



FERTILE GROUND

The multi-artist exhibition, *Carpets of Eden, Gardens of Fantasy*, at **Leila Heller** in Dubai highlights the significance of carpet-making traditions in contemporary art practices.

Words by Laura Cherrie Beaney

In the realm of Persian rugs, birds and blooms speak of the Garden of Eden, the religious paradise from which this exhibition takes its name and inspiration. Carpets straddle complex terrain, as they encapsulate the banality of domestic living yet paradoxically invest homes with splendour. They express a sense of the familiar and the foreign, a history of child labour intertwined with a legacy of luxury.

In a single room at Leila Heller Gallery, more than 20 artists engage the carpet as a product and a concept, employing techniques ranging

from labour-intensive hand-weaving and knotting to digital printing and other modern media forms. The exhibition's curator, Behrang Samadzadegan, presents artists who transcend the formal qualities of carpet-making by repositioning it as their canvas. Showcased are modern and contemporary works spanning seven decades, from 1954 to the present day, produced by significant figures from the SWANA (South West Asia and North Africa) region. These include Etel Adnan, Faig Ahmed (see page 102), Ayman Baalbaki, Marcos

Installation view of *Carpets of Eden, Gardens of Fantasy* at Leila Heller in Dubai. 2024. Image courtesy of Leila Heller Gallery



Grigorian and Mona Hatoum, in dialogue with Debbie Lawson (UK), Antonio Santin (Spain) and others.

The carpet is a site where form and function, craft and fine art, communal practices and radical expressions are organised through thread. Here, some artists harness the carpet for subversion, challenging social hierarchies and value systems through its codes, while others invest it with melding calligraphic forms. They negotiate the relationship between humans and their habitat, process and materiality, or the role of technology in traditional practices. A breadth of expression unfolds across the exhibition space that is impossible to capture comprehensively within the scope of this review, yet within the curation, some powerful conversations unfold.

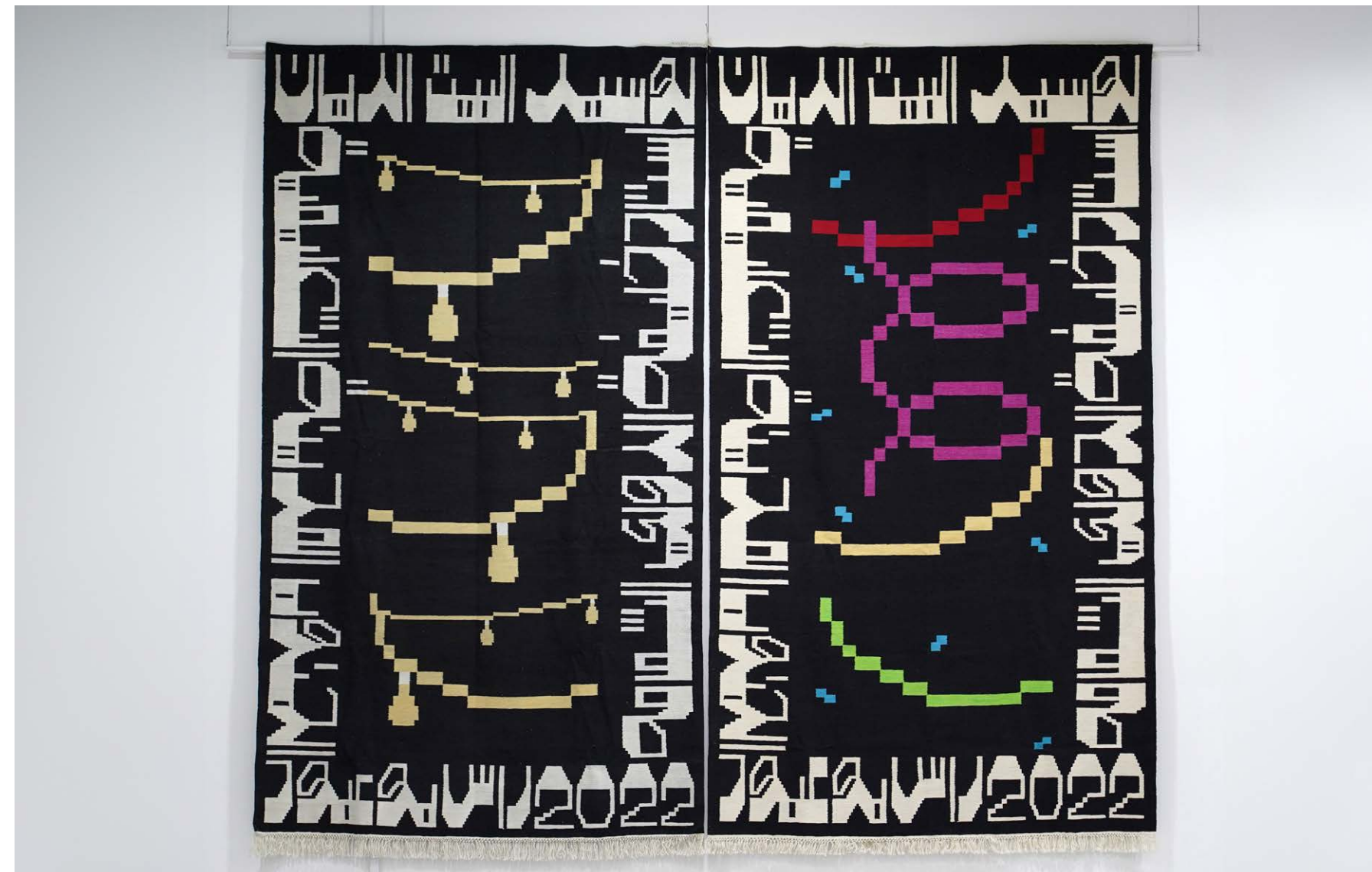
Lion on White I (1977) foregrounds one of the central themes that preoccupies Iranian sculptor and painter, Parviz Tanavoli. An encounter with the stone lions that guard the tombs in the Bakhtiari and Fars provinces was particularly moving for Tanavoli when he once journeyed across his country. Here, his joyful rendering of the creature combines pared-back elements that appear from local architecture, geometries and Farsi script. Tanavoli's utilisation of the

rug as his medium evokes ancestral knowledge and tribal traditions, acknowledging the carpet's relevance in communal culture.

Another artist who shines a light upon the connection between carpet-making and the animal kingdom is British sculptor Debbie Lawson. In *White Tiger* (2024), the head of an open-jawed feline pushes through the centre of the rug, its carpeted tongue outstretched. Lawson's practice orbits around cultural traditions surrounding everyday objects, specifically those found in aspirational homes. It is work that contests contemporary value systems by forcing endangered wild cats and ornamentation to converse.

Baluchi (red and orange) (2007), by the Palestinian multi-media artist Mona Hatoum, politicises the rug by impressing it with a rudimentary map. Devoid of embellishment, the contours of the countries appear to have been chewed through by moths. Hatoum invites contemplation on the way humans inhabit Earth. By establishing tension between the Persian rug as a product of aspiration and the negation of man and land, she confronts us with colonial legacies, cultural erasure and the treatment of ethnic minorities like the Baloch community.

Debbie Lawson. *Ozymandias, King of Kings*. 2020. Carpet and mixed media. H 244 x W 150 x D 150 cm. Image courtesy of the artist and Leila Heller Gallery




Maryam Al-Homaid. *Celebration I & II*. 2022. Hand-woven and hand-dyed wool. 200 x 366 cm each. Image courtesy of the artist and Leila Heller Gallery

Other works amplify the fragility of the world's ecosystem. A polar bear gazes out towards the sea of carpets below. Standing at more than two metres tall, it emerges from a pool of melting ice, materialised through a swathe of icy blue and white rug. The creature, a second contribution by Lawson and entitled *Ozymandias, King of Kings* (2020), is devoid of eyes, indicative of its lifeless existence and reminiscent of the mythological beings found within Azerbaijani artist Farid Rasulov's frames. His digital prints capture opulent interior domains. Each room is draped in ornate prints yet the mythical creatures that inhabit these spaces – goats, peacocks and other animals – are vibrant yet suspended in time, their vision glazed over. His portrayal reflects humanity's insatiable thirst for material goods, as well as immersion in our constructed environments where these animals appear trapped.

36°17'57"N 52°53'15"E (2023), a wall hanging by Iranian artist Shoeib Gorgani, subverts the codes of carpet-making, recasting the rug as a tapestry of handwoven recycled plastic bags. His work places the viewer in a position of discomfort as they are met with their own habits of destruction. Capturing

the spectrum of expression in the curation and overlooking the entire show, a playful diptych by Qatari interdisciplinary artist Maryam Al-Homaid, *Celebration I and II* (2022), merges Arabic typography with graphic forms. It serves as a counterpoint reminding us not to take life too seriously.

With more than 20 artworks suspended from the ceiling and laid across the floor, the spatial arrangement of *Carpets of Eden, Gardens of Fantasy* presents a challenge for viewers, prompting multiple visits to fully immerse oneself in the curation. While carpets and textile art have experienced fluctuations in popularity over the years, the exhibition affirms this medium's potency as a site where significant conversations might take place. Indeed, there is an inherently human quality to carpet-making, rooted in its communal practices, natural fibres and intimate connection to our homes, which perhaps enables it to resonate so deeply with our present-day concerns while also prompting reflection on our past. 

Carpets of Eden, Gardens of Fantasy runs until 20 September 2024