







**MOREHSHIN ALLAHYARI**



# THE DESTABILISED AND DESTABILISING IN-BETWEEN

by Gretty Louw

The depth of research involved in Morehshin Allahyari's practice, not peripherally but as a central component of the finished work, frames archiving as art and object as metaphor. She is best known for her sculptures; art objects, that nevertheless do not allow themselves to be reduced to aesthetics nor materiality. Indeed, her work across a wide range of time-based and performative mediums likewise revolts against categorisation. Allahyari's perspective on networks and the power of digitally dispersed information to preserve and disseminate from person-to-person largely irrespective of traditional or imposed cultural, political, or colonial hierarchies and constraints is radically contemporary - boundless and explicitly anti-

commercial. She consciously positions herself and her work between traditional notions of art-making and activism, between the academic archive and the poetic gesture.

Allahyari is critical<sup>1</sup> of western museums, which she sees as continuing the colonial legacy of removing artifacts from structurally less powerful territories under the guise of preservation, as well as the supposed cultural conservation carried out by private interests, in which the copyright of an ancient artifact is transferred to a corporate entity; an act of digital colonialism. She was clear in her condemnation of

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1 Interview by Hannah Gregory on Ibraaz, accessed on 27.1.2017 by Gretta Louw at <http://www.ibraaz.org/interviews/210>.

the nurturing of the 'us vs. them' narrative that has been building in the U.S. media and politics over recent years long before the rise of the alt-right. She had firsthand experience of this process of narrative creation in the media coverage of her acclaimed series *Material Speculation: ISIS* (2015-16). The series represents a painstakingly thorough research effort by the artist to document, reconstruct, model, and 3D print 12 artifacts from the cities of Hatra and Nineveh that were destroyed by ISIS followers. The process of archiving — of gathering and preserving cultural and historical information outside the constraints of the often colonialist archeological and anthropological structures of museums in the global north — is key. Each piece literally contains a digital memory of its own history, with a flash drive memory card containing the full dossier of information that the artist collated about each artifact embedded into the 3D printed reproduction.

The series embodies a complex set of interrelations between petropolitics, oil and plastic, propaganda, digital colonialism and technocapitalism. In other words, it acknowledges the complexity of the context in which jihad and the so-called 'war on terror' coincide. The response by the western media, in comparison, was often startlingly simplistic and uni-directional with titles like "Artist Fights ISIS with 3D Printer"<sup>2</sup>. These reactions ignored the role that oil, for example, plays in conflicts in the Middle East, not to mention the profit made by western countries through arms trading, the hugely problematic ethics of drone usage and many other narrative strands in favour of a simple pitting of the honourable 'us' (in this case encompassing and claiming the politicised body of the immigrant artist) against the barbaric 'other'. As Allahyari explains in a recent interview, "my existence

<sup>2</sup> e.g. [https://duckduckgo.com/?q=artist+fights+isis+with+3d+printer&t=h\\_&ia=web](https://duckduckgo.com/?q=artist+fights+isis+with+3d+printer&t=h_&ia=web)

as a woman has constantly been oppressed by the Iranian government and culture as well as colonized by white patriarchy”<sup>3</sup>.

The *Dark Matter* series, one of Allahyari’s earlier forays into 3D printing, synthesises the political and physical ‘betweenness’ of what the artist describes as her “self-exile” from her country of birth, with another layer of interpolation; the space that exists between the digital file and the materiality of the physical object. Unlike all that is corporeal, a digital file can slip undetected through geographic and ideological borders. The sculptural works are printed from digital models that refigure “objects that are banned or un-welcome in Iran by the government.” Drawing attention to this censorship, which in Allahyari’s selection of subjects seems beyond absurd, is clearly a criticism of the Iranian regime. However, one can equally read a sort

3 Interview by Hannah Gregory, *ibid*.

of eye-roll at the superficiality of western, capitalist materialism in the works. The Homer-Simpson-cum-Buddha figure of *#buddha #Simpson* is both a humorous jab at the self-indicting insecurity inherent in Iran’s censorship of foreign media and an allusion to the vapid American deification of entertainment. Allahyari’s works are critical knives that cut both ways.

Born and raised in Tehran, Allahyari moved to the U.S. a decade ago. As any person with experience of migration can attest, it is exhausting. The physical, cultural, linguistic, and emotional shifts required to move between two markedly different countries are enormous and, often, demoralising. In Allahyari’s practice, however, the status of being between, of being medial, becomes a potent weapon against all forms of oppression — patriarchal, political, colonial, and technological. Everything in Allahyari’s practice is about disclosing; deconstructing; decolonising.

From a position that is neither and never 'us' nor 'them', she observes incisively and creates decisively. She is shaped by the lived experience of being in-between, but her practice should not be reduced to an individual history. As a radical thinker, organiser, activist, archivist, and artist, Allahyari moves between the shifting, treacherous currents of national and global power structures and the narratives they build, the transformational forces of digitalisation, and the dystopian promise of capitalism and climate change to advocate for the inherent authority of the destabilised position of being between.

*Essay developed in part thanks to the support of Marta Herford Museum für Kunst, Architektur, Design*





# MATERIAL SPECULATION

*Material Speculation: ISIS* is a 3D modeling and printing project that inspects petropolitical and poetic relationships between 3D printing, plastic, oil, technocapitalism and jihad. Allahyari focused on the reconstruction of twelve original artifacts from the Roman-period city of Hatra and Assyrian artifacts from Nineveh that were destroyed by ISIS in 2015.

*Material Speculation: ISIS* illustrates a practical and political possibility for artifact archiving, while also proposing 3D printing technology as a tool for resistance and documentation. It uses 3D printing as a process for repairing history and memory.

Allahyari includes a flash drive or other memory device inside the body of each object. Like time capsules, they are sealed and kept for future civilizations, though the memory devices can be removed without destroying the object. The stored information includes

images, maps, PDF files and videos gathered during an intense research process involving corresponding with archeologists, historians, and museum staff in Iran and Iraq, particularly those at the Mosul Museum.

Morehshin Allahyari is grateful to Pamela Karimi, Christopher Jones, Negin Tabatabaei, Wathiq Al-Salihi, Lamia Al-Gailani Werr for their help with research; and to Shannon Walsh, Shane O'Shea, Sierra Dorschutz, Patrick Delory, Christian Pramuk, and Mariah Hettel for their help with 3D modeling.





previous page:  
*Lamassu*, 2015  
3D printed plastic and  
electronic components  
6.25 x 6.25 x 1.25 inches  
(15.9 x 15.9 x 3.2 cm)

left:  
*Nergal*, 2015  
3D printed plastic and  
electronic components  
11 x 9.5 x 0.5 inches  
(28 x 24 x 1.3 cm)

Digital artifacts related to this work, including Allahyari's STL and OBJ files, were made available for public download in 2016 as a Rhizome Digital commission. Writing for *Rhizome*, Paul Soulellis noted, "The dispersion of the statue guarantees the persistence of its many divergent versions, stored on hard drives and printed out anywhere, at any time. ...In its hybrid state of being and non-being, the CAD model bridges an ontological gap between presence and disappearance—a multiverse of digital cenotaphs."

*King Uthal*, 2015  
3D printed plastic and  
electronic components  
12 x 4 x 3.5 inches  
(30.5 x 10.2 x 8.9 cm)





facing page:  
*Marten*, 2015  
3D printed plastic and  
electronic components  
4.5 x 9 x 1 inches  
(11.4 x 22.9 x 2.5 cm)

*Priest with Eagle*, 2015  
3D printed plastic and  
electronic components  
12 x 4 x 3.5 inches  
(30.5 x 10.2 x 8.9 cm)

following spread:  
*Unknown King of Hatra*, 2015  
3D printed plastic and  
electronic components  
12 x 4 x 3.5 inches  
(30.5 x 10.2 x 8.9 cm)









*Venus*, 2015  
3D printed plastic and  
electronic components  
9.5 x 4.75 x 2.5 inches  
(24.1 x 12.1 x 6.3 cm)

*Maren*, 2015  
3D printed plastic and  
electronic components  
6 x 4 x 1.5 inches  
(15.2 x 10.2 x 3.8 cm)





facing page:

*Barmaren*, 2015

3D printed plastic and  
electronic components

5 x 4.5 x 1.75 inches  
(12.7 x 11.4 x 4.4 cm)

*Ebu*, 2015

3D printed plastic and  
electronic components

12 x 4.5 x 3.5 inches  
(30.5 x 11.4 x 8.9 cm)

*Nike*, 2016

3D printed plastic and  
electronic components

9 x 4.75 x 3.5 inches  
(22.9 x 12 x 8.9 cm)





*Gorgon*, 2016  
3D printed plastic and  
electronic components  
7.5 x 7.63 x 1.63 inches  
(19 x 19.4 x 4.1 cm)

# SOUTH IVAN HUMAN HEADS

As an adjunct to *Material Speculation: ISIS*, Allahyari created a series of wall-mounted works that partially open her archives. Like the series to which they refer, the heads are 3D printed, photogrammetric reconstructions of artifacts targeted for destruction. The works straddle a ground between sculpture, art object and information dissemination platform by including a flash drive with protruding USB cable, from which viewers can access the artist's models and research. The works are visually engaging without being reduced to mere aesthetics, embodying Allahyari's perspective on the power of digitally dispersed information to disseminate and disrupt in spite of imposed hierarchies. Moreover, the works quote both the museum conservation/recreation projects of which Allahyari is critical, while engaging in a form of activist audience outreach and "visitor experience" to which those same institutions aspire.

*South Ivan Human Heads:  
Bearded River God, 2017*  
3D printed sandstone and  
electronic components  
8.75 x 8 x 2.5 inches  
(22.2 x 20 x 6.4 cm)  
edition of 3







*South Ivan Human Heads:  
Young Boy, 2017  
3D printed sandstone and  
electronic components  
8.5 x 8.5 x 3 inches  
(21.6 x 21.6 x 7.6 cm)  
edition of 3*

*South Ivan Human Heads:  
Medusa Head, 2017*  
3D printed sandstone and  
electronic components  
9 x 11.25 x 3.5 inches  
(22.9 x 28.6 x 8.9 cm)  
edition of 3



# DARK MATTER

Morehshin Allahyari combined individual components into humorous, merged objects using modeling software and 3D printing. Underlying the humor, however, is the reality of authoritarianism: each component, despite wide usage in other countries, is a representation of something censured by the Iranian government. Possession of these items puts one at risk of harassment, incurring fines or even incarceration. “In a way,” Allahyari says, “these hybridized objects serve as documentation of lives, my own included, lived under oppression and dictatorship.”

In creating *Dark Matter*, Allahyari set out to explore complex questions around the nature of taboos and their reliance on cultural and historical context. How, she wonders, might this work read in twenty years?

facing page:  
#pig #gun, 2013  
3D printed plastic resin  
4 x 8 x 2 inches  
(10.2 x 20.3 x 5 cm)  
edition of 5 plus 1 AP



*#barbie #vhs*, 2013  
3D printed plastic resin  
8 x 2.5 x 1.75 inches  
(20.3 x 6.4 x 4.4 cm)  
edition of 5 plus 1 AP







facing page:  
*#dog #dildo #satellite-dish*, 2013  
3D printed plastic resin  
6.5 x 7.5 x 2.75 inches  
(16.5 x 19 x 7 cm)  
edition of 5 plus 1 AP

*#buddha #Simpson*, 2013  
3D printed plastic resin  
8 x 5 x 4 inches  
(20.3 x 12.7 x 10.2 cm)  
edition of 5 plus 1 AP



# THE 3D ADDITIVIST MANIFESTO AND COOKBOOK

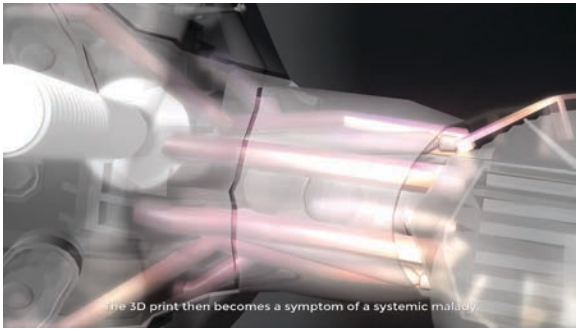
In 2015, collaborators Morehshin Allahyari and Daniel Rourke released *The 3D Additivist Manifesto*. They describe it as a call to “push additive manufacturing technologies to their absolute limits and beyond, into the realm of the speculative, the provocative and the weird.” #Additivism is a portmanteau of additive and activism: a movement concerned with critiquing ‘radical’ new technologies in fablabs, workshops, and classrooms at social, ecological, and global scales.

Following the release of the *Manifesto*, Allahyari and Rourke called for submissions of projects and essays on the topics it raised. The resulting *3D Additivist Cookbook* and companion 3D Additivist Archive is a compendium of OBJ and STL files for the 3D printer, critical and fictional texts, templates, recipes and designs from over 100 artists, activists and theorists. *The 3D Additivist Cookbook* was designed with The

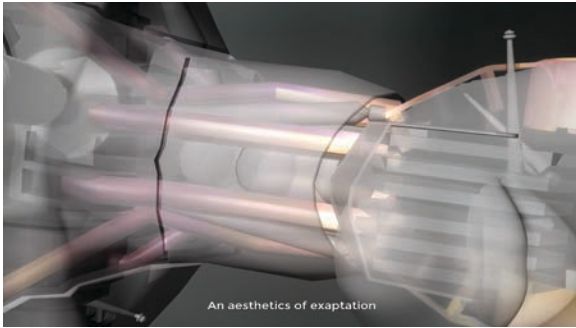
Laboratory of Manuel Bürger and was published by The Institute of Network Cultures, Amsterdam, with editorial support from Rita Macedo, Shane O’Shea and Miriam Rasch. It was produced as part of trans-mediale 2016’s Vilém Flusser Residency Programme for Artistic Research with support from the Ernst Schering Foundation, Berlin. The #Additivism project was supported by Autodesk/Pier 9, San Francisco; Colab at Auckland University of Technology; Emergent Digital Practices program, University of Denver; Frank-Ratchye STUDIO for Creative Inquiry, Carnegie Mellon University + VIA Festival, Pittsburgh; and Jeu de Paume + Disnovation.net, Paris.

The 3D Additivist Manifesto, Cookbook and Archive are available at [additivism.org](http://additivism.org).

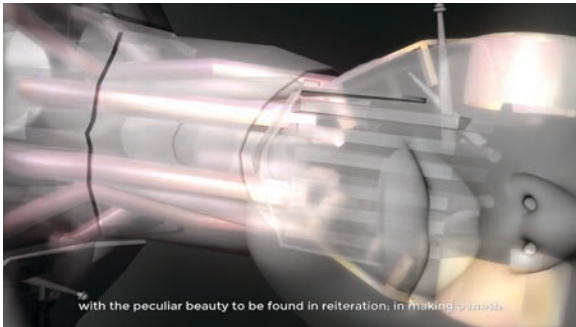




the 3D print then becomes a symptom of a systemic malady.



An aesthetics of exaptation

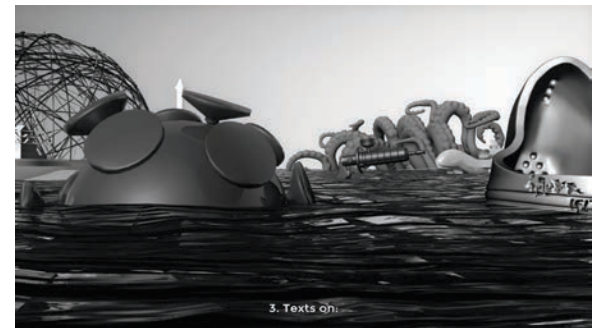
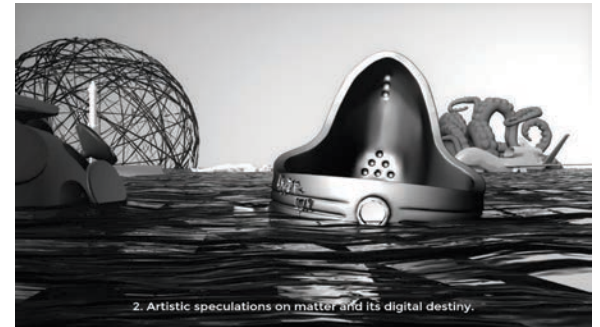


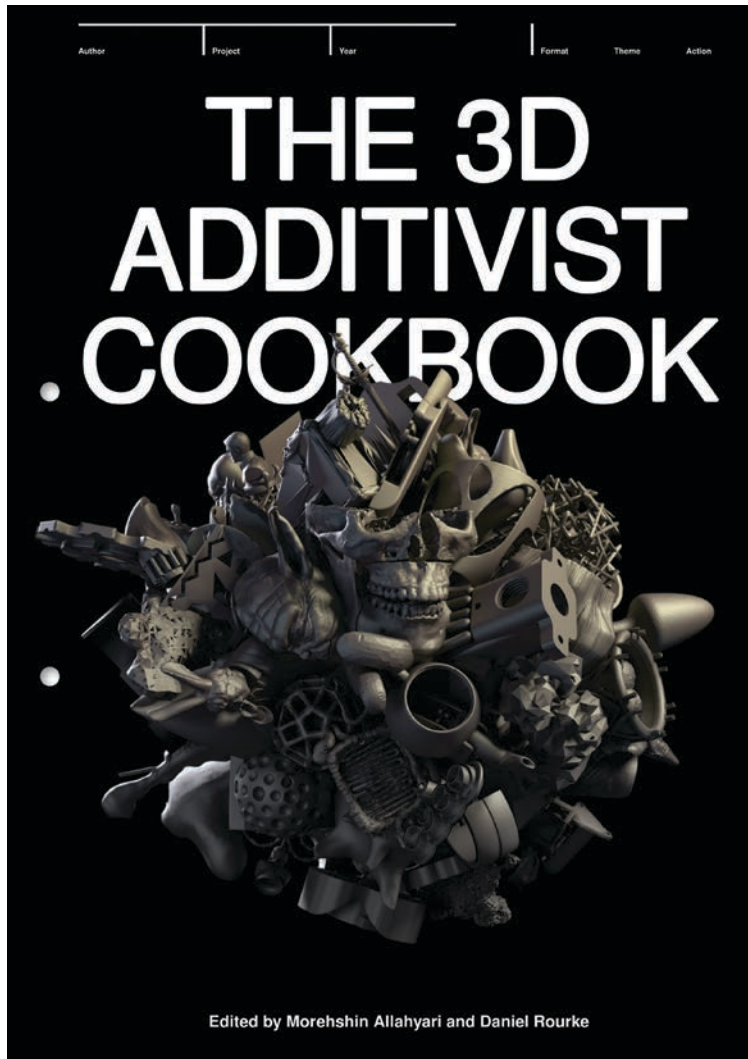
with the peculiar beauty to be found in reiteration. In making objects



This is where cruelty and creativity are reconciled:

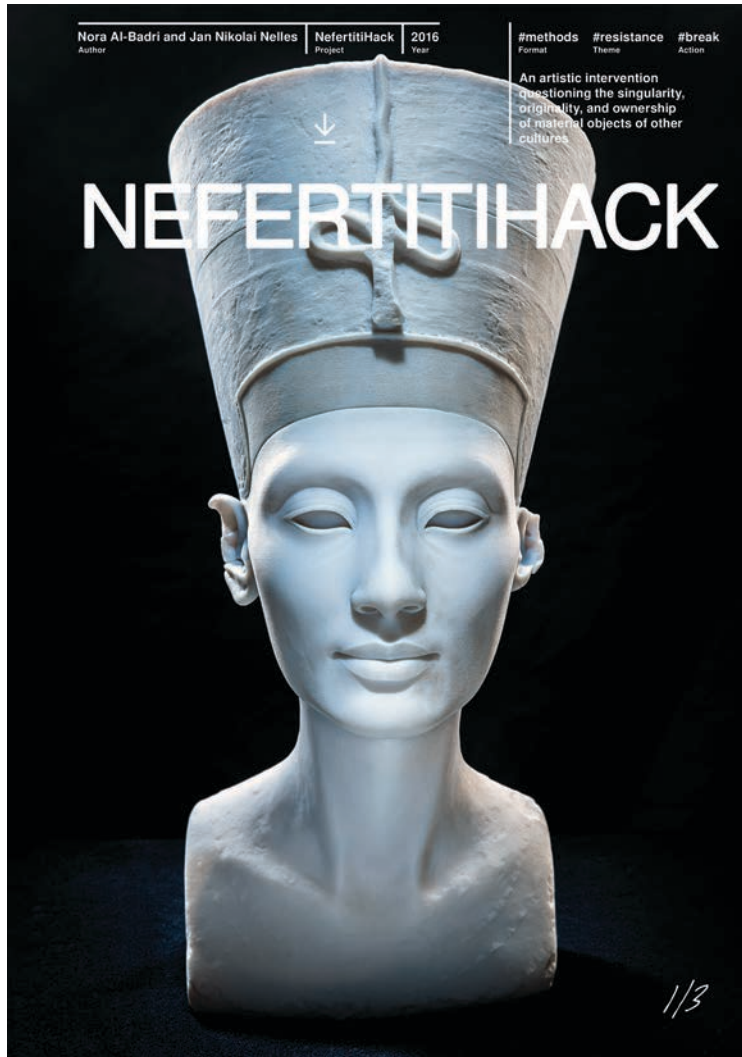
*The 3D Additivist Manifesto* (stills), 2015  
run time 10min 11sec  
edition of 5 plus 2 AP  
by Morehshin Allahyari and Daniel Rourke  
with sound design by Andrea Young





*The 3D Additivist Cookbook* (cover), 2016  
3D PDF  
360 pages, 456 MB  
edited by Morehshin Allahyari and Daniel Rourke

facing:  
pages 264, 265 of the *Cookbook*  
by Nora Al-Badri and Jan Nikolai Nelles



NefertitiHack  
Project

#methods Format	#resistance Theme	#break Action
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‘With the data leak as a part of this counter narrative we want to activate the artifact, to inspire a critical re-assessment of today’s conditions and to overcome the colonial notion of possession in Germany.’



‘The Other Nefertiti’ also known as #NefertitiHack is an artistic intervention questioning singularity and originality as well as ownership of material objects of other cultures. The artists went into the Neues Museum, Berlin, and secretly scanned the bust to release the data at the 32C3 under public domain. The data leak was a part of a counter narrative to inspire a critical re-assessment of today’s conditions and to overcome the colonial notion of possession in Germany’s museums. The head of Nefertiti represents all the other millions of stolen and looted artifacts from all over the world; acts currently taking place, for example, in Syria, Iraq and in Egypt. Archaeological artifacts as a cultural memory originate for the most part from the Global South, however, a vast number of important objects can be found in Western museums and private collections. One should face the fact that the colonial structures continue to exist today and still produce their inherent symbolic struggles.

The Nefertiti 3D model data is provided here under a public domain license.

2/3

# SHE WHO SEES THE UNKNOWN

The figures Huma and Ya'Jooj Ma'jooj, and the videos featuring them, are the first in a planned series rooted in “re-figuring” dark goddesses, Jinn and monstrous female figures from Middle Eastern mythologies. Through poetic-speculative storytelling, 3D printed sculptures, video art and sharing of information culled from archives, Allahyari explores the causes and speculates on the effects of digital colonialism and other forms of contemporary oppression.

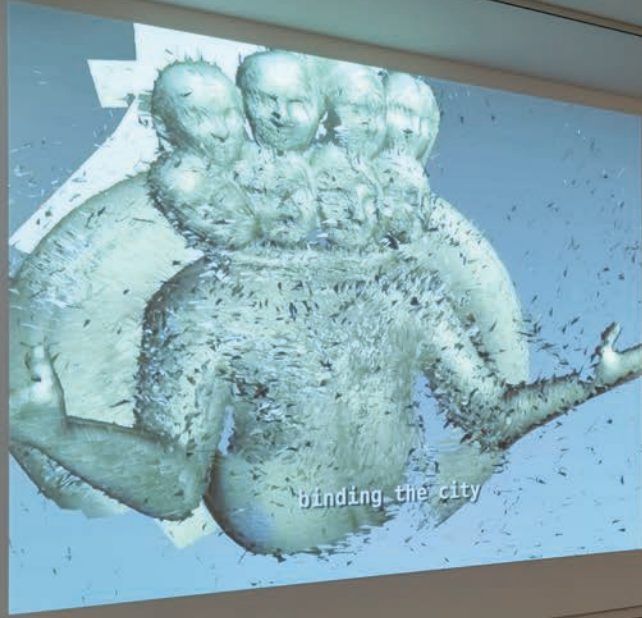
Focusing two years of research on overlooked or misrepresented female characters, Allahyari's *She Who Sees the Unknown* draws from a mix of pre- and post-Islamic texts, myths and stories of Persian and Arabic origin. Significant sources include the manuscripts *Aja'ib al-makhlūqat wa-ghara'ib al-mawjudat* (*Marvels of Things Created and Miraculous Aspects of Things Existing*) and *Kitab al-Bulhan* (*Book of*

*Wonders*), dating to the 13th and late 14th centuries, respectively.

She removes chosen figures from their original contexts, using 3D printing and scanning to create sculptures and associated talismans. “Each of the figures in this series will have specific powers and spells attached to them, aimed at exposing and addressing contemporary imbalances of power and colonial history,” Allahyari explains. For example, the artist interprets “fever,” a malady which the jinn figure Huma is traditionally believed to cause, as the crisis of global warming rather than an illness of the body.

Allahyari exhibited early iterations of the project at Eyebeam Art + Technology Center as part of her research residency, then at TRANSFER in New York and Upfor in Portland, Oregon.





previous page:

*She Who Sees the Unknown: Huma*

on view at Upfor, 2017

facing:

archive and research station made  
available to visitors during the exhibition

ARCHIVE  
Originals, books  
& materials. They  
tell the story.





*Huma and Talismans*, 2016

3D printed plastic resins

sculpture: 12 x 6 x 5 inches

(30.5 x 15.2 x 12.7 cm)

talismans, each: 3 x 2 x 1 inches

(7.6 x 5 x 2.5 cm)

edition of 3 plus 2 AP

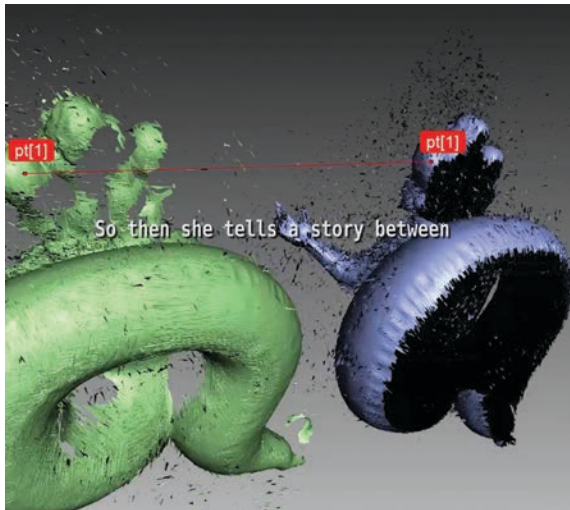
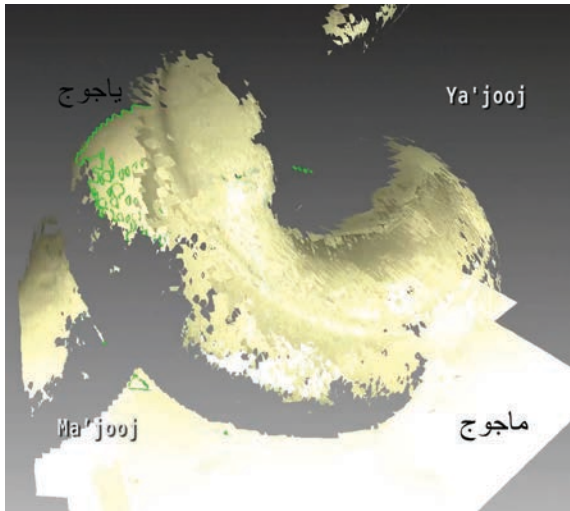




*3D Scanning Screen Capture Performance* (stills), 2016  
HD single channel video  
run time 7min 50sec  
edition of 10 plus 2 AP

*She Who Sees the Unknown: Huma* (stills), 2016  
HD single channel video with audio  
run time 6min 5sec  
edition of 5 plus 2 AP



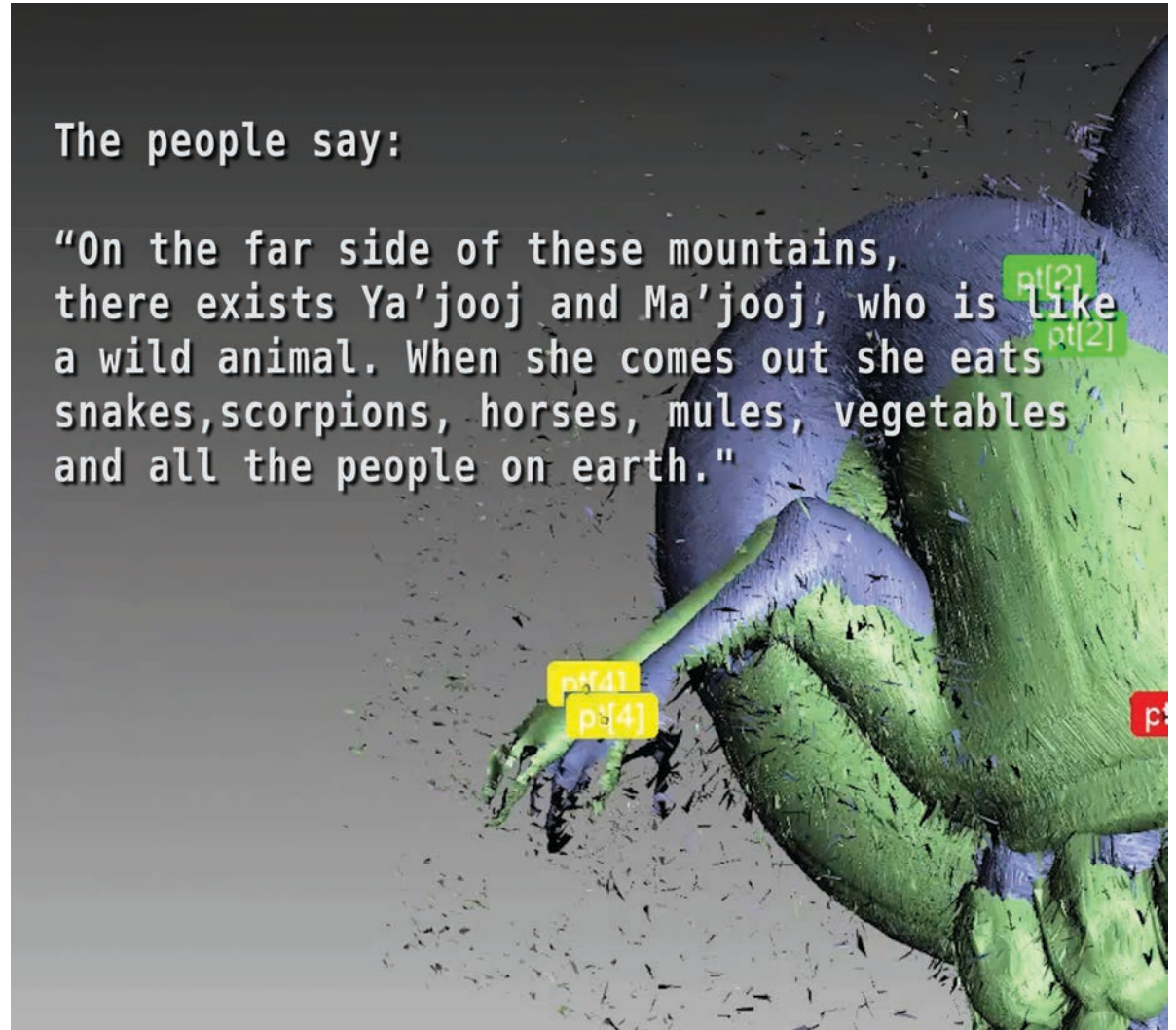


*She Who Sees the Unknown:  
Ya'Jooj Ma'Jooj (stills), 2017*  
HD single channel video  
run time 10min 38sec  
edition of 5 plus 2 AP



The people say:

"On the far side of these mountains,  
there exists Ya'jooj and Ma'jooj, who is like  
a wild animal. When she comes out she eats  
snakes, scorpions, horses, mules, vegetables  
and all the people on earth."







Selected images by Mario Gallucci: pages 9-29, 36, 40-49. All other images courtesy Morehshin Allahyari.

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