

## Artist's Garden

### *Desert is a Forest* by Sunoj D and Namrata Neog

Somewhere between time and infinity, between the land and the sky or the ocean and the mountain, thrives a landscape so dense and complex that on occasion, tentacles of light open up a 'forest'. This is a landscape where the man and the ant, the eagle and the fig, the tree and the bee, and all the other innumerable living beings await for hope after war. A landscape that is lived, negotiated, adapted and adopted by each of us in a complex entanglement of relationships, languages and identities.

This project's intervention begins with the thought of how to 'think like a forest'.

Attempting to *see* through the UAE landscape, this work's primary thought is, 'the desert is a forest'. What negotiations, relationships and hierarchies emerge and submerge in this thinking landscape?

Within the politics of seeing, domestication and food – these three fundamental elements establish the human and the non-human presence in the landscape. Our curiosity emerges as we question, how does a thinking desert negotiate these elements? How do these elements entangle us, draw us together and make us part of the landscape? Attempting to *see*, is the beginning of a dialogue and process, involving a complex web of negotiations which emerge from the selfhood of both the observer and the observed. It involves the independence of agency and representation, which shapes how a desert thinks and acts. Domestication on the other hand involves a curious intervention on the process of seeing, a negotiation between the human and the non-human, as well as between non-humans. Within this process, a complex relationship is forged – sometimes one becoming the other, whilst negotiating a landscape, yet also perpetuating inter-objectivity and inter-subjectivity. Just like the human 'domesticated' the goat, the goat too 'domesticated' the human, and just like the Ghaf tree 'domesticated' the goat, the human too 'domesticated' the Ghaf tree – bringing to light the most fundamental element, 'food', which entangles us in these politics. The act of eating connects the humans and non-humans in such an intimate relationship to the landscape that a strange polity manifests in the 'forest'.

Our intention is to attempt to *see* the entanglement between the goat, the human, the plant and the mineral deposits in the UAE landscape. The goat was one of the first non-humans that humans domesticated, when tomorrow became more important than the past or present. The concept of domestication also emerged from the purviews of human language and how humans perceived the landscape. If we were to deconstruct domestication and stretch it to a non-human centric perspective, food would be the entangling element in this relationship. Perhaps, as humans 'domesticated' the goats for food, the goats also 'domesticated' the humans, and as the goats 'domesticated' the plants they ate, humans too

became entangled with the plants, which finally evolved into the various ways humans consumed the plants over time.

The garden, as envisioned at the Jameel Arts Centre, in a way translates this thought. A garden/landscape of complex entanglements – the politics of food, domestication and the way we *see* it. The garden looks at the different plants consumed both by humans and goats historically and today, and the mineral formations in the UAE landscape. The plants grown in the garden are indigenous to the UAE. Most of the plants are found in the wilderness where goats graze with different goatherd communities, some plants proliferated more in numbers as humans started growing more as fodder in goat farm structures, and some plants occur as weeds, and are no longer considered important. This garden, in a way, also intends to reminisce some of the old eating habits in the UAE.

A mineral deposit in the desert is an entity with agency, appearing sometimes in the form of stones or pools of water, becoming spaces in the landscape that attract goats, humans and plants. Similarly, the mineral sculptures in the garden also draw in humans, animals and plants. Ephemeral in nature, composed of clay, bone powder, rock salt, turmeric, dry branches and stones, creating an evocation of our complex entanglement.

When we finally *see* the 'desert is a forest', it means the entangled goat, the mineral, the human and the plant knows that living is today and that today is the 'forest'.

*-Namrata Neog and Sunoj D  
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