

THE ARMORY SHOW



Emii Alrai, installation view of *A Core of Scar – Future Collect Commission*, 2022. Photo: Michael Brzezinski, Courtesy The Hepworth Wakefield

Emii Alrai

June 2, 2022 by Beth Williamson

Wakefield, U.K.

The Hepworth Wakefield

You could be forgiven for not keeping up with Emii Alrai's many achievements. The Leeds-based artist was a Yorkshire Sculpture International Engagement Artist in 2019, a Paul Hamlyn Foundation Award holder in 2020, had residencies in Calabria and Marseille in 2021 (to mention just a few highlights), and now she has won the second iniva Future Collect commission, which partners with British art institutions to support British-based artists of African and/or Asian descent.

A Core of Scar, which remains on view through September 4, 2022, immediately makes clear why Alrai won the commission. Her sensitive use of materials to explore complex diasporic journeys is ingenious. Two enormous rocky mounds cleave the gallery in two. Following the length of this divide, or rupture, the eye is drawn to numerous glass vessels held in metal armatures mounted on the surface, which evoke something like an archaeological site. All of these elements are handmade and bear the marks of their casting and joining. Alrai and curator Amber Li traveled across Britain to conduct research and find craftspeople to collaborate on the project. North Lands Creative, located on the northernmost tip of the Scottish mainland, near the village of John o'Groats, made the glass vessels. Alrai also visited the Lizard in Cornwall—the southernmost tip on the English mainland—and nearby St Ives, home of the Barbara Hepworth Museum and Sculpture Garden. In between, she saw the Gordale Scar in the Yorkshire Dales, a dramatic hidden limestone ravine that she first learned about while studying the Gott Collection at The Hepworth Wakefield. This collection of 19th-century landscape and architectural views, Alrai says, helped to direct her thinking, as well as her traveling. Selected items from the Gott Collection are displayed along with Alrai's sketches, photographs, and small sculptures to reveal the thinking behind her installation.

A Core of Scar establishes intricate connections between this landscape research and Alrai's interests in ancient Middle Eastern mythology and Iraqi oral history, subverting the traditional visual language of museum displays through references to geology, memory, migration, and diaspora. The glass vessels are perhaps the most potent elements of the installation. Each one is different and tells its own tale through its scars. Following the ideas of Ursula K. Le Guin's *Carrier Bag Theory of Fiction*, Alrai is concerned with the container—she doesn't want to tell the same old stories through the same forms; she wants and needs to tell new stories, the stories of migration and diaspora in Britain today. The traces of Alrai's fingertips running through the work recall memories and histories cut loose from their moorings. Likewise, the geological ruptures in the landscape echo the experience of separation from one's homeland, while disrupting traditional museum narratives simply by their presence. Scars in the landscape, Alrai says, echo the physical and mental scars left on the diasporic human body.

In this commission, Alrai takes on Le Guin's challenge to tell a new story, and she succeeds. The interweaving of landscape, geology, materiality, diaspora, and migration takes us on a complex journey. There is so much more to come from this artist.

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