

Zahrah Alghamdi: Between Memory and Matter

Alghamdi's artistic practice is a balancing act between memory and matter. It emerges from the intertwined soil, stone, and memory of Al Baha, a mountainous region in southwest Saudi Arabia, where architecture, landscape, and ancestral narratives are inseparable. Her practice does not begin with the neutrality of a white canvas or an inert block of material but instead with the living memory of a place: mud-brick houses that seem to rise organically from the landscape, stones etched by generations, trees bending into the early morning mist. For Alghamdi, materials are never neutral; they carry histories, emotions, and the capacity to mediate dialogue between past and present. Each stone or mud fragment becomes a witness, a bearer of experience, a conduit through which memory enters form. In her work, the world is not a stage for representation; it is a body to be felt, known, and transformed.

The artist's rootedness in Al Baha situates her within a broader lineage of artists for whom art is less an act of depiction and more an act of translation—translating memory into matter, affect into form, and lived experience into collective resonance. Her approach resonates with the phenomenological perspective articulated by Maurice Merleau-Ponty, in which perception is never detached but always embodied; we know the world not abstractly, but through engagement with its textures, rhythms, and contours. For Merleau-Ponty, the body is not a neutral instrument but the very condition of perception, a living horizon through which the visible and invisible intertwine, making experience inseparable from the corporeal ground that sustains it. In Alghamdi's practice, the earth is animate, shaping the act of creation as much as the resulting work itself. The stones, mud, and natural elements of her native landscape are interlocutors, not passive objects; they speak, respond, and carry traces of human and non-human presence across generations. It is this intimate relationship between environment and artist that defines the specificity and intensity of her visual language.

Her childhood in Al Baha, surrounded by mud houses, fortified towers, and stone farm structures embedded seamlessly into the mountainous terrain, formed the foundation of her aesthetic sensibility. The town's architecture was not conceived as separate from nature but as an extension of it, built from the very soil and rock it inhabited. Gaston Bachelard, in *The Poetics of Space*, emphasized that architecture is internalized as a structure of imagination and memory, shaping thought as much as sheltering life. Alghamdi's memory of Al Baha—its silent valleys, intimate courtyards, and organically integrated buildings—continues to infuse her work with formal and emotional coherence. Her sculptures and installations often appear to “grow” from their material sources, an organic inevitability echoing the embeddedness of Al Baha's architecture within the mountains. In this sense, her work dialogues with the philosophy of Giuseppe Penone and the principles of Arte Povera, which reveal the latent vitality of materials, yet Alghamdi's work remains uniquely anchored in the regional and ancestral, where materials are imbued with specific histories and affective resonance rather than abstracted into conceptual exercises.

A central thread of her practice is the notion that materials themselves carry memory. Stones, soil, and organic matter are not neutral elements; they are repositories of experience, vessels of collective and personal history. This animist sensibility places

Alghamdi in conversation with contemporary discourses on materiality and memory, reflecting ideas put forth by theorists such as Andreas Huyssen, who underscores the capacity of objects and environments to outlive their makers and preserve traces of human lives. In Alghamdi's work, a stone is never purely geological; it is historical, emotional, and relational. A mud wall is never simply structural; it archives gestures, inhabits histories, and records the passage of time. Her practice thereby transforms the natural world into an active interlocutor, insisting that matter itself is implicated in the ethical and affective life of human communities. This orientation resonates with the work of other contemporary Saudi artists, such as Ahmed Mater, whose *Illuminations* series juxtaposes medical imagery with traditional calligraphy to trace intersections of body, history, and spirituality, or Manal AlDowayan, who transforms quotidian objects into mnemonic vessels. Alghamdi contributes to this lineage by emphasizing the profound mnemonic qualities of natural material, presenting the environment itself as a living, remembering collaborator.

From early attention to environment and architecture, Alghamdi's work gradually turns toward the human figure, though she consistently frames this as a continuation rather than a rupture in her practice. The human presence was always implicit in her work, inscribed within the memory of spaces, encoded in the intimacy of domestic and communal architecture, and carried in the tactile histories of stones and mud. In recent years, however, she has rendered the human body more explicitly, exploring silhouettes, torsos, and fragmented forms that hover between abstraction and figuration. Since 2021, she has produced over fifty drawings examining solitude, grief, joy, and resilience—works born of a period marked by both personal loss and global crisis. These sketches and their resulting sculptural translations are never literal portraits; they are affective embodiments, capturing emotional states rather than anatomical precision. In this way, Alghamdi's figures, while recalling the attenuated existential forms of Alberto Giacometti, emerge from a distinctly Arab context: they convey personal grief alongside collective experiences of silence, fragmentation, and endurance, reflecting social and cultural conditions as much as individual ones.

The genesis of these works in drawing connects Alghamdi to a broader discourse on trauma, memory, and the "traumatic sublime" described by art historian Hal Foster. Her sketches functioned as spaces of refuge, confessional zones where emotions too profound for words could find shape. Yet her practice transcends autobiography, as viewers consistently recognize their own experiences and affective responses within these forms. In this transformation, the intensely personal becomes universal, a shared language of vulnerability and resilience. There are parallels here with Louise Bourgeois, whose *Cells* and fabric sculptures originated in personal trauma but achieved universal resonance. As Foster reminds us, the abject often returns not as narrative but as trace—fragmentary, bodily, and affective—and it is precisely this register that allows Alghamdi's work to resonate beyond individual memory. Her ability to traverse this spectrum—turning private grief into collective dialogue—is one of the most poignant qualities of this exhibition. In cultures where emotional vulnerability is often circumscribed by social norms, her work creates rare spaces of honesty, inviting viewers into encounters of recognition, empathy, and release.

A recurring reference in this body of work is the notion of masks, reflecting the social identity facades individuals maintain. Her art seeks to counter these masks with sincerity,

producing forms that reveal and invite acknowledgment of the emotions otherwise concealed. These works do not offer simple therapeutic catharsis; they constitute ethical gestures, prompting viewers to recognize vulnerability as a shared condition. In this respect, her sculptures align with the practice of Mona Hatoum, whose installations of fragility—shattered glass, hair, soap—disrupt habitual perceptions, exposing precarity and inviting reflection on social and existential dislocations. Alghamdi's sculptures similarly destabilize viewers, but with an additional specificity: they articulate the emotional landscapes of contemporary Arab life, where public and private expressions of feeling are carefully moderated. Through this lens, these works function both as personal exploration and social commentary, revealing the intricate interplay between materiality, memory, and the ethical demands of presence.

Multiplicity and openness are central to the reception of Alghamdi's work. She insists that her forms resist singular interpretation, insisting instead on the dialogical encounter between object and viewer. Seen from this perspective, her practice aligns with Nicolas Bourriaud's notion of relational aesthetics, in which meaning emerges not as a fixed property of the artwork but in the interaction between work and audience. Each encounter is a site of co-creation: viewers bring their own histories, emotional registers, and associations to the work, generating layered and evolving meanings. This openness resonates with Islamic philosophical traditions of multiplicity, where truth is understood as layered and contingent rather than singular and definitive. Alghamdi's forms operate similarly, offering surfaces and spaces that both conceal and reveal, inviting contemplation and reflection while remaining deliberately indeterminate.

Alghamdi's practice can also be understood as part of the broader emergence of contemporary Saudi art in the global arena, an emergence that is neither derivative of international trends nor bound to insular revivalism. Her work reflects a critical engagement with both local and global artistic concerns, integrating ancestral knowledge, environmental consciousness, and affective depth into forms that speak across cultural and geographic boundaries. In her sculptures and installations, mud, stone, and human silhouette become simultaneously material, mnemonic, and ethical instruments; they are not objects for consumption alone but sites of dialogue and reflection. Her work demonstrates that contemporary Saudi art can articulate highly localized experiences while engaging profoundly with universal themes of memory, embodiment, and emotional resonance.

Across her trajectory, Alghamdi weaves earth, memory, and being into inseparable threads. Her childhood in Al Baha endowed her with an intimate understanding of materials and architecture that continues to shape her artistic language. Her engagement with personal and collective experiences of grief, resilience, and emotional expression infuses her forms with depth and vulnerability. And through her ongoing dialogue between environment and body, she produces works that are simultaneously particular and universal, private and communal. Her art embodies a philosophy in which the earth remembers, spaces carry histories, and the body serves as both vessel and testimony. It is a practice that insists upon sincerity, continuity, and resonance, demonstrating the capacity of contemporary art to mediate between memory and matter, affect and form, self and society.

—Daria Kirsanova