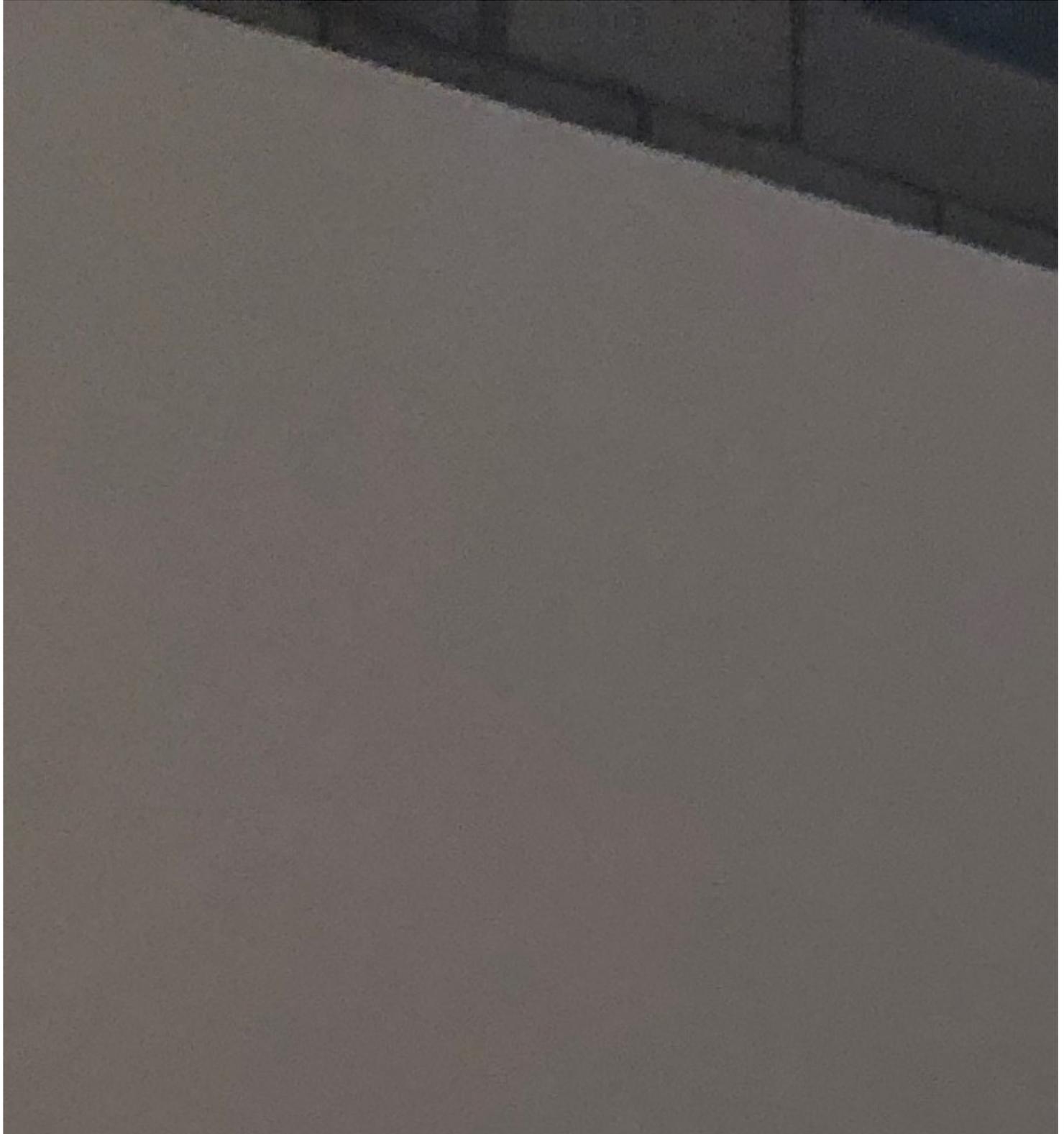


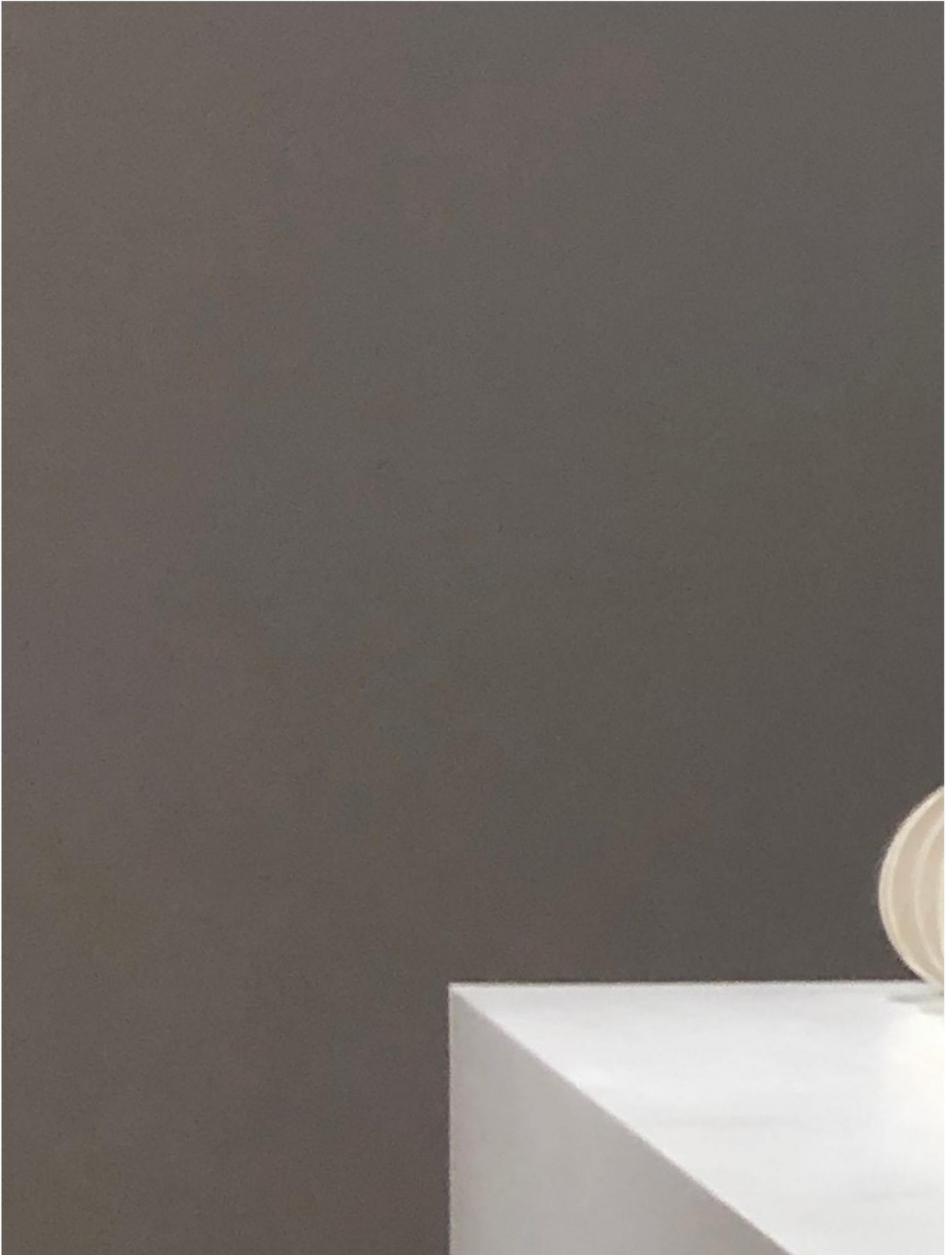
ARTS & CULTURE , DEVELOPMENT , LIBERAL ARTS

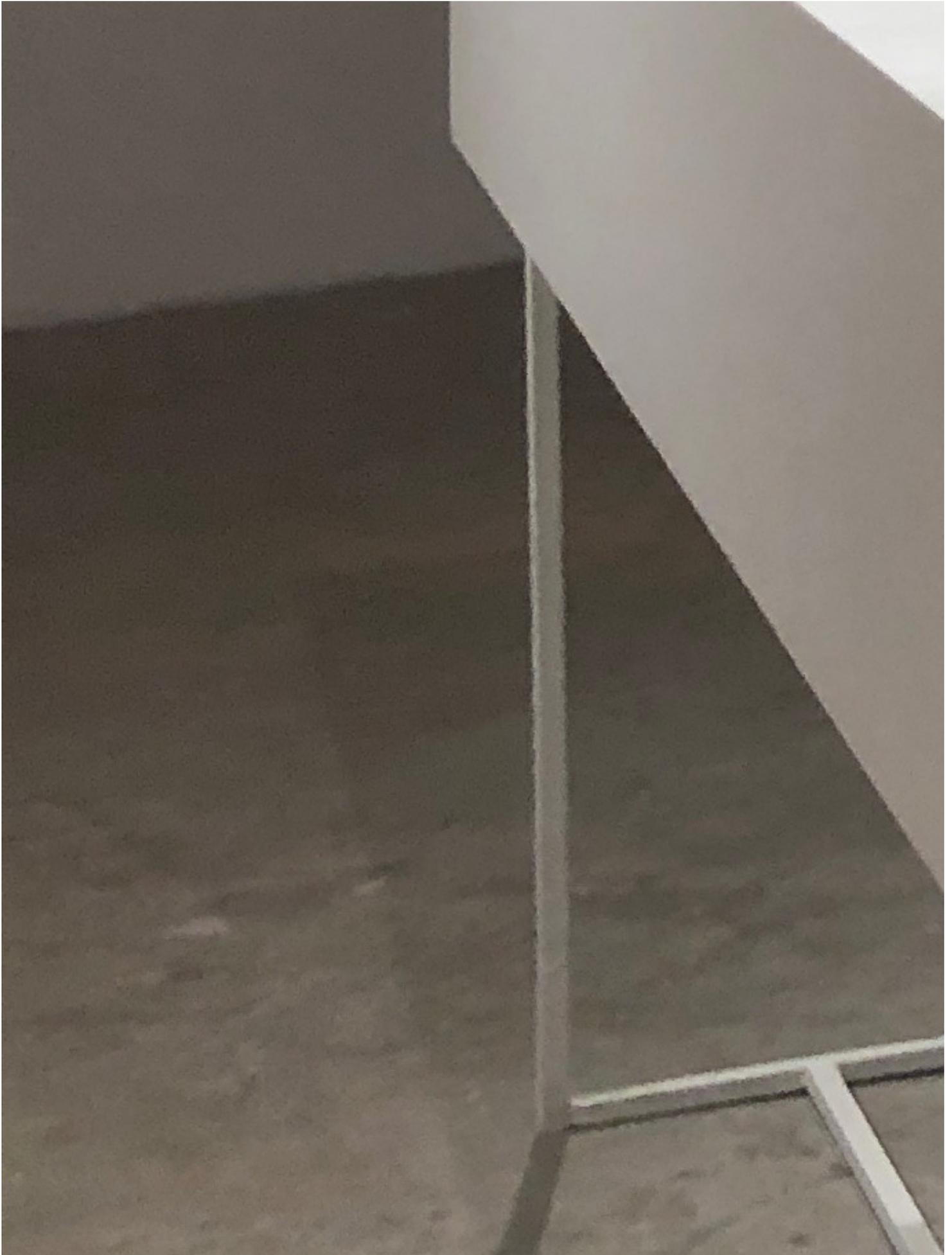
Copyright © 2018 Al-Fanar Media.

Events Highlight a Thriving Visual Arts Scene in Saudi Arabia

Heba Elkayal / 14 Mar 2019









Sukoon, a sculpture installation by Nesreen Bakheet, alludes to an act of crossing, physically and spiritually. It's part of the Al Obour exhibition in Jeddah (Photo: Heba Elkayal).

A diverse crew of international and regional museum directors, curators, journalists and collectors descended on Jeddah last month for "21, 39," a four-day visual arts festival with a continuing exhibition that's organized yearly by the Saudi Art Council, a nonprofit group formed by art patrons and collectors.

Named for Jeddah's coordinates of latitude and longitude, the 21, 39 initiative was set up to inform invited art practitioners about the burgeoning Saudi Arabian art scene, and has become an important contribution to an expanding regional arts calendar across the Middle East that includes biennials, art fairs and regular exhibition programming.

The initiative helps to facilitate introductions for museum curators and collectors while simultaneously providing an opportunity for citizens of Jeddah to learn about local artists.

The program for its sixth iteration this year included organized tours of local galleries and artists' studios, and visits to Jeddah's historic downtown district, to expose visitors to the many facets of the local art ecosystem.

Historically, Jeddah has long been exposed to outside visitors as pilgrims passed through the port city on their way to the holy cities of Mecca and Medina. This spirit of Jeddah as a regional crossroads permeated not only much of the week's programming but also the artworks on display, much of which

focused on cultural identity in Saudi Arabia and the shifting socio-political landscape.

Beyond the four days of scheduled events, 21, 39 continues with a central exhibition that runs for two months, allowing students on day-trips and locals alike to visit and engage with the program.

This year's central exhibition is titled "Al Obour," which translates as an act of crossing. It can be read as a literal reference to Jeddah's history as a port and site of movement of people and goods. But the title also carries metaphorical weight, evoking intellectual or metaphysical acts of transcendence.

Curated by Effat Abdullah Fadag, who is the dean of the School of Design and Architecture at Dar Al Hekma University in Jeddah, the exhibition includes nearly 30 works by 26 artists. Most of the works are located in a large warehouse-like space in the Gold Moor Mall, and a few have been placed in Al-Balad, Jeddah's historic downtown district.

Curatorially, the premise of Al Obour is to illuminate the themes that occupy each artist's practice. In the foreword to the exhibition's catalog, Fadag writes that "Al Obour focuses on presenting [the] artists' experiences of crossing to reach a personal utopia in an effort to find their own individual definition of beauty."

Reflecting themes in the realms of metaphysics, science, spirituality, society, and culture, the artworks display a sense of deep personal and social self-scrutiny. The artists who produced them represent a range of ages and experience, including established Saudi Arabian artists who have been practicing for several decades along with young, emerging artists.



Images from an exhibition of works by Sarah Al Abdali titled *The Simorgh Always Rises*, presented in Bait Al Sharbatli, a restored historic home in Jeddah (Photo: Heba Elkayal).

Factors that contribute to the success of an artwork, critics have argued, include the original use of a medium, or the cogent articulation of a political or social message. In Al Obour, some of the artworks succeed more than others in parlaying a strong message or displaying an artist’s control of their chosen medium.

Highlights of the exhibition include a work by Ajan Gharem titled *Mount of Mercy*, a large installation of Polaroid photographs of pilgrims visiting Mount Arafat during the annual hajj, and of the objects and handwritten prayers they intentionally leave behind. Mount Arafat is a hill east of Mecca where the Prophet Muhammad is said to have given his last sermon, and the ephemera left there are regularly collected and discarded by local authorities. Gharem’s images and objects he collected before they were discarded speak about practices of ritual and faith, and poignantly capture the emotional intensity of spirituality in a well-balanced examination of the subject.

Nesreen Bakheet’s work *Sukoon* is a sculpture installation of 30 ceramic rings of varying sizes placed equidistantly from one another in a straight line. The installation physically alludes to an act of travel or crossing, and the work’s title—which means internal stillness and calm—references the theme of spirituality in the artist’s practice. An instructor at the College of Art and Design at King AbdulAziz University, Bakheet melds great technical execution with personal expression in her work.

Ever
edu
Su
لعربية
نتراك

Like Bakheet, many of the exhibition's participants are female, and their artistic training varies from local to international art schools.

The most interesting of the exhibition's works are those that deal with local culture, such as the painting *Khatwa*, by Enas Al Neami, which visually captures the steps of a traditional dance from the south of Saudi Arabia. Footprints on the canvas allow viewers to trace the steps and visualize the dance itself. The work allows the artist, who hails from the southern city of Abha, to explore her cultural identity and remind visitors that the kingdom's various regions contain a multitude of histories and traditions. It was this message that was most powerfully portrayed throughout the events of 21,39.

Hafez Gallery organized several exhibitions. One, titled *Makan* and mounted at the gallery's new mixed-use gallery and artistic residency space, highlighted painting and sculptural work by a roster of artists focusing on concepts related to the spaces of objects and life in Saudi Arabia, including marketplaces and gardens.

Another was a solo exhibition of works by Sarah Al Abdali, titled *The Simorgh Always Rises*. The show includes works on paper and paintings of females, some of which were done in the style of Islamic manuscripts, painted in scenes of vernacular traditional home spaces inhabited by Saudi women. Al Abdali's exhibition was presented in *Bait Al Sharbatli*, a restored historic home in downtown Jeddah whose traditional architectural features mirrored the scenes of Al Abdali's works.

Hafez Gallery's nuanced understanding of the importance of site in relation to an artwork were best exemplified in these two tightly-curated exhibitions as artists responded directly to the context.

Athr Gallery, now in its tenth year of representing Saudi Arabian and Middle Eastern artists, presented a group exhibition of artists the gallery has featured over the years. Works by internationally-recognized artists Ahmed Mater and Dana Awartani were displayed alongside works by emerging artists as a showcase of the substantial work done by the gallery in supporting the growing art scene and helping create connections and dialogues between the region's artists and helping secure residencies for artists abroad to help further develop their work and practice.

The gallery's communal spirit was best displayed during its rooftop opening night event, which saw artists and visitors mingling after seeing the show—a testament to the gallery and 21, 39's success in helping bring visitors and various members of the community together over art.

Al Obour runs until March 30 in Jeddah's Gold Moor Mall.



Copyright © 2018 Al-Fanar Media.