

apexart

2022-23 NYC Proposal
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Kafala: Migrant Labor in the Arabian Peninsula **submitted by: Clark Clark**

This exhibition surveys the art and creative activism that brings attention to the migrant workers' crisis in the Arabian Peninsula. Considered by many to be modern-day slavery, the Kafala sponsorship system exploits workers from impoverished nations in Africa and Asia. They endure unconscionably long shifts, scorching heat, and inhumane living conditions. Often employers confiscate their passports, trade their visas to the highest bidder, and force them into crowded dormitories. Domestic workers face physical, psychological, and sexual abuse. They receive inadequate food, poor medical care, and little or no leave. Nearly seven thousand construction workers have died thus far in preparation for Qatar's 2022 FIFA World Cup. The recent pandemic has only escalated the severity of their plight, leaving them stranded, unpaid, and neglected.

Although ex-pats comprise more than 85% of the Arabian nations' population, they appear invisible in pop culture, especially within mass-produced TV. Kuwaiti artist Monira Al Qadiri recasts soap operas to include the missing domestic workers who clean lavishly decorated villas, cook the food, and raise the citizens' children. Clark Stoeckley's "Oppressive Architecture" installation recreates to scale the tiny bedroom intended for a domestic worker that he discovered in his Kuwait apartment.

During her Art Dubai residency, Poonam Jain emphasized counting and numbering for manual work's mundane and repetitive nature. She collected, cleaned, and counted concrete blocks from construction sites numbered by weight and presented them as a coded puzzle. She distilled the experiences of Indian laborers through Labor Cards, which comprises two stacks of forms used to mark attendance and working hours.

A group of artists, writers, architects, curators known as the Gulf Labor Artist Coalition organized protests to protect migrant workers' rights during the construction of the New York University campus, The Guggenheim, and Louvre museums in Abu Dhabi. Hans Haacke documented the inhospitable work conditions. Thomas Hirschorn dropped protest banners in the rotunda of the Guggenheim's Manhattan museum. Meanwhile, Greg Sholette & Matt Greco shop-dropped 3D printed collectibles of the Saadiyat Island workers' residential quarters in the gift shop. The UAE banned artists Walid Raad and Ashok Sukumaran due to their association with the group.

Jonas Bendiksen's "Far From Home" and Philippe Chancel's "Workers Emirates" photographic reportage documents construction workers' lives in the UAE. Saudi artist Ahmed Mater compiled mobile phone footage shot by workers on Mecca's nearby building sites for his film "Leaves Fall in All Seasons." Sudanese artist Khalid Al Baih and Indian photographer Aparna Jayakumar's "Doha Fashion Fridays" street portraits showcase guest workers in personal outfits on their only day off.

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Illustrations by Rositsa Raleva for Human Rights Watch, Ryan Inzana for The Nation's article "Why Are Thousands of Malagasy Women Being Trafficked to Abusive Jobs in the Middle East?", Molly Crabapple's "Slaves of Happiness Island" article for VICE will be displayed. Documentation of graffiti and theatrical protests by Arcadia Blank, Subash Thebe, and Indonesian woodblock printmaking collective Taring Padi provide a glimpse of the guerrilla art intended for those most affected by the Kafala system.

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