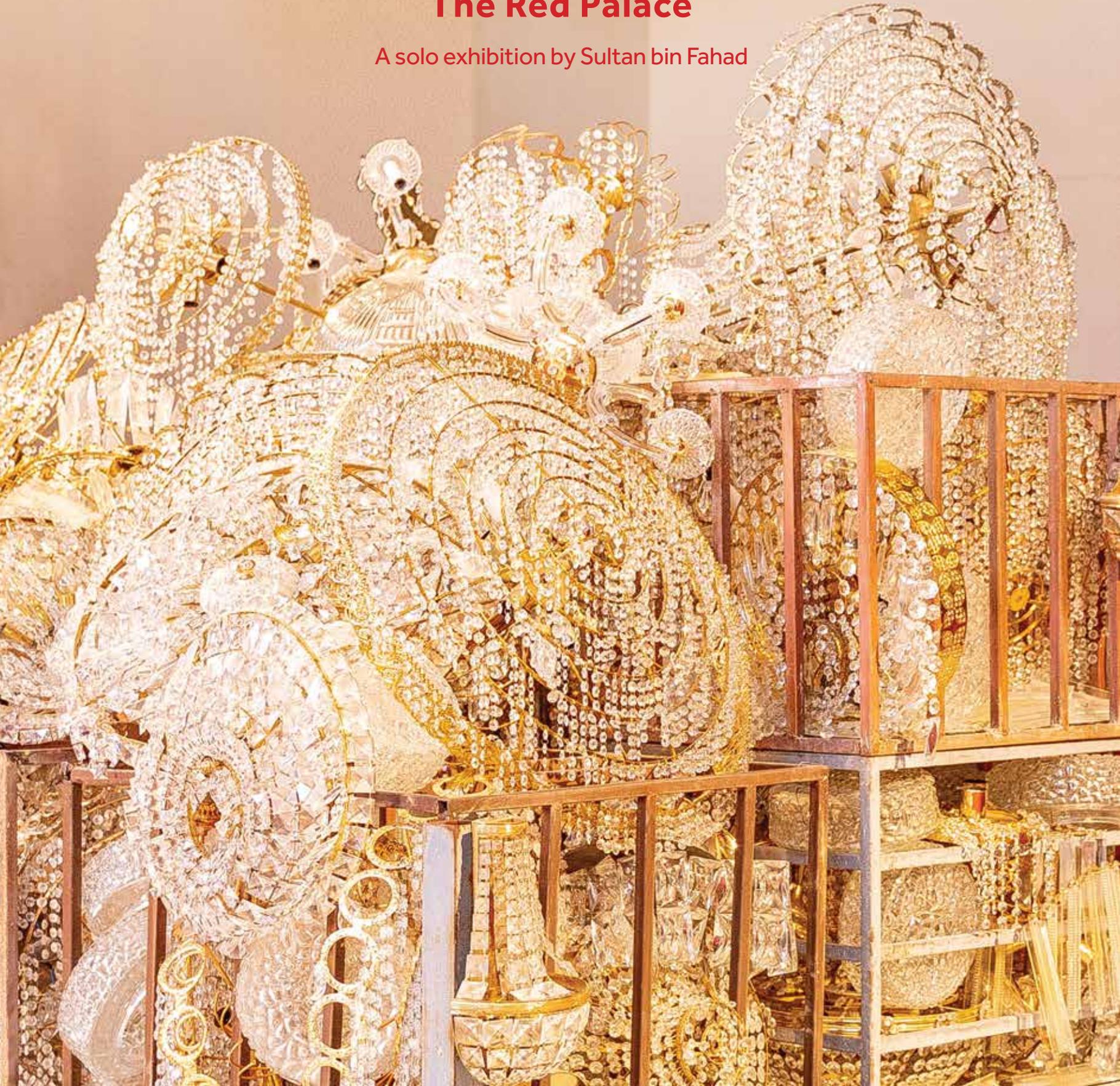


# القصر الأحمر

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A solo exhibition by Sultan bin Fahad



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# Introduction

## The Red Palace

'The Red Palace' is a travelling solo exhibition of the artwork of Saudi artist Sultan bin Fahad. It debuted in Riyadh then moved to Jeddah and now arrives at the Cultural Foundation in Abu Dhabi. The show is a series of critical material investigations of the region and takes its title from the premise of the Red Palace in Riyadh as a site of inspiration and allegory at the height of the country's modernisation.

The Red Palace was completed in 1944 for the Crown Prince Saud bin Abdulaziz, who reigned from 1953 to 1964. It was his royal residence for many years and the palace where he greeted heads of states, such as Jawaharlal Nehru, Jamal Abdul Nasser and Shukri Al Quwatli. After King Saud's move to Al-Nasriya Palace in 1953, the Red Palace became the office of the Saudi Council of Ministers office subsequently the Board of Grievances, until 1987. A place of grandeur and history, the site now lies in ruins awaiting renovation. Bin Fahad's exhibition there was the first use of the building on such a scale since its abandonment in the late 1980s.

The artist's recent practice takes on many forms, including videos, sculptures, photograms and installations. He has collected memorabilia, historical relics and discarded objects from sites across Saudi Arabia from which to create sculptures and installations that critically examine the transformation of the abandoned palace into latency.

For some of the works in the exhibition, bin Fahad sourced objects found at the palace or from flea markets, but which referenced the historical importance of

the building in its prime. In his art practice, bin Fahad focuses on pivotal personal moments that are synonymous with the social metamorphosis of his country. He is invested in the act and concept of translatability, particularly of the intangible, such as within language, to reinterpret histories and narratives. The artist attempts to capture the intangible in material culture to demonstrate and embody its inherent social and collective potential.

'The Red Palace' foregrounds bin Fahad's current research and uses it as a common denominator for the various works on show. The exhibition is divided into seven chapters: The Red Palace, 1979 — Flood, Labour,, Desert Storm, Holy Economy, Dinner at the Palace and Prayer Room. The works in each of these chapters are framed within the historical and political events that took place during the life of the palace.

The artist created a series of video installations that feature the recreation of a palace dinner in the various abandoned rooms, to highlight the role of labour. In the Holy Economy and Desert Storm sections, the works explore the commodification of Saudi Arabia's holy sites and the calamities of the Gulf War, through installations and found objects.

# Biography

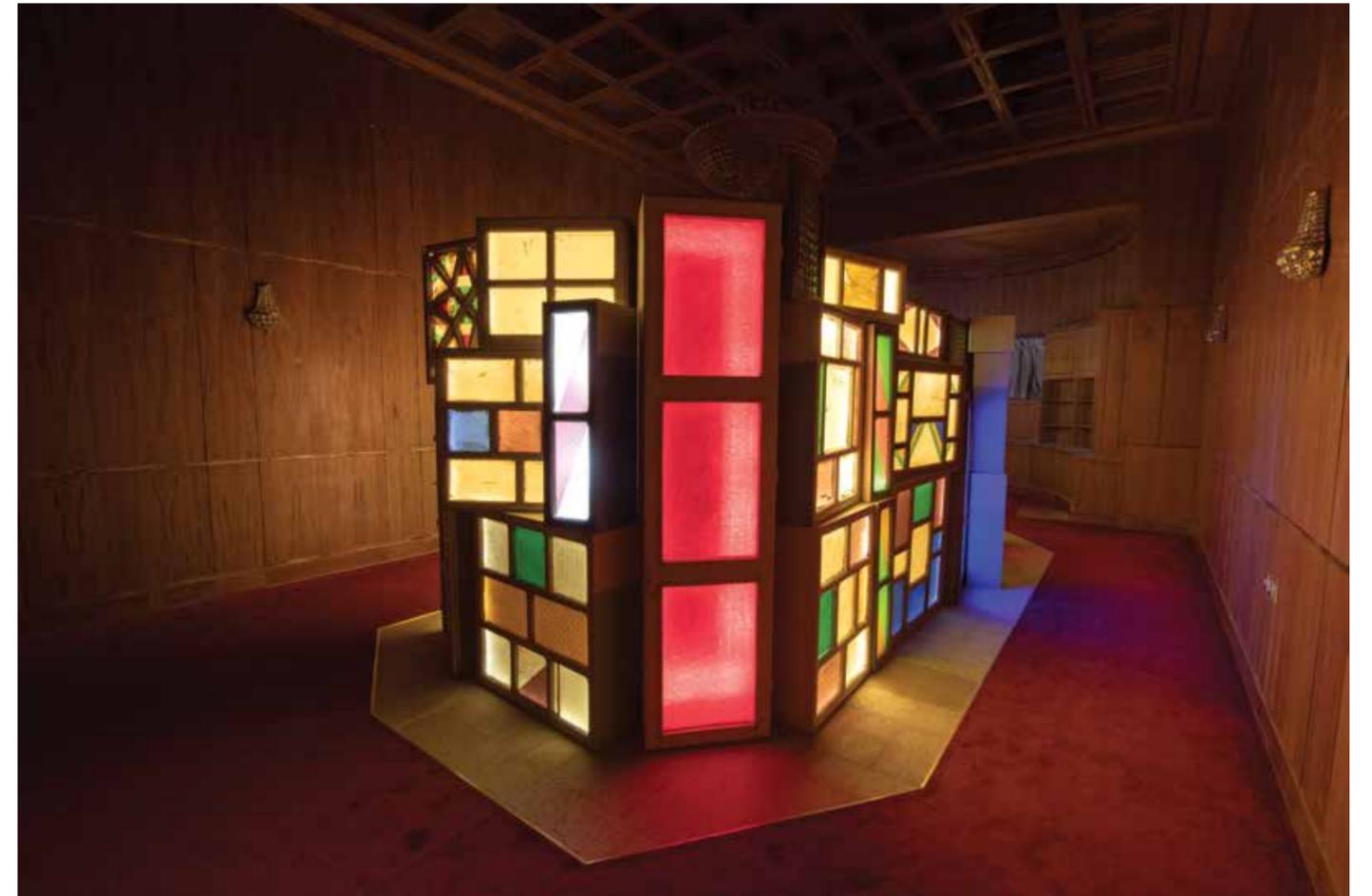
Sultan bin Fahad was born in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia, in 1971 and lives and works in the kingdom's capital city. His art practice focuses on mediating between intangible memories and tangible cultures. Throughout his abstract paintings, sculptures and installations, bin Fahad's central theme and object of concern remains spirituality and the material culture of Mecca in his homeland.

Reinterpreting histories, stories and narratives with the use of material cultures, bin Fahad transposes these narratives to contemporary culture. Themes central to his practice revolve around repetition, sound and movement, using symbols that derive from his culture. In his ongoing series and installations, bin Fahad invites the viewer to reflect in unconventional ways on the space between human interaction, faith and reconstructed memorabilia.

Bin Fahad has held solo exhibitions - 'Qounot' at Alaan gallery in Riyadh (2016) and 'The Red Palace' at the Red Palace, Riyadh, and at Khuzam Palace, Jeddah (2019). He has also participated in several group exhibitions, including: 'Dreams and Memory', Athr Gallery, Jeddah, (2016); 'Tadafuq', Jeddah (2017); 'Contemporary Art 2014', Madinah Art Center, Medina (2018); 'Vantage Point', Sharjah Art Foundation, United Arab Emirates (2018); 'Contemporary Photography From the Arab World', American University Museum at the Katzen Arts Center, Washington, DC (2018); Sharjah Art Festival, Sharjah, UAE (2018); Winter at Tantoora Festival, Al Ula, Saudi Arabia (2019); and the 45th Bahrain Annual Fine Arts Exhibition, Manama, Bahrain (2019). Sultan bin Fahad's work has also been acquired by the Palestinian Museum, in 2016.

*Photographs courtesy of ATHR and the artist*

For the past three years, Sultan bin Fahad has collected discarded stained glass window panes from Mecca and the Red Palace, repurposing them into light boxes and stacked to create a new free-standing structure. The use of stained glass windows spans centuries, mainly seen in Islamic architecture and monasteries. Bin Fahad reclaims these windows, offering a site of reflection and contemplation on these abandoned sites. The colours of the windows reflect the walls of the houses in which they were found, bringing new life to these discarded objects.



**Sultan bin Fahad**  
*Window, 2017-2019*  
Glass, wood and LED lights  
Dimensions variable

In this work, Sultan bin Fahad collected water containers used and discarded by pilgrims on their way to Mecca. The bottles are mass-produced, commercially available objects decorated in brightly coloured and ornate enamel, often depicting cultural motifs on Mecca. Here, the artist contemplates the value of these objects between 'use' and 'waste', salvaging their function and showcasing them as objects of documentation. He offers a glimpse into their history and journey, transforming each object into an individual totem on diversity, colour and collectivity.



**Sultan bin Fahad**

*Holy Economy, 2018-2019*

Metal containers with enamel and cement blocks

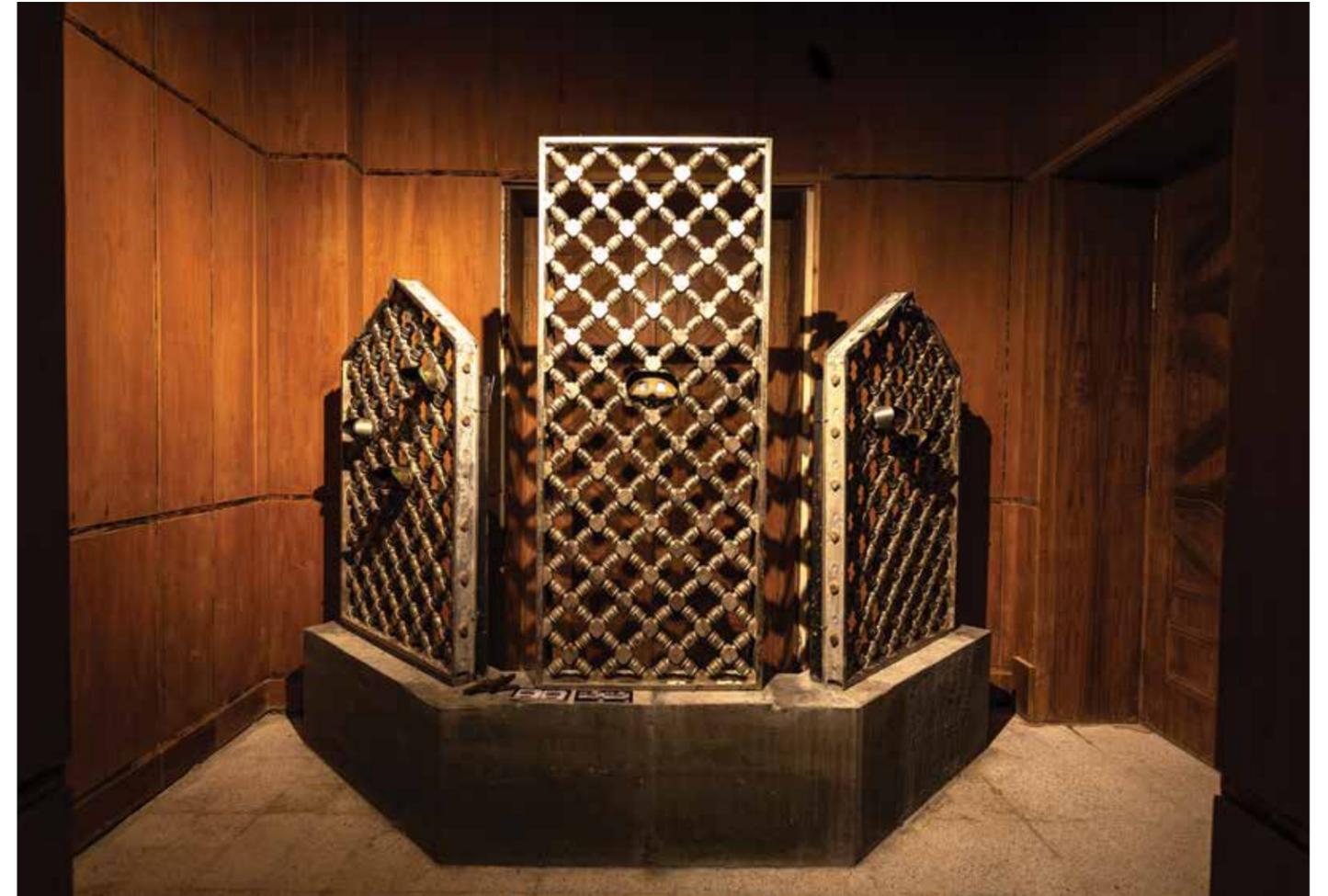
Dimensions variable

Sultan bin Fahad has sourced one of the remaining red prayer carpets used in Mecca before 1979. This work references the Grand Mosque Seizure of 1979, when extremists besieged the holy site for more than two weeks, holding up to 100,000 people hostage.



**Sultan bin Fahad**  
1979, 2017-2019  
Carpet  
450 x 118 cm

Sultan bin Fahad sourced three rails of brass riddled with bullet holes formed into a viewing booth placed on a concrete base. We are invited to look at a series of images — of blurred photos of the Kaaba and the Grand Mosque, the holy site of Mecca, clouded by smoke from gunfire. This work references the Grand Mosque Seizure of 1979.



**Sultan bin Fahad**  
1979, 2017-2019  
Brass rails and image slideshow  
Dimensions variable

Prayer mats are a staple item in any Muslim and Saudi household. In this work, Sultan bin Fahad recalls his time as a young student when he carried his prayer mat everywhere, even repurposing it as a satchel for his school books, as did many other students in Saudi Arabia at the time. These rugs are mainly made in China, India or Morocco but sold in shops under the premise that they are made in Mecca. The artist collected personal prayer mats from the people he encountered and formed them into the shape of a traditional prayer room. He then used coloured neon lights to write a full prayer with only their diacritics:

“اللَّهُمَّ أَنْتَ السَّلَامُ، وَمِنْكَ السَّلَامُ، تَبَارَكْتَ وَتَعَالَيْتَ يَا ذَا الْجَلَالِ وَالْإِكْرَامِ.”

In this work, the artist draws a parallel between the spoken word, the absent letters and the collective of bodies, making corporeal what we do not perceive.



**Sultan bin Fahad**  
*Prayer Room*, 2019  
Rugs and neon  
471 x 671 cm

*Mecellati* is an installation of a mosque made on real scale (1:1), that has intricately beaded interior walls as well as beaded Islamic/mosque paraphernalia. The artist chose to develop this work to reference the relevance and connection of the Hausa (ethnic group) to the Mecca region.

The scale and intricacy of the installation surpasses the scale of the beaded tapestries and the chairs and really tests the artist's relationship with the online acquaintance who facilitated the production of the previous works; by ordering even grander custom-beaded pieces from the workshop in West Africa. This time the artisans were encouraged to pick the beaded designs, as opposed to the previous pieces dictated by existing designs.

The resulting piece is an Arab/African hybrid of Islamic temporary architecture. While the geometric motifs allude to Islamic architecture, the shapes (such as the teardrop and Hausa ethnic flag) and the colours are a full expansion of the style. By giving craftsmen the liberty to make the design choices, they transcend from labour to become an integral part of the finished product. The name *Mecellati* is the Hausa word for mosque; the installation is inscribed with both Arabic (on the Holy Qur'an) and Hausa script (on the interior walls).



Sultan bin Fahad

*Mecellati*, 2019

Tent cloth, beads, LED lights, prayer mats, shelves, 'minbar' (pulpit), turban

325 x 255 x 230 cm

*"Trust"* tackles issues of translation and the exchange of cultures. The title references the children's game Chinese Whispers, where a story whispered from one to another is transformed into something else by the end. In the making of this piece, the artist, through an online acquaintance, custom-ordered this chair from a beading workshop in West Africa. Sultan bin Fahad also found scarves made in India in the 1950s and 1960s that were originally used as souvenirs for pilgrims in Mecca. Bin Fahad sent out these scarves with images representing Mecca but which are full of mistranslations, to the African craftsmen, who were then asked to produce the beaded seats from the scarf renditions.

While the emblems and motifs are from Saudi Arabia, the colours used are combinations associated with African culture. The artist is interested and even encourages these variations and cultural interpretations, bridging West Africa, West Asia and South Asia, and trust becomes the basis of these cross-cultural relations.



**Sultan bin Fahad**  
*Chinese Whispers*, 2019  
Cloth and plastic beads  
90 x 90 x 110 cm

A row of mirrored display boxes contains several small plastic dancing and singing toys made in China. When switched on they move haphazardly within their containments. These toys absurdly reference Islam or Mecca with stereotypical Orientalist tropes from the East and fuse various cultural ideas, translations and misrepresentations. For example, an airplane that sings out Islamic prayers with disco lights, or a maharaja-like figure adorned with a turban reading the Holy Qur'an on a camel. These objects are a direct reference to the hybridised and intertwined economies and cultures of holy sites.



**Sultan bin Fahad**  
*Loop II*, 2018  
Fibreglass, mirror, plastic toys  
Dimensions variable

The artist began researching the etiquette of preparing and serving food, examining photographs of cooks and details of the royal dinner preparations during King Saud's reign. In this work, Sultan bin Fahad dissects the conventional boundaries of labour and delves into its meaning. In *Labor III: Polishing*, videos were filmed depicting hands cleaning, polishing and simulating the palace work of the time. The artist re-enacted these situations and shot these actions, presenting the images on a loop. By focusing solely on the hands, this is a timeless reference to nameless labour.



**Sultan bin Fahad**  
*Labor III: Polishing*, 2019  
Multichannel digital video installation with sound, two minutes, 21 seconds

This installation consists of disused chandeliers sourced by the artist from the Red Palace. They are placed inside rusty steel cages of old air-conditioning units, also from the palace, while shards of glass protrude from the surrounding bars. This work draws a contrast between material wealth and the decaying palace ruins, reminiscing on its rich history.



**Sultan bin Fahad**  
*To Dust*, 2019  
Crystal, brass, copper, steel and mirror  
Dimensions variable

This two-part video displays an intimate portrayal of men and women who worked as household servants at the palace. The lens focuses on their hands as they intimately groom themselves with elaborate costumes, custom-made from historical source images. Sultan bin Fahad sourced photographs of various dinner table settings and was intrigued by the servants adorned in embellished uniforms, standing patiently on the sidelines. He captures and highlights these figures, otherwise forgotten, and attempts to include their presence in the history of the palace itself.



**Sultan bin Fahad**  
*Labor I: sufrah wa sayah*, 2019  
Two-channel digital video installation, with sound, two minutes, 21 seconds each



**Sultan bin Fahad**  
*Dinner at the Palace II*, 2019  
Single channel video  
3 minutes, 14 seconds

Over many years, Sultan bin Fahad collected dinnerware from the Saudi royal palaces. With these hundreds of discarded objects he repurposed them as props in a re-enactment of a dinner scene captured on film and now displayed at the side of this installation.

The dinner is hypothetically set for the palace labourers and servants. The artist creates a full seated dinner, capturing details from archive footage from the Red Palace.

The extended dinner tables are flanked by custom-made upholstered chairs, with abandoned tableware from the palace on top, and with staple meat and rice dishes served alongside bottles of ketchup and A1 steak sauce.

The video captures small moments of intimacy between the men and women as they enjoy the meal. In the video, the objects in the installation consist of stacked ceramic, embellished plates, golden embossed glasses and silverware bearing the royal emblem of the kingdom, used by hands made rough by labour.

As part of his interest in translatability, Sultan bin Fahad explores the overlooked notion of labour and its origins. One of the translations of 'labour' in Arabic is 'the hands of labour'. The artist captures this figurative and corporeal image through this video. Modernity, of which the Red Palace was a part, was built on material growth but somehow erased the physicality associated with the labour that produced this wealth. Here, the focus on labour becomes an antidote to abstracted effort; bodies become manifest and are visible. The otherwise silent people of service and their efforts leave a focus and a detectable trace.



**Sultan bin Fahad**

*Dinner at the Palace I*, 2019

Installation of tables, chairs, ceramic plates, silverware, glass cups, silver ewers and mirrors

700 x 130 x 75 cm

This installation features road signs collected from Mecca which became obsolete after the construction of new roads and as the older roads became inaccessible.



In this semi-autobiographical artwork, Sultan bin Fahad references the Second Gulf War, in which he volunteered by enlisting in the Joint Forces as an interpreter for prisoners of war. Bin Fahad presents a selection of his intimate memorabilia in a vitrine: a military cap; Desert Storm trading cards; and pamphlets with survival instructions that were dropped from airplanes during the war. This vitrine is in stark contrast to the four other vitrines, that are filled with gas masks retrieved in wooden storage boxes at the palace. These gas masks became a recognisable hallmark of the conflict as they were distributed widely across the region at the time. The artist places his memories on display in the form of small items collected during his enlistment, but they are surrounded — almost overwhelmed — by reminders of commodities produced in a war environment.

**Sultan bin Fahad**

*Make it Rain (Gulf War)*, 2016-2019

Military cap, gas masks, wood boxes, paper, postcards, T-shirts, caps, sweatshirts and glass vitrines

Dimensions variable



This framed photograph shows the founder of Saudi Arabia, King Abdulaziz Al Saud, sitting in a car next to the driver. The picture was captured during the first phase of petroleum discovery in the kingdom, as the king inspected the oil wells. Bin Fahad flips the image using a gelatin silver process, placing the late king into the driver's seat instead. He is now the driver, in control and is driving Saudi Arabia into the future. The number '1440 M' refers to the moment when King Abdulaziz ordered Aramco to dig deeper than 1,440 metres, the point at which oil was found at this geological depth.



**Sultan bin Fahad**  
*1440 M*, 2016  
Gelatin silver print  
298 x 163.8 cm

