

## The art of science fiction from Algeria to Pakistan



Jim Quilty India Stoughton | The Daily Star

BEIRUT: “Gravity does not cause things to fall,” Mehreen Murtaza writes. “Instead falling causes gravity. ... We were hunting obsessively compulsively for something that would do more than represent an existing world.” The artist’s declaration serves to introduce her 20-page pamphlet “UFO Hunters part II,” 2015.



An image from Mehreen Murtaza, "UFO Hunters, Part II," 2015, Publication ink on paper. Photos courtesy of apexart

Copies of her work are available for perusal at the library of Ashkal Alwan’s Home Workspace. Complementing it is Ala Ebtekar’s five-piece collage series “Tunnel in the Sky (chapter IV),” 2015, a piece that mimics the formal conceits of Persian miniatures to frame representations of a nighttime sky.

Ashkal Alwan’s Jisr al-Wati location is one of five Beirut-area spaces hosting “Space Between Our Fingers,” an exhibition of new and recent work by eight artists, all of whom are “imagining and challenging outer space and science fiction.”

Some see science fiction as its own genre. Others argue that fiction set in the future isn’t really a genre at all but a delivery system for recasting older genres – war pictures, porn, melodramas, what have you.

Before science fiction, people tended to fantasize about the future – not unlike the way they imagined distant places, peopled by dog-headed Cynocephali, surly one-eyed Cyclopes and one-legged Unipeds.

Science fiction became possible only after the cultural hegemony of technology conditioned the way writers imagined “tomorrow.” Old-school science fiction simply took writers’ confidence in how technology can improve the human condition (aka “progress”) and set it in the future.

Late last century, with faith in progress truly flagging, someone coined the term “cyberpunk” to label science fiction whose pessimism had overwhelmed the form’s former optimism. Utopian premises gave way to dystopias formed by projecting contemporary realities – the global deracination of late capitalism, looming environmental catastrophe and the like – into the near future.

The Pakistani-born Murtaza has attracted critical attention for her work’s appropriation of science fiction tropes.

In “UFO Hunters part II,” the artist combines worrisome photos of collapsed buildings, sinkholes and craters with ruminations linking these seemingly inexplicable phenomena to extraterrestrial causes. Though lyrical in expression and sentiment, the text doesn’t have the labored polish of poetry, and reads more like voice-over.

Festooned with scientific terms, Murtaza’s language reads like science fiction, yet the anxieties driving it suggest the work is less grounded in the future than present trauma.

“We continue our lingering search for these mysterious UFOs to fill an inner sense of emptiness,” Murtaza writes. On a facing page she refers to a “curved space-time” that announces “the schizophrenic soliloquy of our irredeemable loneliness.”

Across town at Zoqaq al-Blat’s Mansion, the familiar strains of Johann Strauss Jr.’s stately waltz “The Blue Danube” fill the vacuum of space.



Larissa Sansour, "A Space Exodus," 2009, Video (red cam, HD), 5.24 minutes. Photos courtesy of apexart

As artist [Larissa Sansour](#) drifts weightlessly past the camera lens, flashing the Palestinian flag on the white sleeve of her space suit, Oriental percussion kicks in, forming a pulsing base for the Arabized melody that drones and lilts its way through the famous score, matching it with alien harmonies.

Sansour’s “A Space Exodus” has been widely shown since the artist completed the 5 1/2 minute video in 2009. The work is at once a humorous satire of Stanley Kubrick’s cult sci-fi classic “2001: A Space Odyssey,” whose soundtrack uses the same music, and a serious reflection upon the Palestinian condition.

Sansour’s work can be read in hopeful terms – a Palestinian flag planted on the moon, finally signaling an uncontested land for a people driven from their own, a superpower success for a people associated with Western occupation and strife. Yet it ends bleakly, with a woman drifting in space, alone, after calling for a Jerusalem that does not answer.

In the context of “Space Between Our Fingers,” Sansour’s film assumes an additional resonance, finding echoes in work by artists from around the region and – consciously or not – contributing to a larger body of work taking its cue from science fiction and outer space.

“Space Between Our Fingers” is funded by U.S. nonprofit arts organization apexart, through its Franchise Program. The show is curated by Rachel Dedman, a British independent curator and writer currently in the midst of a yearlong curator-in-residence stint at 98weeks.

Dedman chose to stage the show in multiple locations because finding a single nonprofit venue in [Beirut](#) proved challenging. A multiple venue platform does encourage viewers to spend more time with each work, though individual exhibits tend to be rather sparse and visiting the entire show is a time-consuming business.

At Mansion, Sansour’s video is paired with five black-and-white photos by Jananne al-Ani, tacked to the peeling walls.



Jananne al-Ani, "Shadow Sites II," 2011, Video, 8.38 minutes, still. Photos courtesy of apexart

“Shadow Sites II” is a series of landscape stills, taken from video footage the artist took from a light aircraft. The series of birds-eye-view images are marked by pronounced shadows upon barren landscapes, punctuated by ruins and brutal military infrastructure, evoking alien traces on the surface of the moon or some distant, lifeless planet.

Two Gemmayzeh spaces host “Space Between Our Fingers” exhibits. The [Arab Image Foundation](#) has hung three photos from its archive showing an Arz rocket in flight, or rather the contrails left in its wake, as taken by Asaad Jreidi. The Arz was one of several experimental craft launched in the 1960s by the Lebanese Rocket Society, whose (largely forgotten) existence and accomplishments have inspired Joana Hadjithomas and Khalil Joreige’s sprawling art and film project of the same name.

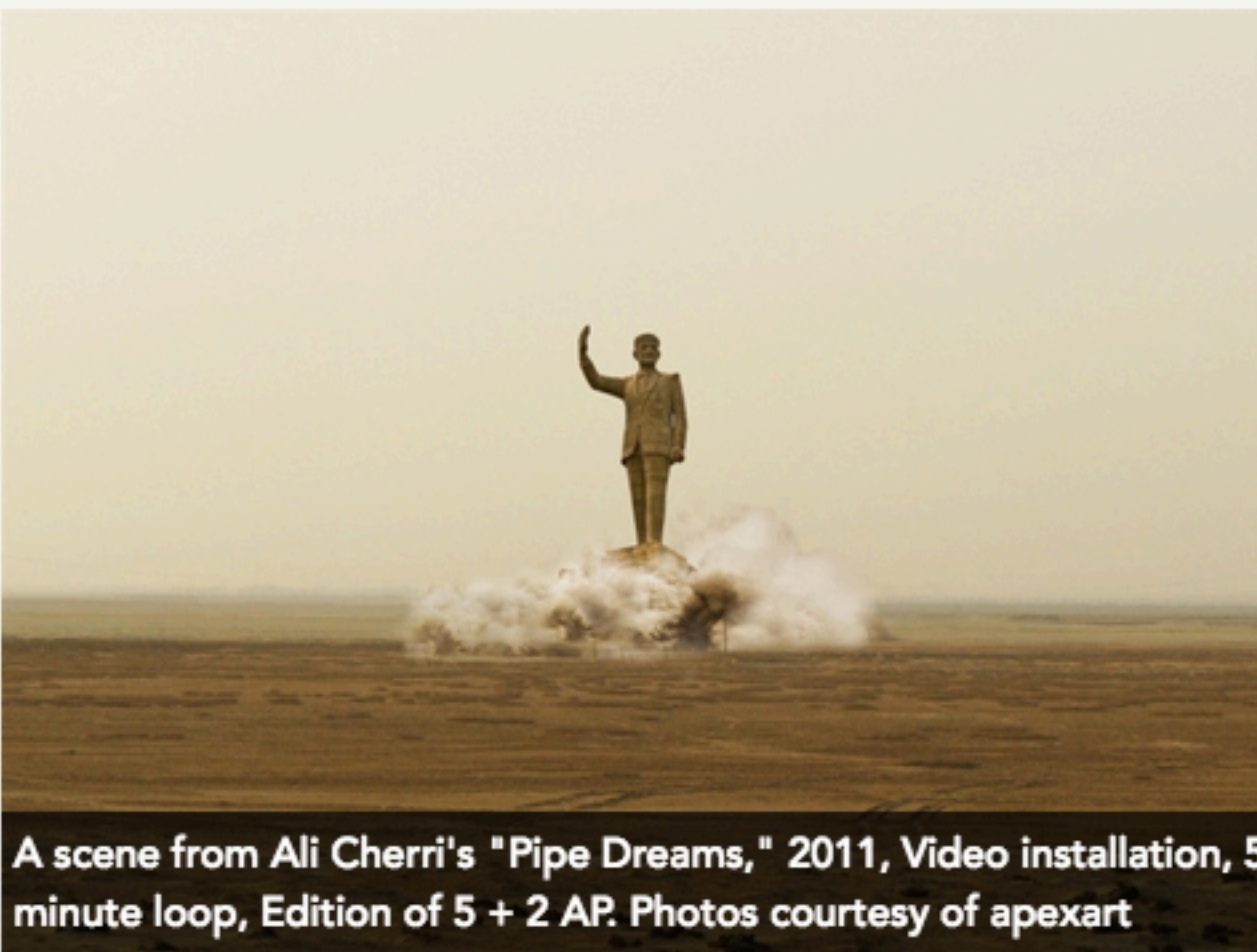
Complementing Jreidi’s small format black-and-white snaps, the surface of the library’s perpendicular wall hangs “Elective Purification (Arab Version),” Fayçal Baghriche’s colorful wallpaper work that recasts the stars of national flags as night-time constellations.

The screening room of Dawawine is hosting the show’s screening cycle, as well as another [Ala Ebtekar](#) piece. Like the work hung at Ashkal Alwan, the 2015 “Journey to the Moon,” 104x68 cm, uses found paper as a medium, specifically an old ad for the movie from which the piece takes its name.

On the poster’s verso the artist has applied a handsome inkjet image of the cosmos, again framed by an elaborate design evocative of classical Persian art. The work’s colors and scale make it more aesthetically pleasing than Ebtekar’s miniatures, and the origin of the medium lends it additional irony.

apexart: Beirut  
*Space Between Our Fingers*  
on view May 2 - May 30, 2015

<https://www.dailystar.com.lb/Arts-and-Ent/Culture/2015/May-22/298886-the-art-of-science-fiction-from-algeria-to-pakistan.ashx>



A scene from Ali Cherri's "Pipe Dreams," 2011, Video installation, 5 minute loop, Edition of 5 + 2 AP. Photos courtesy of apexart

The matter of Arab or Muslim science fiction, and the dearth of it, has been a talking point for some years now, and was the subject of a lively panel discussion hosted by 98weeks during the 2013 edition of Home Works, Ashkal Alwan’s Forum on cultural practices.

Dedman was inspired to create this show by a symbol she saw spray painted on walls around the city – a cedar tree on the moon beside a rocket, marked with the words “believe it.” The image stems from “The Lebanese Rocket Society” project.

“Golden Record” is one of six installations Hadjithomas and Joreige produced for the “Rocket Society” project. It’s on show at The Hanger, UMAM D&R’s Haret Hreik exhibition space, though when The Daily Star visited it was temporarily on the fritz.

The 2011 work was inspired by the U.S. probes Voyager 1 and 2, which in 1977 were launched into space carrying golden records intended to regale extraterrestrial audiences with a selection of sounds reflecting the diversity of life on earth.

“Golden Record” consists of a video projection of an enormous spinning gold disk, accompanied by a recording of archived sounds from 1960s Beirut, which create a retrospective audio portrait of the city at that era.

Blended with the sound of the contemporary city, this audio work is at once historical and fictive, touching on issues surrounding Lebanon’s uneasy coexistence with its violent past.

Nearby, glass vitrines display UMAM’s extensive archives, displaying original newspaper articles from the 1960s and ’80s, reporting on Lebanon’s space program as well as the landmark extraterrestrial journey of Syrian cosmonaut Muhammad Faris.

Faris plays a role in Ali Cherri’s “Pipe Dreams,” also on show in The Hanger. It combines old and new footage to reflect upon such issues as public profile, politics, history and the media.

On a small television, film footage shows former Syrian President [Hafez Assad](#) in a seemingly scripted chat with Faris, who in 1987 spent almost eight days in space, making him the second and last Arab to do so.

“Mr. President, I am content and happy to see the country I love,” Faris says. “I see it wonderful and beautiful as it truly is. ... It is superb and wonderful. I am very happy with what I see.”

Cherri projects a second, larger image that overlaps the television screen. Shot after the Syrian uprising began in 2011, this footage shows statues of Assad being removed on the orders of his son and successor, Bashar.

The work creates a wonderful juxtaposition of the father’s monumental moment of triumph and the son’s furtive efforts decades later to prevent his father’s image being torn down by protestors.

“Space Between Our Fingers” is up until May 30. For more information, please visit [www.apexart.org/exhibitions/dedman.php](http://www.apexart.org/exhibitions/dedman.php).

A version of this article appeared in the print edition of The Daily Star on May 22, 2015, on page 12.