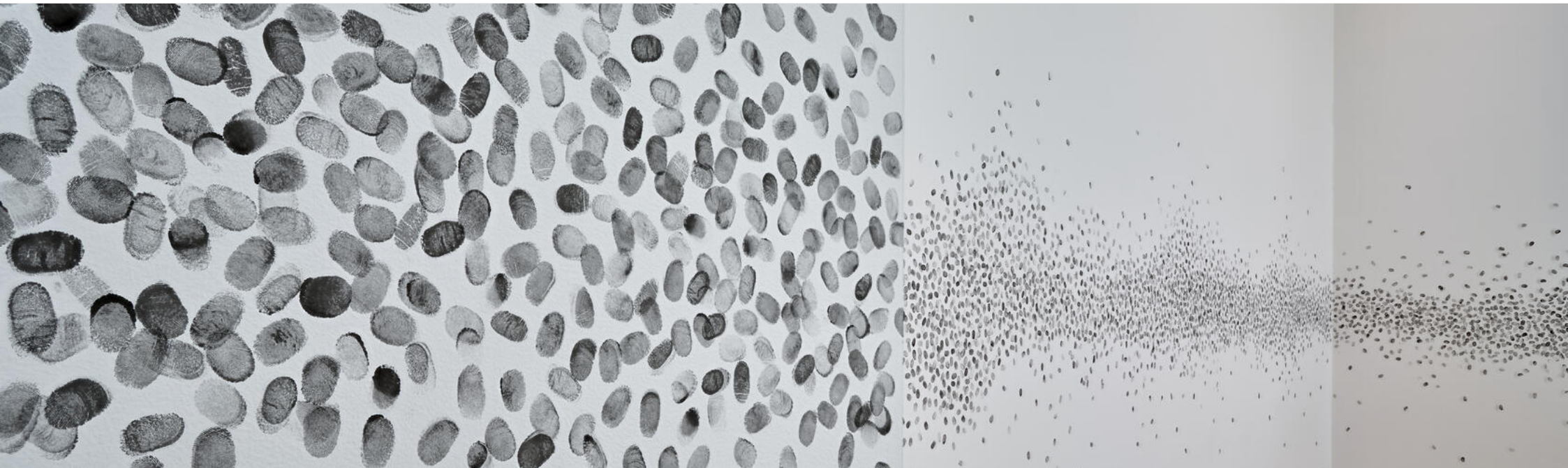


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Moving the Dial on Performance Art in the UAE

‘In Real Time’ at NYUAD Art Gallery, Abu Dhabi, presents art works that evolve over the course of the exhibition

N BY NADINE KHALIL IN EXHIBITION REVIEWS | 16 MAY 24



I’m often disappointed by the nature of performance art in the UAE, which is largely treated as window dressing for exhibitions rather than as a practice in its own right. However, ‘In Real Time’ at NYUAD Art Gallery – co-curated by executive director Maya Allison and recently appointed curator Duygu Demir – is a promising exception. Featuring eleven artists and collectives as well as many more collaborators, the show presents artworks that evolve in performative ways throughout the course of the exhibition.



Gözde İlkin, *Entrusted Ground*, 2022–ongoing, dyed and stitched fabrics, fibre filling, stones, twigs, video, 3-channel sound, performance, dimensions variable. Courtesy: the artist; photograph: John Varghese

A standout example is Gözde İlkin's mixed-media installation *Entrusted Ground* (2022–ongoing), in which suspended embroideries depict mythical, multi-limbed bodies. These chimeras of hybrid beings are mirrored in a performance, choreographed by Aslı Öztürk, in which three dancers move around the space enacting shamanic gestures, at times seeming directly to reference the configurations seen in the embroideries. In one powerful moment, augmented by musician Berke Can Özcan's live accompaniment, two performers encased, cocoonlike, in stretchy, flesh-toned material lie on the floor eerily pressing their heads and limbs against their fabric enclosures before whirling their bodies around like the hands of a clock. For viewers who don't get to see this action live, two videos document the first performance which took place at artSümer, Istanbul, in 2022.

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Ramin Haerizadeh, Rokni Haerizadeh, Hesam Rahmanian, Julie Becton Gillum, Kiori Kawai, Pirouz Taji, Mohammed Rahis Mollah and Bhakta Gaha, *Take a poiesis capsule with a glass of shadow on an empty stomach*, 2024, floor painted with Dastgāh performance, video derived from that performance, assemblage of serving vessels, welded iron structures, clay plates, dimensions variable. Courtesy: the artists and NYUAD Art Gallery; photograph: John Vaghese

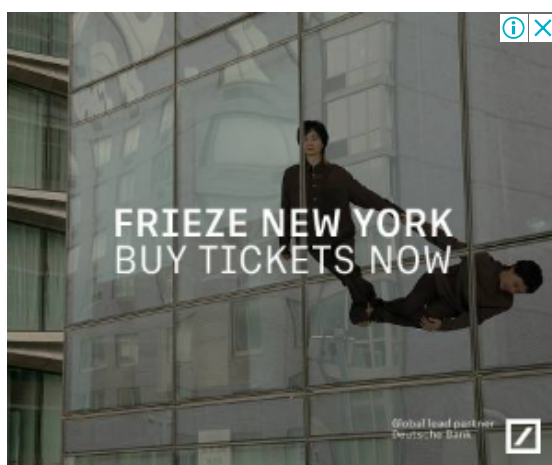
Take a poiesis capsule with a glass of shadow on an empty stomach (2024) – a sprawling installation by the UAE-based collective comprised of artists Hesam Rahmanian, Ramin Haerizadeh and Rokni Haerizadeh – is similarly animated by performance. Within the overwhelming array of wall paintings, videos and sculpted vessels is a more subtle investigation of emptiness and, more specifically, how objects and bodies define the contours of a void. A video montage shows Butoh dancer Julie Becton Gillum making the sculptures that are on display by shaping clay over her eyes, between her toes and with her teeth during a performance at the exhibition opening. At one point she densely wraps black tulle around her face in a self-asphyxiating gesture that carries echoes of the fluid-yet-constricted, fabric-encased dancers of İlkin's *Entrusted Ground*.

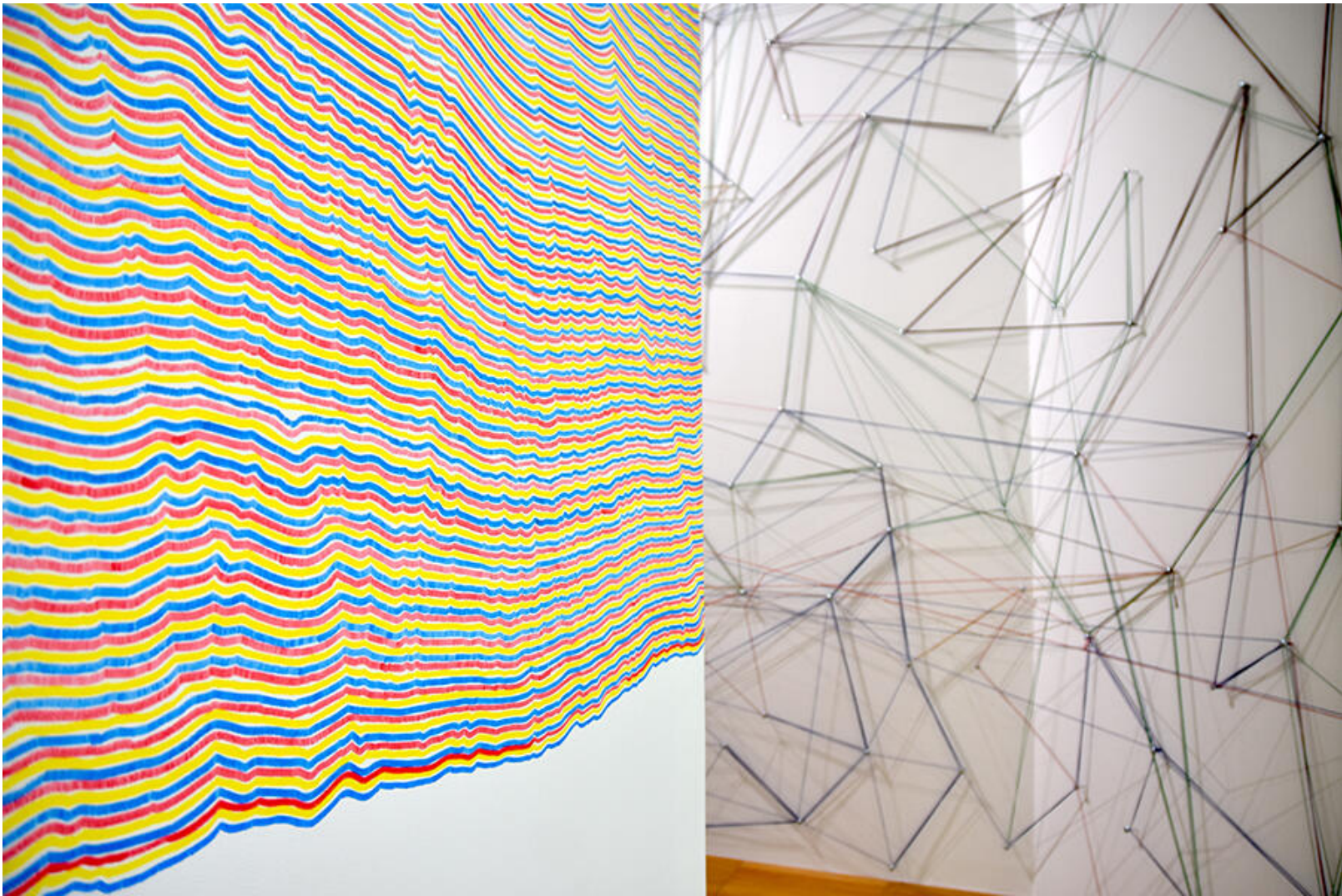


Cristiana de Marchi, *The Echo of the Void* (left), 2021, and *Black Square* (right), 2022, hand-knitted wool stretched on board, dimensions variable. Courtesy: the artist; photograph: John Varghes

This call-and-response between works continues with Cristiana de Marchi's *The Echo of the Void* (2021) and *Black Square* (2022), two hand-knitted wool squares that precisely replicate the dimensions of the world's smallest recorded prison cells. Staking a quiet presence, these textile squares may be absent of bodies but it's impossible not to imagine one within the tiny spaces they delineate. Here, a line from the video by Rahmanian, Haerizadeh and Haerizadeh resonates deeply: 'I live in a two-by-two-metre room. Every time I enter, I feel that I wear this room instead of my overcoat.' Absence is also marked in Rana Begum's *No.1348 Wall Drawing* (2024), which features a series of individual thumbprints spread across two adjoining walls – ghostly traces symbolizing how property is bequeathed in the artist's native Bangladesh.

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Sol LeWitt, *Wall Drawing 797 (in progress)*, 1995/2024, wall drawing and Nujoom Alghanem, *Geography in Transformation (in progress)*, 2022-ongoing, nails, cotton string, burlap, sound, audience participation, dimensions variable. Courtesy: the artists; photograph: John Varghes

‘In Real Time’ also solicits audience participation. Sol LeWitt’s *Wall Drawing 797* – an invitation to draw irregular lines in four colours, first enacted in 1995 by the artist’s students at Amherst College – tasks visitors with following LeWitt’s instructions during the exhibition’s run. However, the precise and orderly results generated by *Wall Drawing 797* lack the dynamism of the creased textiles, clay indentations and various performative traces that make the other works in the show so compelling. Ultimately, it is these vibrant vestiges that enable ‘In Real Time’ to feel alive long after its performances have ended.

In Real Time’ is on view at NYUAD Art Gallery, Abu Dhabi, until 9 June

Main image: Rana Begum, No.1348, Wall Drawing, 2024, ink on wall. Courtesy: the artist and The Third Line, Dubai; photograph: John Varghes



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