

Conversations from the Field

JANANNE AL-ANI WITH MASSUMEH FARHAD

JANANNE AL-ANI IN CONVERSATION

In June 2024, the artist Jananne Al-Ani sat down with art historian and curator Massumeh Farhad to discuss some of the ideas explored in Al-Ani's recent work. The following is the edited extract of the interview.

Massumeh Farhad: I first encountered your work in the late 1990s through a postcard of a photograph from your MA show at the Royal College of Art. It immediately grabbed my attention, and I wanted to know more about it and the artist. And still after all these years, when I see the works (*Untitled I and II*, 1996; fig. 1), now in the collection of the National Museum of Asian Art, they stop me in my tracks.

The contemplative nature of these monumental photographs, which forces us to look closely and carefully, is a quality that I also see in your subsequent video work and inspires a kind of slow looking. In part, it is because of your eloquent way of making elements appear and disappear. Can you tell us more about your approach?

Jananne Al-Ani: Yes, to put it crudely, I think one of my roles as an artist is to draw attention to things in the world. Simply saying, "Have another look at this, a closer look."

Massumeh Farhad: But not all artists do that.

Jananne Al-Ani: No, but that's what I'm interested in doing. I'm inviting people to look again at what's already out there in the world. We can fantasize about all the things that have been lost, and so much has been lost, but there's still such a rich repository of material culture available to us, and we often accept the way it has been interpreted and historicized without question.

What I try to do is look again at an image or an object and ask if there's another story that could be told about it. To ask if it's possible to look at something familiar in a different light. It's actually a very simple strategy. It's one of the reasons I'm so interested in archival material. Why were things collected? Who collected them? Why were they valued and what was the wider historic and political context when they were first collected? These are all questions that really interest me.

In addition, so much of what's been collected has never been seen again. It's been buried in storage. I like the idea of the museum itself becoming a kind of archaeological site, one that invites excavation. In museums attention is often focused on star objects like the so-called Freer canteen or the Courtauld metal bag, which are prized highlights of each collection (figs. 2, 3).

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FIGURE 1. Jananne Al-Ani, *Untitled II*, 1996. National Museum of Asian Art, Smithsonian Institution, Acquisition from the artist, S2013.13.1-2. © Jananne Al-Ani

But then you have all this other material which never sees the light of day. So, what else is hidden in the museum's vaults and why are we not seeing these objects? Is there some way to bring these overlooked items into the light?

In 2022, I made the film *Timelines*, which focuses on a brass tray in the V&A collection that was made in Iraq in the early 1920s, immediately after the creation of the modern state of Iraq under British mandate (fig. 4).

The tray is engraved with highly decorative imagery depicting two very dense crowd scenes divided by the river Euphrates, which cuts across its center. Among the Arab men and women are British soldiers in smart uniforms accompanied by cannons and armored vehicles. Although it looks like a jolly, festive occasion, if you look closely, you can see a man being led to the gallows on a donkey before being hanged. It is clear from the text pinned to his chest that he has killed a major in the British army.

In contrast with the Freer canteen or the Courtauld bag, the tray is a comparatively low-value object that ended up in the V&A collection by chance. It was donated by a museum employee on his retirement, and it languished in storage for many years before being acquired properly. There is no information about its provenance, and it has never been exhibited, partly because it is too modern an object to sit comfortably within the museum's world-renowned Islamic art collection.

When *Timelines* was first exhibited and images from the film appeared in the art press, the V&A was approached by the great-grandson of a British political officer who had served in Iraq from 1917 to 1925, and who, it has since transpired, was responsible for commissioning a local craftsman to make the tray, along with at least five others! I also had the privilege of

being able to read over sixty letters which the political officer wrote to his wife while serving in Iraq. So, *Timelines* inadvertently exposed a much more nuanced and complex story linking the tray to the time and conditions of its creation. Also, the letters have since been acquired by the Imperial War Museum, and through them it has been possible to learn so much about this troubled and complex time in the history of the modern Middle East, from the intimate details of the political officer's relationships with his wife and children to his reflections on the political situation in the region, particularly British policy relating to Iraq in the early 1920s.

Massumeh Farhad: In the case of the tray, what inspired your conceptual approach, which offers us a very different experience of the object?

Jananne Al-Ani: All the works, including the photographs you first mentioned, which relate to the veil, the veiled body, and orientalist photography and painting, are inspired in part by the idea of looking through the lens. So, the camera—photography—is a really important element in my work.

The relationship between photography and the real and the illusion of truth that the photographic image offers continues to fascinate me. Photography is almost two hundred years old, so it's a relatively new technology, yet it has infiltrated almost every discipline and has transformed the way we see the world. We see everything through a photographic lens but do



FIGURE 2. Canteen, probably northern Iraq, 1300–1330, brass, silver inlay; H x W (overall): 45.2 x 36.7 cm. National Museum of Asian Art, Smithsonian Institution, Freer Collection, Purchase — Charles Lang Freer Endowment, F1941.10



FIGURE 3. Bag (known as “The Courtauld Bag”), Iraq, Mosul, Ilkhanid dynasty, 1300–1335, brass, silver, and gold with black inlay; H x W: 15.2 x 22 cm. London, The Courtauld, (Samuel Courtauld Trust). O.1966.GP.209. Photo © The Courtauld

so, in general, in a rather naïve and trusting way. For me, encouraging a more critical, skeptical approach to looking at the photographic image is central to all my work.

Timelines was rather challenging to make because the imagery on the tray was so cartoon-like, as far from photography as possible really. It is a highly illustrative representation of a real historical event. In a way, it’s much closer to a history painting, which contains the entire narrative of an unfolding event in a single image, rather than a photojournalistic snapshot.

The imagery on the tray reminded me of illustrations in children’s storybooks, and that’s one of the reasons I decided to introduce the spoken word, using my mother’s voice to tell rather dark stories alongside this cartoonish imagery, which on the surface looks lighthearted and entertaining.

It’s a bit like the imagery on the Bayeux Tapestry or on ancient Assyrian friezes. They’re beautiful and very stylized, while also representing moments of extreme violence.

To give you an idea of the structure of the film, *Timelines* is divided into four sequences, each starting with a panoramic scene engraved on the tray (figs. 5–7). As the camera zooms in closer and closer, the surface of the tray is transformed into a landscape. The idea of virtually “flying” over the tray came to me the first time I saw the metal bag at the Courtauld, which happened to be under the microscope while it was being cleaned in preparation for an exhibition. I got really excited because just by coming in very, very close, the surface of the bag seemed to have been

magically transformed into a landscape. The edges of its elaborate patterns had become much more organic, and it felt as if I was looking down at canyons or river valleys from an aerial perspective, which linked to the earlier works I'd made adopting the basic principles of aerial archaeology.

Taking a wide-angle view allows one to see the bigger picture, with some things appearing clearly while others disappear altogether. Conversely, when you come in very close, all manner of detail is revealed but it can become harder to understand the wider context. This shift between the macro and the micro, the camera pulling out and then zooming in, is something I continue to be preoccupied by in my work.

Massumeh Farhad: Your work clearly depends on new imaging technologies. Can you say a little more about how you use these tools, and to what effect?

Jananne Al-Ani: With *Timelines*, I wanted to get as close as possible to the surface of the tray, so I worked with a special-effects artist who was able to use photogrammetry and import high-resolution photographs of the tray into 3-D animation software, and transform them into a three-dimensional "landscape," which we were then able to light virtually to replicate



FIGURE 4. Tray, Iraq, 1918, brass; Diam: 58.2, Depth 2.5 cm. London, Victoria and Albert Museum, M.17-2002. Photo © Victoria and Albert Museum



FIGURE 5. Jananne Al-Ani, *Timelines* (film still), 2022, Panoramic Video Installation, 9 minutes 7 seconds. © Jananne Al-Ani



FIGURE 6. Installation view of *Timelines*, 2022, 9 minutes 7 seconds, at Tower Eastbourne. © Jananne Al-Ani. Photo by Rob Harris



FIGURE 7. Jananne Al-Ani, *Timelines* (film still), 2022, Panoramic Video Installation, 9 minutes 7 seconds. © Jananne Al-Ani

the effect of shadows being cast by the sun. The landscape of Iraq is rich and varied, with mountains in the north and east; fertile agricultural land between the two great rivers, the Tigris and Euphrates; and marshes in the south. Turning the flat metallic surface of the tray into a territory that's evocative of the Iraqi landscape was in part a reference to my earlier concerns in the *Shadow Sites* films of challenging orientalist representations of the Middle Eastern landscape as a barren uninhabited desert (fig. 8).¹

Massumeh Farhad: So, right from the beginning of your career you were playing with the idea of the still image and the animated image.

Jananne Al-Ani: Yes, I'm still enchanted by the relationship between photography and film, the way every second of projected film is made up of twenty-four photographic stills, animated to create the illusion of movement. When the digital revolution began, this link between the still and moving image became more tenuous, but since the mid-2010s camera phones started to get more sophisticated with the introduction of features like "live" photo, allowing one to scroll back and forth across a short clip of footage every time a photograph

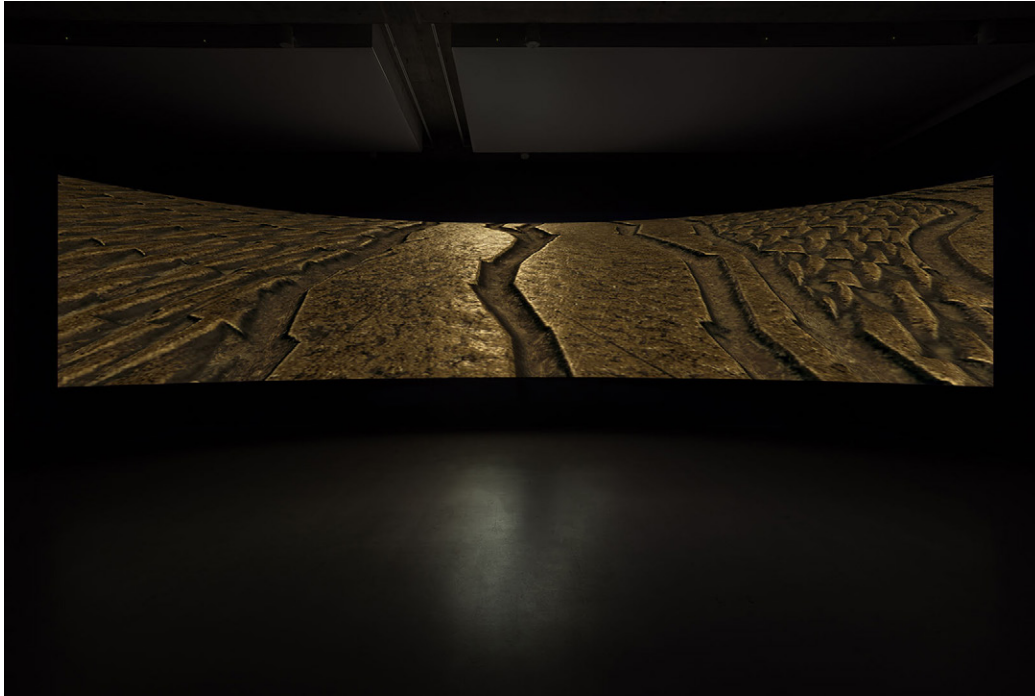


FIGURE 8. Installation view of *Timelines*, 2022, at Tower Eastbourne. © Jananne Al-Ani. Photo by Rob Harris

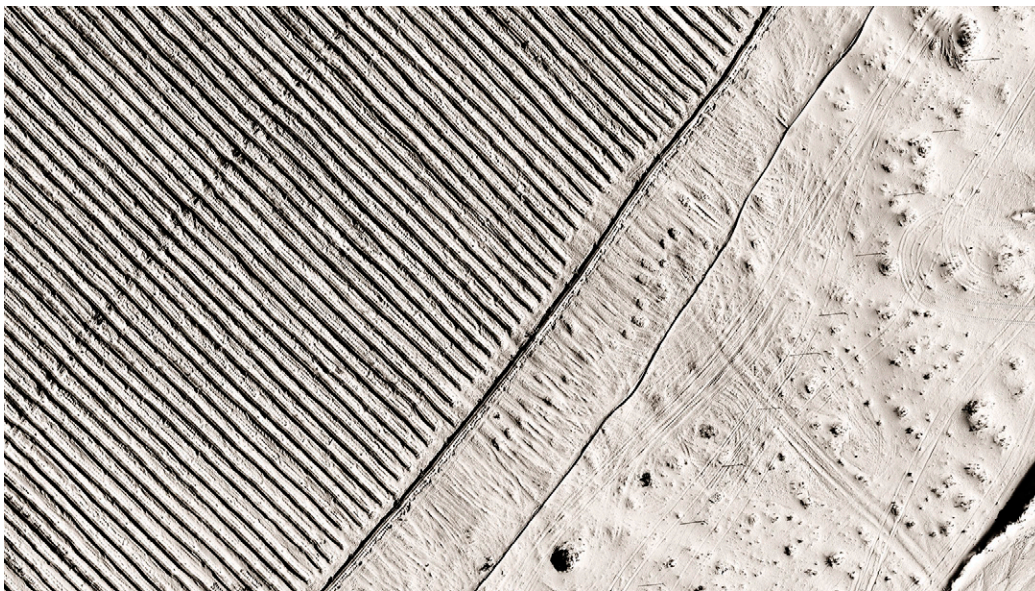


FIGURE 9. Jananne Al-Ani, *Aerial V*, production still from the film *Shadow Sites II*, 2011. © Jananne Al-Ani

is taken in order to select the “best” frame, and more recently being able to take stills while simultaneously filming. This new technology is pointing us back to the origins of the moving image, when each frame could be looked at as a separate image. We’ve almost come full circle in understanding the relationship between the still and moving image after the 130 years or so since the first “movie” camera was invented.

Massumeh Farhad: Thinking of the metal bag in the Courtauld collection and, of course, the canteen in the Freer Gallery, I was wondering if you had any thoughts on your approach in light of the work on the V&A tray.

Jananne Al-Ani: What’s important for me is that all three of these exquisite objects were made at times of great upheaval and turbulence, and they are all linked to the region now known as modern-day Iraq, the county of my birth.

The tray was made during the British occupation of Iraq in the aftermath of the First World War; the bag is thought to have been made for a noble woman of the Mongol Ilkhanid court in the early fourteenth century in the wake of the Mongol invasion of West Asia, a period of enormous violence. As for the canteen in the Freer, while it is one of the most studied objects of Islamic metalwork in any collection, there is still some debate about where it was made; like the Courtauld bag, it was probably made in Mosul. Its specific function is also still unclear as is the identity of the person who commissioned it. I’m interested in the combination of Islamic design and rich Christian iconography on its surface alongside the fact that it was made in the mid-thirteenth century, while the Holy Land crusades were raging.

I also like the idea of plotting a timeline with these objects. I am fascinated by the thought that their whereabouts were unknown for long periods. For example, the provenance of the canteen dates back to just 1845, when it is listed in the collection of the Italian prince Filippo Andrea Doria. Similarly, the Courtauld bag was acquired in 1858, probably in Venice, by the Victorian collector Thomas Gambier Parry. Yet nothing at all is known of the bag’s whereabouts for the five hundred years or so before that. I have begun to think of the bag, the tray, and the canteen as time travelers, popping up unexpectedly, almost by chance, in great Western museum collections, out of time and place.

Massumeh Farhad: You are now planning two new films, one on the Courtauld bag and the other on the Freer canteen. Would you approach these objects differently than the tray?

Jananne Al-Ani: Yes, while *Timelines* and the films I am planning to make on the bag and the canteen will form a trilogy of sorts, each object will be treated in a distinct way. This is how my long-term project *The Aesthetics of Disappearance: A Land Without People* was made. Although all the works explored aerial archaeology and aerial warfare and combined these two ways of seeing, each focused on a different location and took a different form. The sister films *Shadow Sites I* (2010) and *Shadow Sites II* (2011) were both made in the Middle East, but the first was shot on 16mm film and the second was made from high-resolution digital photographs.² Then I made *Groundworks* (2013) in the United States. The work consists of five small-scale films of subtly animated photographs of sites in the Sonoran Desert in the Southwest. And lastly, *Black Powder Peninsula* (2016) was made from a combination of photographs and digital video footage of abandoned military and industrial sites in the British landscape.

Although the form of the films I’m planning to make focusing on the Freer canteen and the Courtauld bag are yet to be resolved, just like *Timelines* they will be informed by the stories of the women I’m planning to interview, whose voices will drive the narrative overlaying the imagery.



FIGURE 10. Jananne Al-Ani, *Groundworks II*, film still from the five-channel video installation *Groundworks I-V*, 2013. © Jananne Al-Ani



FIGURE 11. Jananne Al-Ani, production still from the film *Black Powder Peninsula*, 2016. © Jananne Al-Ani

Like my mother, they are part of a small community of women who met and fell in love with young Iraqi men while they were studying on scholarships in Britain in the 1950s and '60s. Many married and moved to Iraq, started families there, and inadvertently became witnesses to the political turmoil that followed the 1958 revolution to overthrow the British-backed monarchy. As the situation in Iraq went from bad to worse—the eight-year Iran-Iraq war being followed closely by the 1991 Gulf War—the women gradually returned to the UK, with some only leaving after the 2003 war.

Massumeh Farhad: Can you tell us more about these voices or narrators?

Jananne Al-Ani: It's a bit difficult, because I haven't made the recordings yet, but one of the women whom I'm hoping to interview is somebody who only left Iraq relatively recently and whose husband came from Mosul. In contrast to the objects moving from East to West, these women moved in the opposite direction, from West to East, and they have extraordinary stories to tell, ones which have never been heard before.

While I was a Smithsonian Artist in Residence fellow in 2022, I had the privilege of being able to examine the Freer canteen under the microscope in the conservation department, and I was amazed to see that many of the engraved channels on the surface looked as if they'd been filled in with tar or some other dark substance. I'm not sure if it was added later or if it was an accumulation of dirt or some material that had been used to clean the surface, or a combination of the two. In any case, it looked a lot like pitch or oil, which felt oddly prescient bearing in mind it was the discovery of oil that drove the British to stay on in Iraq after the end of the First World War.

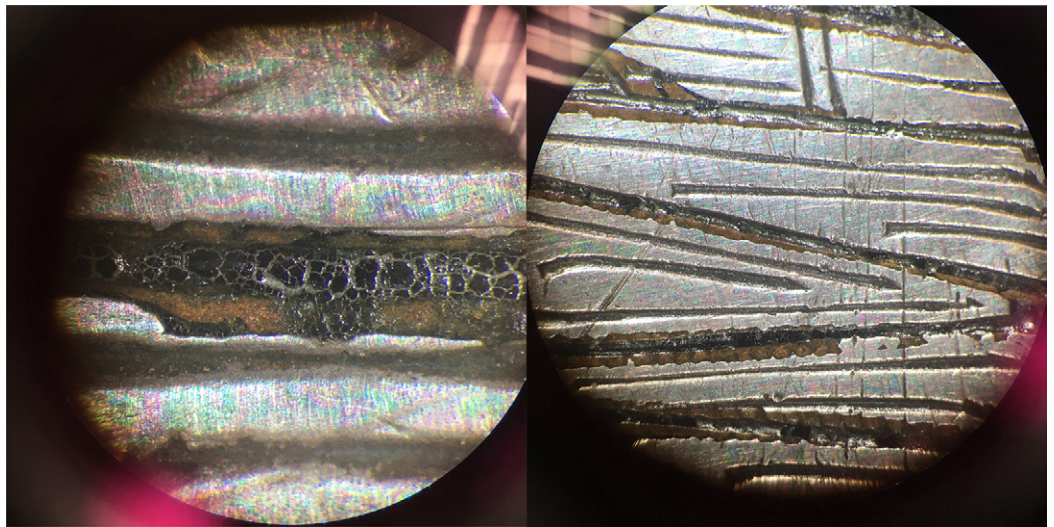


FIGURE 12. Jananne Al-Ani, production stills, magnified details of the Freer canteen. © Jananne Al-Ani

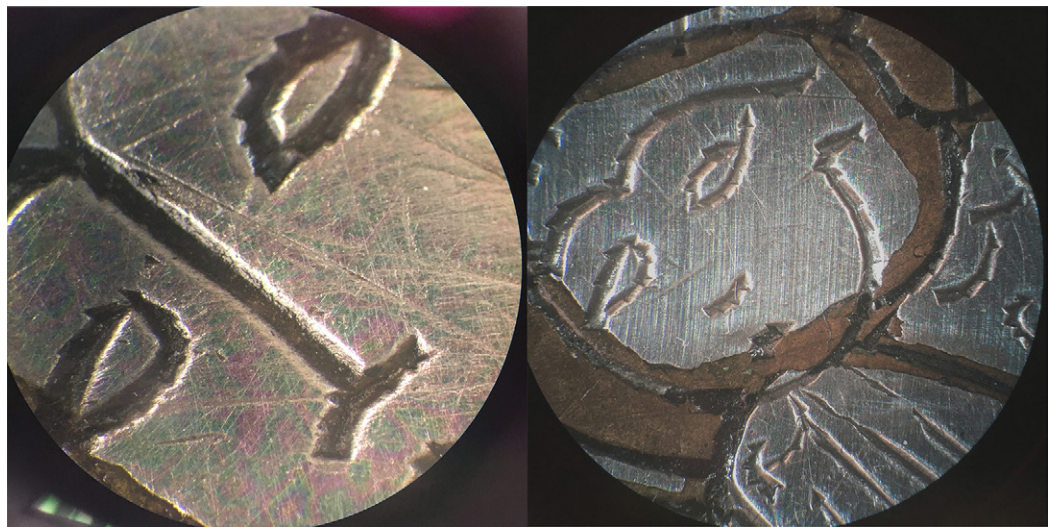


FIGURE 13. Jananne Al-Ani, production stills, magnified details of the Freer canteen. © Jananne Al-Ani

As for the iconography, while it is interesting to see the story of the life of Christ so beautifully rendered in a piece of exquisite Islamic metalwork, I am much more curious about the many other figures that are featured on the canteen, from saints to angels. Looking closely at their faces, their eyes and mouths, is so compelling. Eyes for witnessing and mouths for telling others about what they have seen, much like the women whose stories are being told.

By interrogating objects in museum collections in this way, I hope their stories will gradually be transformed to reveal narratives that have been overlooked or actively suppressed.

Jananne Al-Ani is an artist and Reader in Photography and Moving Image at the University of the Arts London. Recent exhibitions include *Timelines*, co-commissioned by Film and Video Umbrella and Towner Eastbourne with Art Fund support (2022, Towner Eastbourne), and *Landmarks* (2023, Ab-Anbar Gallery, London). Her work can be found in collections including the Imperial War Museum, London; Centre Pompidou, Paris; Mori Art Museum, Tokyo; National Museum of Asian Art, Washington, DC; and Darat al Funun, Amman. She is currently a member of the Management Committee of the Nahrein Network, supporting the sustainable development of Iraqi history and heritage, and she serves on the General Assembly of Mophradat, an organisation creating opportunities for artists from the Arab world.

Massumeh Farhad is the Ebrahimi Family Curator of Persian, Arab, and Turkish Art and Senior Associate Director for Research at the Smithsonian's National Museum of Asian Art. She is also the editor-in-chief of *Ars Orientalis*.

Notes

1 *Shadow Sites: Recent Work by Jananne Al-Ani* was on view August 25, 2012–February 10, 2013, in the National Museum of Asian Art's Arthur M. Sackler Gallery.

2 The project also included *Excavators* (2010).