

stories over art

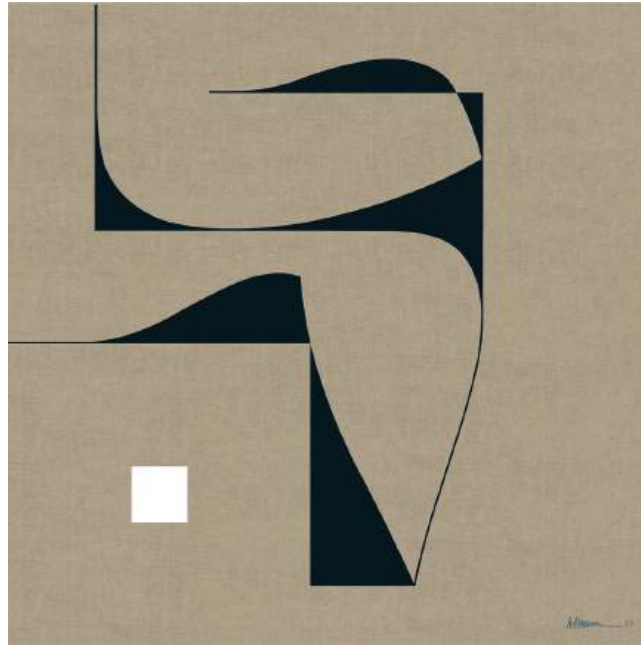
middle east & beyond

November 2024
#5

ART & DESIGN | ARCHITECTURE | FASHION | INTERVIEWS | COMMENTARY | FILM | MUSIC | PERFORMANCE | PHOTOGRAPHY | FEATURES | REVIEWS



EDITOR'S NOTE



Ethos of Love: Calligraformism by Wissam Shawkat

What do you? They ask. I am an artist. I respond. That's fine, but what do you exactly do? They push further. For, I chose a line of work that is not conventional and not as 'rewarding' in the eyes of few, some, and many — no answer to the question is satisfactory. Is this for free? They ask. No. I respond. Could you give me a discount? They push further. For, I chose a path of creativity, which is supposed to thrive on 'exposure' — no answer to the question is satisfactory. Is this available online? They wonder. I am on social media channels. Everyone has to be, I think to myself. Perhaps I can copy and print. Why buy? They think to themselves. For, I chose to be on a journey where ideas can't be measured — no answer to the question is satisfactory. The most pressing issues facing the artists in my community happen to be a struggle between being willing to work and forced to compromise, aspiring to pay bills and being compelled to share skills for exposure, competing with larger financially secure platforms, and being challenged to make space in the crowded world.

Each month, as we prepare a new edition, we encounter discussions on the above issues. Our aspirations continue to be guided by the philosophy that one day, the world will recognize arts and artists/artistes as a 'real profession', and as we further on this mission, all we ask of you is to support the colors, strokes, moves, words, struggles, accomplishments and efforts of arts all around you.

P.S: In an era of ChatGPT and Paywalls, we're daring to create original content and offer it to our readers without a fee. Your support would go a long way. Subscribe to the portal, and meet us on socials as well.



Purva
founder-editor
hello@storiesoverart.com

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CONTACTS

Purva Grover, Founder–Editor
Dolly Goel, Art Director

hello@storiesoverart.com
storiesoverart.com

All queries should be addressed to
hello@storiesoverart.com
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INSTALLATION: GARDEN 'LIFE OF UAE'

A large-scale digital installation inspired by the country's natural beauty, rich history, and extravagant cityscape.

ARTE MUSEUM DUBAI, an immersive media art exhibition space, has introduced a new roster of immersive exhibits, including the highly anticipated debut of a UAE-inspired media art installation, GARDEN 'LIFE OF UAE.' Keeping with its theme of ETERNAL NATURE, the exhibition showcases 15 meticulously curated media art installations, of which eight are brand new, each highlighting the awe-inspiring beauty and elemental power of nature and culture.

Since October, ARTE MUSEUM DUBAI has been transporting guests to dreamlike landscapes featuring endless

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blooming rose fields (FLOWER 'ROSE'), massive glaciers (ICE), glistening seashores (STARRY BEACH), and a mystical forest through its four seasons (FOREST). LIVE SKETCHBOOK has also been updated with a new theme inspired by marine life. It features ocean floors teeming with radiant corals, where guests can color and create sea creatures that come to life on screen, creating a harmonious underwater scene.

A highlight of the new lineup is the exclusive debut of GARDEN 'LIFE OF UAE,' a large-scale digital installation inspired by the country's natural beauty, rich history, and extravagant cityscape. It follows the evolution of the UAE from a tranquil desert to a bustling metropolis, with golden dunes transforming into iconic landmarks that rise from the desert like a dazzling mirage, celebrating the region's spirit, resilience, and visionary growth.

At ARTE MUSEUM DUBAI, visitors embark on an extraordinary journey that engages all five senses through a unique combination of technology, stunning visuals, bespoke soundscapes, and captivating scents. It is a must-see destination in the region for families, art lovers, and those seeking a unique experience. This latest refresh ensures that each visit offers something new, inviting first-time guests and returning enthusiasts to rediscover their connection with nature and creativity.

Launched in February, ARTE MUSEUM DUBAI, The Dubai Mall, is produced by the internationally acclaimed digital design and art company d'strict, known for its public media art showcases such as WAVE and Waterfall-NYC. Since its inception, the exhibition has attracted more than 8 million visitors across its eight global branches and has won numerous international design awards.



FLORAL: INSTALLATION

Jeff Leatham is renowned for his dedication to his craft. His treatment of flowers as an artistic medium has earned him significant honors.

Four Seasons Resort Dubai at Jumeirah Beach unveiled an artistic expression of its ten-year legacy with a floral experience designed by Jeff Leatham. The celebrated artistic director, renowned for his poetic mastery of floral décor, unveiled the installation with a ceremony at the resort's lobby in October 2024.

Inspired by nature, heritage, and metropolitan immersion, Leatham's design adorns the main lobby, styled into a winding tale that evokes the resort's tropical greenery, effervescent city spirit, and connection to Dubai culture. As the resort blooms into its tenth year, the floral experience expresses all the unique moments, beautiful bonds, and eternal memories that guests have created over time.

Jeff Leatham is renowned for his mesmerizing lobby installations at Four Seasons Hotel George V Paris, where he flourished as Artistic Director. His dedication to his craft and his treatment of flowers as an artistic medium has earned him significant honors, including a prestigious "Knighthood," the Chevalier de L'Order des Arts et Letters—France's highest honor for those who have made important contributions to France's artistic legacy. His patrons include the Kardashians, Oprah, Tina Turner, Dolly Parton, and Cher.



Guests are invited to experience Jeff Leatham's floral design by staying at Four Seasons Resort Dubai at Jumeirah Beach or reserving a dining experience. The installation is available for guests to admire until November 8, 2024.



HISTORY: PEARL FARMS

Years before the discovery of oil in the Arabian Gulf, pearling was the lifeblood of the local community and UAE's primary source of wealth, with many nomadic merchants and fishermen becoming skillful in the art of pearling.



As the region's first cultured pearl farm and the only traditional pearl farm in the UAE, Suwaidi Pearls is a leading national institution in Ras Al Khaimah and the nation's only remaining pearl farm. It provides locally sourced pearls to jewelers worldwide.

Years before the discovery of oil in the Arabian Gulf, pearling was the lifeblood of the local community and UAE's primary source of wealth, with many nomadic merchants and fishermen becoming skillful in the art of pearling. Dating back to the 12th and 13th centuries, the Al Suwaidi family has been intrinsically linked to the history of pearling in the Gulf region, leading to the 20th century when Abdulla Al Suwaidi's grandfather was amongst the last remaining pearl divers in the UAE, before the discovery of oil and the invention of the 'cultured' pearl.

Established in 2005 by Abdulla Al Suwaidi to preserve his family's legacy and revive the country's proud tradition, Suwaidi Pearls is the only pearl farm in the region that utilizes naturally bred, hand-seeded oysters as opposed to wild ones. This ultimately contributes to the local economic development and environmental preservation in Ras Al Khaimah. Apart from this, the pearl farm is entirely eco-friendly, with no machinery used in the harvesting of oysters, and is instead powered by solar panels, promoting the use of renewable energy and conservation in the UAE. Contributing to Ras Al Khaimah's integrated approach to sustainability, the cultural conservation of Suwaidi Pearls continues to preserve the Emirate's culture and traditions.



The pearl farm tour is a unique cultural experience in Ras Al Khaimah, drawing visitors from across the country and beyond. Nestled at the foot of the expansive Al Hajar mountain range in the northern town of Al Rams, the cultured pearl farm is a visual delight. The lagoon at Al Rams, filled with fresh rainwater from the Hajar mountains, creates the perfect environment for the pearls to thrive, adding to the allure of the tour.

Culturing cultured Arabian pearls is a meticulous process requiring a specific and controlled environment. The intense process begins with seeding, where a round bead is inserted into the mother-of-pearl shell and oyster tissue. This allows a layer of nacre to grow around the bead, gradually forming a pearl of distinctive size, quality, and nacre thickness over time.

The farm tour starts with visitors boarding a traditional pearling boat to reach the floating pearl farm, offering a chance to enjoy views of the Hajar mountains and lush mangroves of the Emirate, home to pastel pink flamingos, western reef herons, Kalba collared kingfishers, and the more incredible spotted eagle. The guided tour provides visitors with a unique insight into the pearl cultivation and harvesting process, starting with the history of pearling and educating

them on the industry's evolution. Visitors will also learn about the diving techniques the fisherman once practiced to collect oysters and explore the tools they used from the trader's box 'bish-take-ah.' Visitors also have the opportunity to open their oysters, see if they hit the jackpot, and find their very own Arabian pearl to take home and treasure.

The Pearl Farm is designed to be inclusive and offers a range of immersive activities for visitors of all ages, including those with special needs. From oyster-opening experiences to pearl diving, kayaking, and mangrove tours, the farm ensures every visitor can enjoy a memorable experience. The tour culminates with a traditional lunch, providing a complete and satisfying visit for all.

Pearls harvested from the farm have adorned various jewelry collections of international brands such as Steven Webster, Van Cleef & Arpels, and Mouawad, as well as customized crafted private collections for members of royal families across the region. In 2018, Suwaidi Pearls collaborated with several Emirati jewelry designers inspired by the region's pearling past and renowned international designer Sarah Ho. Drawing from the farm's spectacular pearling history and culture, Sarah designed a white gold, diamond, and inlaid mother-of-pearl enamel ring to hold The Pearl of Arabia, a unique pearl discovered by the Suwaidi Pearl's founder, Abdulla Al Suwaidi in 2006.







EXHIBITION: FLIGHT INTO EGYPT

The multisensory exploration of nearly 150 years of artistic and cultural production will feature almost 200 works of art in a wide range of media from The Met collection and public and private collections, including critical international loans from Africa, Asia, the Caribbean, and Europe. Thematic sections will trace how Black artists and other agents of culture have employed ancient Egyptian imagery to craft a unifying identity, the contributions of Black scholars to the study of ancient Egypt, and the engagement of modern and contemporary Egyptian artists with ancient Egypt.



Opening at The Met on November 17, 2024, the exhibition *Flight into Egypt: Black Artists and Ancient Egypt, 1876–Now* will examine how Black artists and other cultural figures have engaged with ancient Egypt through visual, sculptural, literary, musical, scientific, scholarly, religious, political, and performative pursuits. The multisensory exploration of nearly 150 years of artistic and cultural production will feature almost 200 works of art in a wide range of media from The Met collection and public and private collections, including critical international loans from Africa, Asia, the Caribbean, and Europe. Thematic sections will trace how Black artists and other agents of culture have employed ancient Egyptian imagery to craft a unifying identity, the contributions of Black scholars to the study of ancient Egypt, and the engagement of modern and contemporary Egyptian artists with ancient Egypt.

The Gail and Parker Gilbert Fund, the Jane and Robert Carroll Fund, the Ford Foundation, and the Hobson/Lucas Family Foundation make the Exhibition possible. The Hayden Family Foundation, Allison and Larry Berg, The Holly Peterson Foundation, The Andy Warhol Foundation for the Visual Arts, and the National Endowment for the Arts provide additional support.

“Ancient Egypt is a symbolic source for people of the African diaspora that continues to inspire. This groundbreaking Exhibition brings to light a modern history that has developed over nearly 150 years and is also an active, creative tradition existing outside the walls of the Museum and in daily life,” said Max Hollein, The Met’s Marina Kellen French Director and Chief Executive Officer. “Unprecedented in scope, the Exhibition broadly lays out the many ways Black artists and cultural figures have engaged and continue to engage with ancient Egypt as a point of reference, inspiration, and connection. We hope that it furthers and deepens exploration of this topic.”

“This is a modern history of how an ancient civilization became a wellspring of inspiration for Black creatives to craft a unifying identity after generations of it being underrepresented and undervalued,” said Ford Foundation President Darren Walker. “This is an exhibition that only The Met can do by pulling inspiration from its collection stretching back 5,000 years and connecting it to today and our communities in New York City and beyond.”

“The exhibition takes its title from The Met’s painting *Flight into Egypt* (1923), an emblem of fugitivity and timeless creativity by the expatriate artist Henry Ossawa Tanner—the first internationally recognized African American painter—who traveled to Egypt in 1897, and includes works as recent as Madeline Hunt–Ehrlich’s film *Cleopatra at the Mall* (2024), which reflects on the rediscovery of Edmonia Lewis’s major sculpture *The Death of Cleopatra* (1876),” said Akili Tommasino, Curator in the Department of Modern and Contemporary Art at The Met and the curator of the Exhibition. “*Flight into Egypt: Black Artists and Ancient Egypt, 1876–Now* challenges Eurocentric constructions of ancient Egypt, offering a more expansive history that celebrates the contributions of cultural figures of African descent.”

Beginning in the late 19th century, the era of emancipation, Black Americans started to look to ancient Egypt as evidence of an undeniably great ancient African culture to ennoble Black identities, having been systematically stripped of any knowledge of specific African heritage through the transatlantic slave trade, generational enslavement, and dehumanization in American civic life and society. This Exhibition will illuminate how modern Black artists and cultural figures asserted affinity with ancient Egypt—in opposition to the prevailing definition of 19th-century Egyptology that distinguished ancient Egypt from “Black Africa” and instead characterized it as proto-European—from the

THE
MET

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late 19th century to the efflorescence of Afrocentric visual art during the Harlem Renaissance, to the Black Arts Movement of the 1960s and 1970s and artistic tendencies of the ensuing decades, to the present day.

While most of the stories in *Flight into Egypt* are about individuals of African descent born and active in the United States, the work of artists of the Caribbean, Egypt, and other African-born artists active in the United States, Europe, and elsewhere indicate the worldwide resonance of ancient Egypt in the African diaspora—the global dispersion of people of African descent. The Exhibition will present well-known and emerging artists, new works, and works new to The Met collection while reintroducing rarely displayed works of art and resurfacing obscure objects and documents.

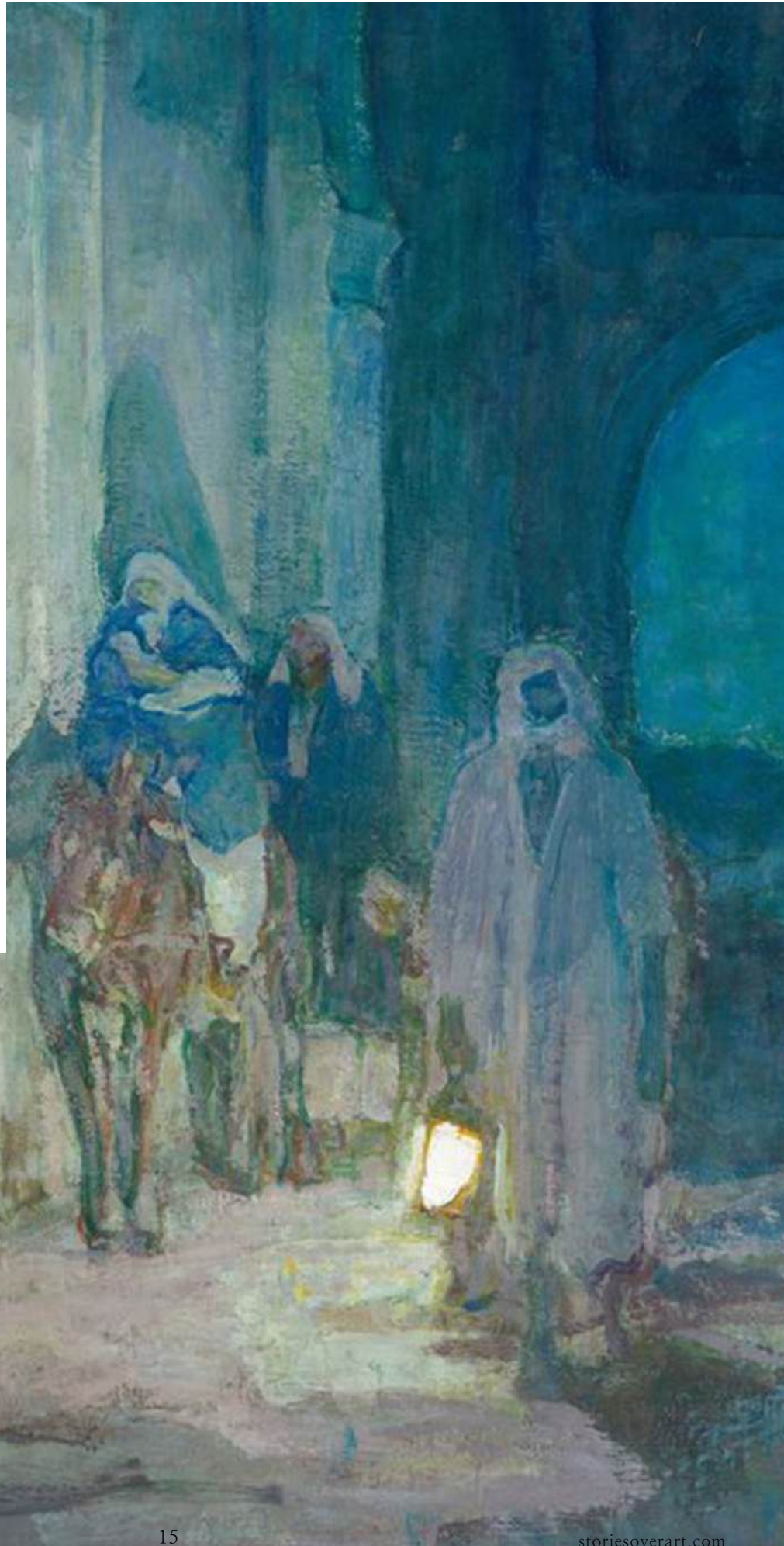
The Exhibition will be accompanied by robust multidisciplinary on-site and off-site educational programs that explore contemporary academic, artistic, and social engagement with ancient Egyptian

art and civilization. Programs across audiences—students, families, and educators—will include gallery talks with Met curators, designers, and scientists and workshops focusing on artistic processes and materials. A major highlight will be the Creative Convening on December 7, 2024, which will bring artists, scholars, and community members together for discussions, performances, and reflections on exhibition themes.

Flight into Egypt: Black Artists and Ancient Egypt, 1876–Now is organized by Akili Tommasino, Curator, and McClain Groff, Research Associate, in the Department of Modern and Contemporary Art at The Met. The Exhibition will be held from November 17, 2024, to February 17, 2025, at The Met Fifth Avenue, The Tisch Galleries, Gallery 899, Floor 2.



Artists whose work will be on view include: Terry Adkins, Ghada Amer, Ayé Aton, Jean-Michel Basquiat, John Thomas Biggers, Barbara Higgins Bond, LaKela Brown, Rashida Bumbray, René Burri, George Washington Carver, Barbara Chase-Riboud, Ed Clark, Irene Clark, Robert Colescott, Houston Conwill, Renee Cox, Shani Crowe, Jamal Cyrus, Damien Davis, Karon Davis, Noah Davis, Charles Clarence Dawson, C. Daniel Dawson, Jeff Donaldson, Aaron Douglas, Emory Douglas, Louis Draper, Dream The Combine (Jennifer Newsom Carruthers and Tom Carruthers), Oasa DuVerney, The Egyptian Lover, Tremaine Emory, Awol Erizku, Fred Eversley, Derek Fordjour, Meta Vaux Warrick Fuller, Genevieve Gaignard, Ellen Gallagher, Sam Gilliam, Chet Gold, Lauren Halsey, David Hammons, Maren Hassinger, Chester Higgins, EJ Hill, Lonnie Holley, Madeleine Hunt-Ehrlich, Gregston Hurdle, Iman Issa, Steffani Jemison, Malvin Gray Johnson, Rashid Johnson, Loïs Mailou Jones, Barbara Jones-Hogu, Armia Malak Khalil, Jas Knight, Solange Knowles, Simone Leigh, Glenn Ligon, Maha Maamoun, Eric Mack, Julie Mehretu, Mahmoud Mokhtar, Ronald Moody, John W. Mosley, Lorraine O'Grady, Gordon Parks, Kamau Amu Patton, Robert Pruitt, Richard Pryor, Baaba Heru Ankh Ra Semahj Se Ptah, Sun Ra, Betye Saar, Mahmoud Said, Addison N. Scurlock, Lorna Simpson, Ming Smith, Tavares Strachan, Henry Ossawa Tanner, Henry Taylor, Mildred Thompson, Kara Walker, Laura Wheeler Waring, William T. Williams, and Fred Wilson.





INTERVIEW: AREEJ RAJAB

AREEJ RAJAB: Areej Rajab is a Bahraini artist known for her evocative use of color and emotional depth. While her early academic pursuits were in business and general management, her passion for creativity led her to the London College of Art, where she refined her artistic voice. Areej's work transcends conventional categorization, characterized by its abstract forms and the absence of titles, allowing viewers to bring their narratives to her art.

How do you come up with the titles for your pieces?

I never title my work because I prefer to leave the interpretation open to the viewer. By keeping my pieces unnamed, I allow a window for individual emotions and personal stories to emerge without the influence of specific words. Various individuals see and feel something different when they engage with my art, primarily since my paintings often draw inspiration from nature and landscapes. I believe that naming a piece could impose a fixed meaning or direction, and I don't want to burden the artwork with that constraint. Art, like emotions, is fluid and subjective, and I want viewers to experience it on their terms, free to take away whatever resonates most with them.

What's the most unusual source of inspiration you've ever had?

I find inspiration in the intricate, often unseen world of microscopic images of blood cells and viruses. There is something truly mesmerizing about the organic patterns and structures that exist on such a small scale. The textures, shapes, and sometimes chaotic formations within these microscopic images translate beautifully into abstract forms, sparking my imagination unexpectedly. Nature can hide beauty in the most unlikely places, and discovering it in such fine, scientific detail is rewarding and surprising. It reminds me that art, like life, can emerge from even the most minor, seemingly insignificant elements, and transform into something more significant.

If you could only use three colors/instruments/software for the rest of your life, which would you choose?

The three primary colors. Red, blue, and yellow.

What piece of art do you take the most pride in and why?

It is hard to single out one piece because I take pride in all my creations. Each artwork represents a different emotional state or period in my life; in that way, they are all personal.

Do you have any quirky rituals or habits when you're in your creative zone?

What's your earliest memory of creating art?

My earliest memory of creating art goes back to when I was a child, experimenting with color mixing. I was fascinated by how combining different shades could create entirely new hues, often spending hours trying to recreate the colors I saw in nature or around me.

What's the weirdest thing you've ever used as a medium/tool/platform in your artwork?

An injection syringe is one of the most unconventional tools I have used in my art. I discovered its precision was perfect for applying incredibly fine lines in a way that brushes couldn't achieve. This method allowed me to introduce intricate detail into my work, creating a sense of movement and control that contrasted with the fluidity of my broader strokes.



I spend hours in the studio as a mood setter before getting to actual work.

How do you deal with a creative block?

Dealing with creative blocks is tricky, but I have learned that the best approach for me is not giving it too much power. By not acknowledging the block, I avoid getting stuck in the frustration of it. Sometimes, it is about giving myself permission to be imperfect, knowing that creativity flows naturally.

What's the most memorable reaction someone has had to your work?

I'm always told that my art translates to happiness. Viewers often describe feeling uplifted and energized by the colors and forms I use. Hearing this feedback is always incredibly rewarding.

What's one piece of advice you'd give to artificial intelligence aspiring to replace artists?

I believe it stands no chance when it comes to total replacement. The artist is the only constant among all variables.

What would you be doing if you weren't an artist?

If I weren't an artist, I'd try to be one.

What's the strangest place you've ever found inspiration for a piece?

I found inspiration in something as mundane as old wooden storage shelves in local garages. A certain nostalgia and texture to these shelves—weathered by time and use—caught my attention.

Can you describe your art in three words?
Places to be.

What's your favorite part about the process of creating art?

My favorite part would be the planning process. This is where the possibilities seem endless. I enjoy the initial conceptualization and deciding on colors, textures, and themes. It is where I set the mood for the entire creation, even though I know that spontaneity will play a role as I progress.

If you could have your artwork displayed anywhere in the world, where would it be?

Museums.

Mestaria Gallery, Alserkal Avenue, Dubai, proudly presents the latest exhibition by renowned Bahraini artist Areej Rajab, titled "Interwoven," until November 10, 2024. The exhibition invites viewers to experience an artistic and therapeutic play of colors and emotions where the intricate patterns of human behavior are delicately overlapped with the rhythms of nature. Unlike artists who capture and document present moments to reflect current experiences and complexities they navigate, Areej's paintings reflect a place where she aspires to be — expressing an optimistic vision of the world. Through her translation of nature, she shifts perspectives to convey joy and optimism. She uses a carefully chosen color palette, weaving a spectrum of colors, with each hue and shade meticulously selected to inspire specific emotions and moods. She leaves her paintings untitled, believing that each viewer should have the freedom to interpret and connect with the artwork in their own way.

DESIGN: FAIL FORWARD

Since 2018, Tanween has served as Ithra’s most impactful annual event dedicated to designing, motivating, and inspiring a new generation of innovators. With over 265,000 visitors, the conference spotlights Ithra as a global design platform, showcasing diverse design voices worldwide.

The King Abdulaziz Center for World Culture (Ithra) is pleased to announce the return of its most impactful annual design conference, Tanween, which will run from 31 October to 6 November. In its 7th edition, Tanween 2024 will take place at the Ithra Theater under the ‘Fail Forward’ theme. It is an invitation to celebrate the setbacks within the design process, which, when embraced, allows creatives to reach breakthroughs that push the boundaries of design.

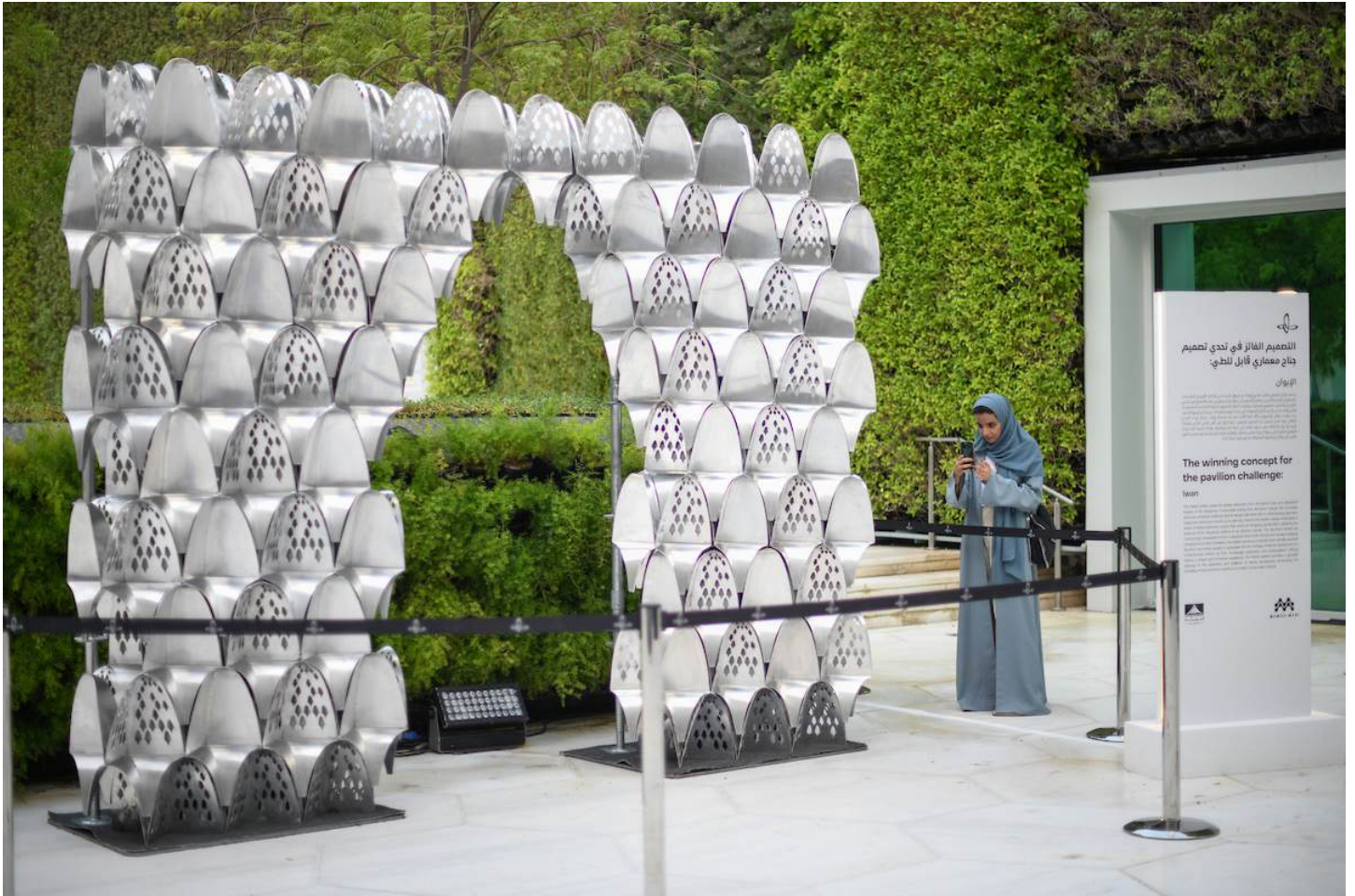
Tanween 2024 will feature an engaging program of panel discussions, masterclasses, and workshops. Global industry experts and emerging talents will exchange, discuss, and highlight innovations and creative

breakthroughs born from creative challenges. This year’s speakers include world-renowned artist Ross Lovegrove, whose works are exhibited at MoMA in New York and The Pompidou Center in Paris, tech designer and public artist Sebastian Errazuriz, and Dubai Design Week curator Rana Salam.

This Tanween edition will also offer a space dedicated to exhibitions of cutting-edge design pieces and products developed through Ithra’s Creative Solutions Residency Program and Tanween Challenges. Embracing this year’s theme, a new international exhibition titled Behind the Curtains: Scenes of Craft, designed and curated in collaboration with Italian design platform Isola Studio, will invite







TANWEEN IS A CATALYST FOR DESIGN INNOVATION IN THE KINGDOM AND BEYOND, ENGAGING THE WIDER DESIGN COMMUNITY – FROM EXPERTS, PRACTITIONERS, STUDENTS, AND PASSIONATE VISITORS – TO EXPAND THEIR CREATIVE HORIZONS AND ADVANCED DESIGN PRACTICES TO ENRICH OUR SOCIETY. ITHRA IS PROUD TO ACT AS THE NEXUS AND MEETING POINT FOR INNOVATORS WORLDWIDE DURING THE TANWEEN CREATIVITY CONFERENCE TO FACILITATE A FRUITFUL EXCHANGE OF IDEAS AND THE DEVELOPMENT OF CONSTRUCTIVE, IMPACTFUL DESIGN SOLUTIONS.

— Shahad Alwazani, Program Lead:
Tanween

visitors to immerse themselves in the creative journeys of ten internationally acclaimed design studios specializing in crafts, circular design, or material research.

Over the years, Tanween has become Saudi Arabia's most influential design and creativity conference. It fosters cross-cultural dialogue between emerging creatives, international experts, and institutions and is a key global platform for innovative design incubation.

The King Abdulaziz Center for World Culture (Ithra) is a world-class destination and the heart of Saudi Arabia's creative and culture industry. It contributes to its prosperity by enabling talent, supporting content production, encouraging cross-cultural exchange, and promoting social harmony and human development. Ithra is Saudi Aramco's most ambitious CSR initiative and the largest cultural contribution to the Kingdom. Through a compelling series of programs, workshops, performances, events, exhibitions, and other various initiatives, Ithra creates world-class experiences that bring together culture, innovation, and knowledge designed to appeal to everyone. Ithra's components include the Idea Lab, Library, Theater, Museum, Cinema, Great Hall, Energy Exhibit, Children's Museum, and Ithra Tower.

EXHIBITION: PRECIOUS

The exhibition's title, *Precious*, evokes all the associations seen within the paintings: hunting for treasure, memories of childhood, and beachcombing. By repeating the motif, Su asks us where we find meaning and why. Her dreamlike paintings present a natural world that acknowledges the harshness of economic and political realities. Yet, the most precious things in her works are free.

Albion Jeune is pleased to present *Precious*, Los Angeles-based artist Su Yu-Xin's first solo exhibition in the UK. The exhibition consists of a series of dynamic paintings that examine the history of migration and the vicissitude of pigments through a geological perspective. Portraying sea caves, shells, and natural objects found along the California coastline, this new body of work invites us to consider the value attribution of material objects. The artist's unique material language, in which she collects, extracts, and transforms organic and man-made color substances into the paint, is a fascinating interrogation of the politics of pigment: the pulverization of exploitative ecological and imperial histories into color. Through materiality and subject matter, the works in *Precious* act as portals between Los Angeles and Taiwan, sharing the artist's journey and the cross-cultural dialogue of her diasporic identity and experience.

Born in Hualien, Taiwan, the artist has an academic background in traditional techniques such

as the 'boneless' method of Chinese painting and nihonga, or "Japanese-style painting" that binds pigments derived from natural ingredients such as minerals, shells, or semi-precious stones with glue made from animal hide. The artist processes these pigments from collected natural materials, which she applies to the surface in layered washes to construct nebulous, multi-perspective horizons. For the artist, colors are no longer mere visual signifiers but embodiments of their complex identities and origins. Su sources materials from various locales, deepening the relationships between subjects by often depicting the California coastline with materials sourced in the land itself.

Throughout *Precious*, the artist uses ground cowrie shells to create a spectrum of white hues across her paintings, evoking the forgotten history of trade and the invisible workforce. Originating in the oceans surrounding the Maldives islands, cowrie shells, or *Cypraea moneta*, were transported to various parts of Asia as precious goods in the



prehistoric era. Later, this small marine product was used as a currency in the slave trade from the sixteenth century onward and eventually became a form of currency in several ancient Chinese provinces. Su is interested in the prevalence of these natural objects and how humans ascribe value to items based on their geographic location and scarcity, underpinning notions of invisible infrastructure through commodity trade.

Along with shells, sea caves are the central subject of this exhibition. Commonly found along the northern Los Angeles coastline, these architectural wonders are subjects of immense fascination for the artist for their geological formation from wind and sea erosion into cavernous grottos. In *Bone Caves* (featured below), Su presents a panoramic view of a double sea cave, immersing us within the tunnel as though the painting is transforming into the subject. The canvas is physically curved and monumentally proportioned, echoing the organic forms of sea cave walls while referencing the traditional horizontal perspective of Chinese scroll paintings. On the right, the setting sun commands our attention while the violet night sky unfolds simultaneously, evoking a sense of ancientness and capturing the ephemeral transition to dusk. The pigments bring their physical presence into the painting, becoming as much a protagonist as the landscape. For instance, the green sea comprises oxidized copper, pointing to California's mining history. In contrast, the white pigment found in the moon and the sea cave is obtained from bleached coral, evoking our environmental loss and the circularity of materials.

The paintings in *Precious* are rhizomatic, with each painting leading to the next in a continuous process of experimentation. Monumental works allow an immersive perspective, while more intimate paintings, or 'color swatches,' serve as

experimentation sites, enabling the artist to test new color combinations, motifs, or layering paint. In *A Chase for Treasure*, a concave map of the Pacific Ocean along the Equator, the artist applies swatches of whites, using materials such as diamond dust and silver alongside colors derived from shells and minerals. As in her inclusion of the cowrie shells and copper pigments, the use of diamonds links the paintings back to Su's study of commodities and value in the capitalist system, reminding us that the value of these gemstones will change with the ebb and flow of the forming of both anthropic and planetary history.

The recurrence of these small, organic objects has a heartfelt quality. The exhibition's title, *Precious*, evokes all the associations seen within the paintings: hunting for treasure, memories of childhood, and beachcombing. By repeating the motif, Su asks us where we find meaning and why. Her dreamlike paintings present a natural world that acknowledges the harshness of economic and political realities. Yet, the most precious things in her works are free.



Su Yu-Xin considers painting a place where multiple disciplines and perceptual capacities intersect. Painters have always played a vital role in the visual art industry, and the medium of painting reflects the discovery and re-invention of the material world. Hence, paintings bear witness to the history of the exchange between cultures and nature and project the painter's role through wars and migrations: they manifest territorial invasions and restitutions and the exploitation of pigments and their trades. Su collects, studies, and processes these color substances scattered on the earth's crust and invents a new order on the painting surface through drawing, compression, and accumulation. The exhibition runs until 17 November 2024 at Albion Jeune, 16-17 Little Portland Street, London.





CINEMATIC HORIZONS: THE RISE OF THE GCC'S FILM INDUSTRY

If someone told you that Saudi Arabia now hosts one of the world's largest film festivals, would you believe them?

Welcome to the Red Sea International Film Festival. First held in Jeddah in 2021, it has quickly become the biggest film festival in the Middle East and North Africa. Last year, the festival broke records with nearly 6,000 international film professionals and critics in attendance, and over 40,000 screening tickets were sold to the public. The red carpet welcomed Hollywood stars like Will Smith and Johnny Depp, alongside top talent from Arabic cinema and Bollywood.

This dynamic scene is not limited to Saudi Arabia. Across the GCC, cinema—including tickets, concessions, and events—is expected to reach a staggering USD 1 billion by the end of 2024 and exceed USD 1.26 billion by 2029.

What's driving this boom, and what does it mean for the future of our region? Let's dive in.

The UAE's Booming Film Industry

The UAE's film industry has grown significantly in recent years. During the first eight months of 2024, the country's cinema sector generated AED 517 million (USD 141 million) in revenue, attracting approximately 11 million cinema visits. Across the UAE, there are 702 screens in 72 locations.

According to His Excellency Mohammed Saeed Al Shehhi, Secretary General of the UAE Media Council, the UAE now holds 30% of the Middle East's cinema market share—an impressive figure

given that the country makes up only 3.3% of the region's population.

A key driver behind this growth is the increasing affluence and strong spending power of the UAE's residents. This is reflected in movie ticket prices, with the UAE ranking among the top 10 countries for the highest average ticket prices (USD 11.27), surpassing the US, UK, and Canada. Premium moviegoing packages can cost as much as 180 dirhams (USD 49) per ticket. As the UAE's economy expands, this willingness to spend on high-quality entertainment, including movies, is only expected to increase.

Government support for the film industry has also been crucial in its growth. Since 2012, the Abu Dhabi Film Commission (ADFC) has been offering a 30% rebate on production costs—the first such incentive in the Middle East. The ADFC also provides technical support, including free location scouting and assistance with shooting permits, visas, and customs clearance for productions filmed in Abu Dhabi. This has attracted significant global franchises like Star Wars, Mission: Impossible, and Fast & Furious to shoot scenes in the UAE alongside a wide range of Indian and Arabic-language films.

Other initiatives, such as Abu Dhabi's Department of Culture and Tourism's twofour54 Studios—a 40-hectare production facility launched last year—and Dubai Studio City, which was established in 2005 and now hosts over 270 companies specializing in



film and TV production, further strengthen the UAE's position as a leading hub for cinema and filmmaking in the region.

These developments will continue cementing the country's status as a prime destination for moviegoers and filmmakers alike.

Saudi Arabia: An Emerging Powerhouse in Global Film

Saudi Arabia's film industry has experienced rapid growth since the launch of Vision 2030, which aims to position film and entertainment as key drivers of economic diversification and enrich its residents' cultural life.

Since 2018, the Saudi film industry has generated an impressive USD 986 million in revenue. Last year, the country's box office saw a particularly strong performance, with a 20% year-on-year increase and a release of 443 films, attracting over 17.4 million moviegoers. This placed Saudi Arabia 15th globally in box office sales, with ticket revenues exceeding USD 240 million. By the end of 2023, seven licensed cinema operators managed 69 cinemas, 628 screens, and 65,000 seats across the Kingdom.

This growth is set to continue. According to PwC, Saudi Arabia's domestic box office could reach USD 950 million by 2030, with the wider cinema industry, including revenue from concessions, advertising, and F&B sales, projected to generate as much as USD 1.5 billion.

Government policy has played a crucial role

in supporting the industry's rise. Since 2022, the Saudi Film Commission(SFC) has partnered with the Cannes Film Festival on an incentive program to make the Kingdom a global film production hub. This initiative includes offering up to 40% rebate for productions that hire local film crews.

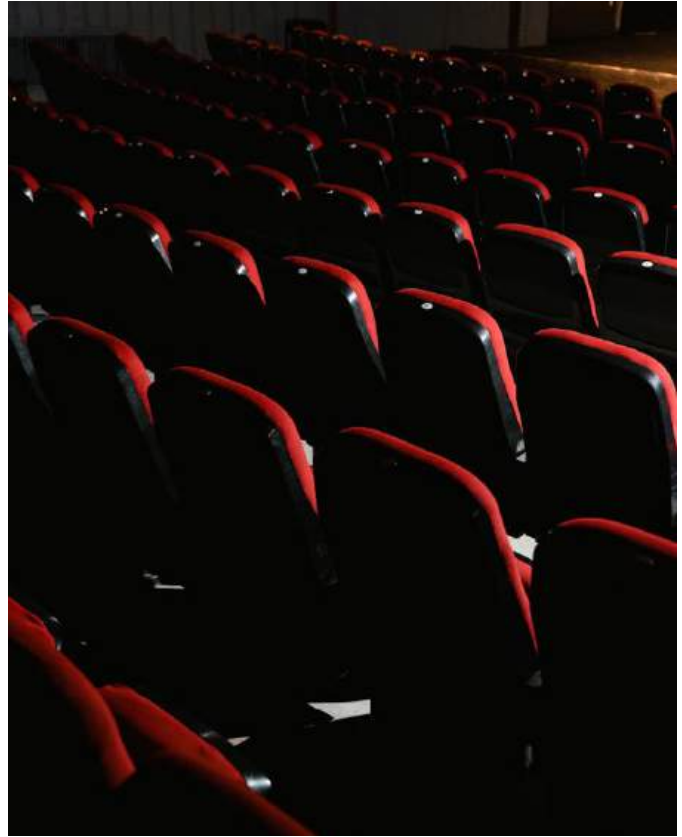
Direct funding has also been vital. In 2021, the government launched the Red Sea Fund to support Arab and African filmmakers, which has provided funding for over 250 films as of 2024. The Cultural Development Fund is preparing to launch the Saudi Film Fund, a USD 100 million initiative to promote local film projects and nurture homegrown talent.

In addition to financial support, Saudi Arabia is positioning itself as a hub for global filmmaking talent. The Red Sea International Film Festival, the Gulf Film Festival (held every April in Riyadh), and the Saudi Film Festival (held every May in Dhahran) all attract filmmakers and industry professionals from around the world, further cementing the Kingdom's status as a major player in the global film industry.

Looking Ahead

Two key trends will likely shape the future of the GCC's film industry.

First, we can expect even greater international collaboration across all aspects of film production. The partnership between the UAE and Hollywood started to gain momentum over the past decade with Mission Impossible: Ghost Protocol in 2011, which showcased Dubai's skyline, including Tom Cruise's



iconic stunt on the Burj Khalifa. Similarly, *Furious 7* in 2015 featured well-known locations like Abu Dhabi's Yas Marina Circuit and Emirates Palace.

Saudi Arabia is also attracting major international productions. Notable examples include Gerard Butler's action-thriller *Kandahar*, filmed in AIUla; Anthony Mackie's *Desert Warrior*, shot in NEOM; and scenes from the Russo Brothers' crime drama *Cherry*, filmed in AIUla and Riyadh. These productions benefitted from Saudi Arabia's 40% rebate before it was officially announced. As the region's film industry continues to capture global attention, these collaborations will likely become more common shortly.

Second, we are seeing a growing focus on producing Arabic-language films. Our research at Manara Global found that 55% of moviegoers in Saudi Arabia and the UAE are eager to see more locally produced content, rising to over 60% among those aged 35 to 44. Most (67%) of these viewers are young parents who want their children to engage more with Arabic content in their native language.

Encouragingly, there is increasing investment in this area. Abu Dhabi's twofour54 launched the Sanad Fund, which supports talented Arab filmmakers in developing and post-producing narrative and documentary feature-length films. Similarly, Saudi Arabia's General Entertainment Authority partnered with Egypt to establish the USD 130 million Big Time Film investment fund to finance 20 Arabic films across the region this year.

These developments point to a bright future for the GCC's film industry, with international collaborations and local productions playing pivotal roles in its success.

Conclusion

It's exciting to imagine where the GCC's film industry will be in the coming years. While we're witnessing a significant transformation, this is only the beginning.

The industry's future will depend on how the UAE, Saudi Arabia, and other Gulf countries continue to attract investment, provide incentives, nurture local talent, and capitalize on the region's appeal to international filmmakers and production teams. With sustained effort in these areas, the GCC is on track to become a global hub for cinema consumption and film production.

Manara Global is a strategic communications and advisory agency that partners with businesses, governments, and organizations to enhance their reputation, define their purpose, and shape their communication strategy to connect with audiences in a human-centric way. Their purpose is to help leaders, businesses, and organizations thrive, make a difference, and succeed. This piece was part of one of their recent newsletters.

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