

Culture **Art & Design**

Exhibition envisions UAE architecture reclaimed by nature, from Sheikh Zayed Grand Mosque to Louvre Abu Dhabi

At Leila Heller Gallery, artists Ryan Koopmans and Alice Wexell transform structures from the Gulf into imagined worlds where natural and built sites merge



Infinite Bloom reimagines Abu Dhabi's Sheikh Zayed Grand Mosque as a fertile garden. Photo: Leila Heller Gallery

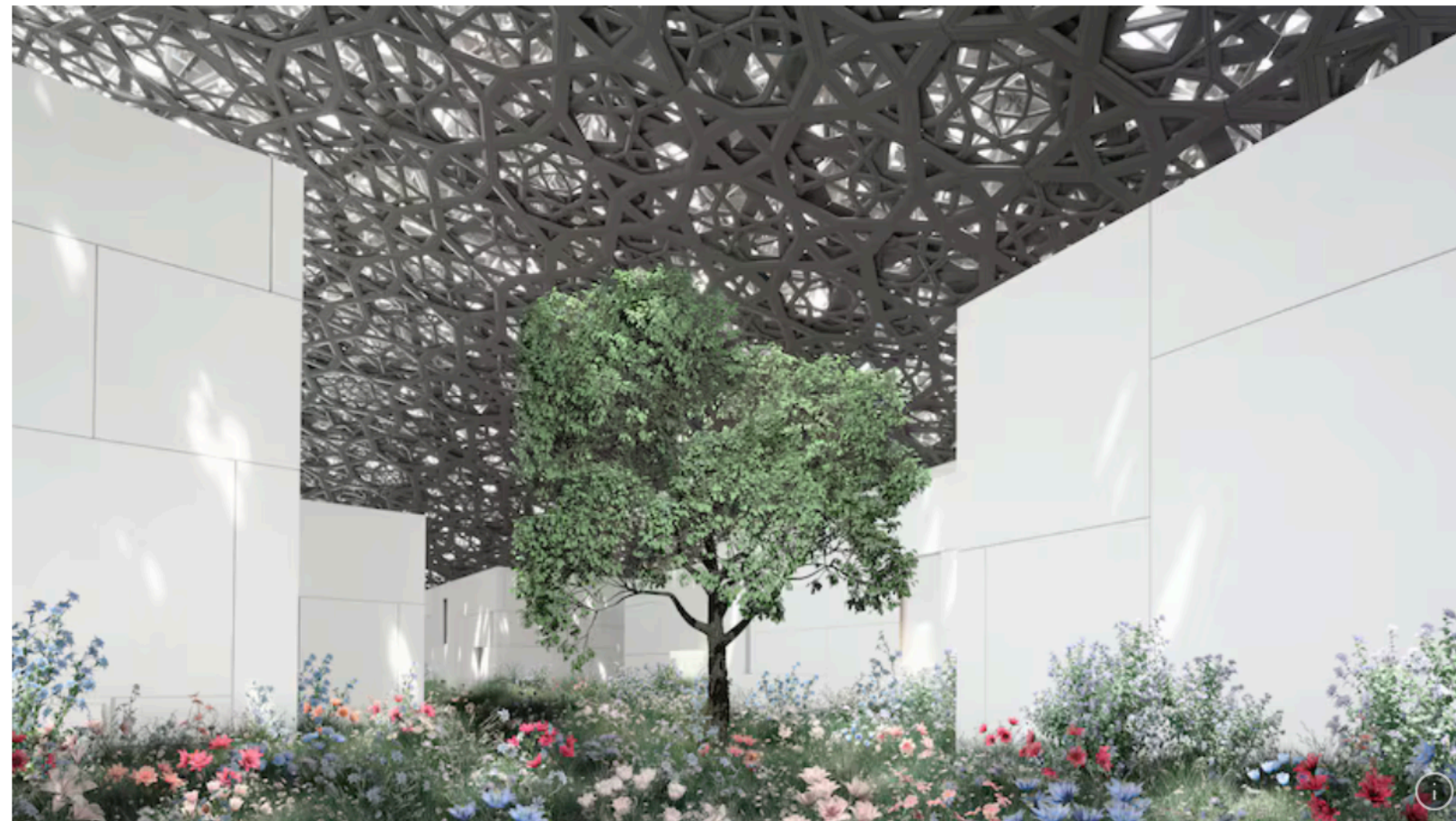
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A familiar scene unfolds under Jean Nouvel's Dome of Light at [Louvre Abu Dhabi](#) – but with a twist. The courtyard tree is no longer Giuseppe Penone's bronze sculpture. In its place stands a towering oak, digitally rendered and surrounded by wildflowers.

"The oak is a symbol of wisdom and grows not from soil but from cultural sediment," says artist Ryan Koopmans. "We chose this tree to represent the museum and what it stands for: centuries of art, migration and memory converging under the rain of light."

The work, titled *Under The Rain Of Light*, is part of the latest iteration of *The Wild Within*, a series of lens-based artworks by Koopmans, who is Dutch-Canadian, and his wife, Swedish artist Alice Wexell. The series combines photographic imagery of historic and sometimes derelict buildings with meticulous 3D renderings of flora, transforming them into what the artists call "imaginative overgrown realms".



On view at Dubai's [Leila Heller Gallery](#) until mid-January, the exhibition features architecture from across the region, including several structures from the UAE. [Sheikh Zayed Grand Mosque](#) becomes a fertile garden of blooms, its foyers and colonnades wrapped in flowers, grasses and climbing vines. In Qasr Al Watan, digital flora softens marble pillars and gilded geometry, while the upper floors of Emirates Palace Mandarin Oriental are transformed into a sanctuary of gold and greenery.

Other works depict Dubai's historic Al Maktoum Residence in Al Shindagha, Al Bait Al Gharbi in Sharjah's Al Mureijah area, Jeddah's old town (Al Balad), Lebanon's abandoned Grand Aley Hotel and an old bathhouse in Baku's city centre.



The pieces feel like both a reflection on the region's architecture and a meditation on the relationship between humanity and nature. "I have long been interested in the constantly evolving relationship between nature and the built environment," says Koopmans. "In previous work, I've documented the intentional and regulated use of foliage within cities and urban areas, but in this series, nature is in control – hence the wilding of the interior spaces."

The Wild Within began with a real-life experience. Around 2015, Koopmans and Wexell visited Tskaltubo in Georgia, once a popular Soviet resort known for its natural springs. Abandoned after the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, it had fallen into disrepair, with vegetation creeping through bathhouses and hotels.



"The photographs did not convey the sense that the city was being slowly engulfed and reclaimed by nature," Koopmans says. "So we decided to exaggerate that overgrowth by using creative interventions and subjective manipulations to create a place that is also no place, somewhere suspended between reality and fantasy."

Each work takes several hundred hours to complete. The process begins with research and on-site photography, followed by months of 3D modelling and rendering in the couple's Stockholm studio. The artists create both still images and short animations that merge real photographs with digitally crafted flora.



They run four computer processors around the clock, with one of them often working for up to 20 hours a day. "Visually, AI is very close to be able to create the same kind of thing, but it cannot achieve the same compositional balance and level of creative

control," says Koopmans. "It is also important that we keep part of this work grounded in reality because people respond to that."

The 24 pieces in the Dubai exhibition took almost three years to produce. They are displayed as large-scale archival prints and on LED screens, including a 3-metre by 2.4-metre digital canvas by Megapixel showing a rotating selection of works. Koopmans says the screen enhances colour and detail to their fullest effect.

"This is the best way to show motion-based artwork," he says. "It is far superior to even the best LEDs and this is an important consideration. The conversation about hardware is becoming even more critical, and it is something that artists, gallerists and collectors are having to factor in as an integral component of the art."

The Wild Within by Ryan Koopmans & Alice Wexell is on display until January 15 at Leila Heller Gallery, Dubai

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