

An entirely different view of Abu Dhabi: Sarah Morris's film is the first commissioned work for the Guggenheim's permanent collection

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The internationally acclaimed artist's work 'Abu Dhabi' is a 67-minute film and is screening for the first time in the UAE at Abu Dhabi Art



A film still from Sarah Morris's Abu Dhabi, the 67 minute film that had its premiere this week at the capital's annual Abu Dhabi Art fair.

[Nick Leech](#)

Nov 20, 2018

A young Emirati sits on a pale leather sofa, spinning his mobile phone manically between thumb and forefinger, his head straining nervously and repeatedly towards we know not what.

Before long, an older South Asian gentleman in a tatty trucker cap and kandura flops down next to the youth, cradles his chin pensively and stares in the opposite direction, through pale, tired eyes. The pair are obviously consumed by the same anxiety, but nobody speaks.

Accompanied by repetitive, electronic music the scene, a study in tension is captured in high definition, but rather than depicting the anxiety that accompanies imminent fatherhood, it depicts the drama that can be found in the waiting room at the Abu Dhabi Falcon Hospital, where owners and handlers await the outcome of a surgical procedure on a prized bird:

The sequence lasts only a few seconds, but it is just one of the many that illustrate the hypnotic quality of the artist Sarah Morris's *Abu Dhabi*, the 67 minute film that had its premiere this week at the capital's annual Abu Dhabi Art fair.

The first commissioned artwork for Guggenheim Abu Dhabi's permanent collection, *Abu Dhabi* was filmed in just more than a month towards the end of 2015 on and around National Day but the movie, Morris's 13th, was almost four years in the making.

Like Morris's other urban films, the New York artist has created works about Midtown Manhattan, where she lives, Washington, DC, Beijing, Los Angeles and Rio de Janeiro, *Abu Dhabi* manages to depict the capital and the emirate from a somewhat uncanny insider-outsider perspective that not only testifies to the analytical intensity of her gaze, but to the depth and quality of her research. "I always start with conversations with people because I think that people are portals into a place, by reading and by listening to the books they talk about that are interesting," the artist tells me on the eve of Abu Dhabi Art.

After an initial conversation "over dinner" in New York in 2010, Morris accepted an invitation from the Guggenheim to make a first visit to Abu Dhabi before conducting what she describes as several "scouting trips" to establish what size of crew she needed and how she wanted to go about making the film.



Sarah Morris on location. Courtesy Wendy Bowman

"When I first came here I had a lot of conversations with people and they obviously had a desire to represent what they think is important or what they think I would be interested in, and some of those things became images, some did not, they just become bits of data, or titles for paintings."

It was while the artist was delivering a lecture at her alma mater, Brown University in Providence, Rhode Island, that Morris met a student who lives in Abu Dhabi who would go on to help with her research.

"I proceeded to talk to her and offered her a position to do some work in the studio because I wanted to hear more of her perspective about growing up here and then studying abroad. It was an insider's perspective," Morris says.

"But then there's a lot [in the film] that's just fiction. It's not a documentary, it's not researched in any thorough or solid way. There's a lot of subjective antennae going on."



Sarah Morris on location in the Liwa Desert. Courtesy Wendy Bowman

As *Abu Dhabi* oscillates between fact and fiction, it is sometimes difficult to remember that, as far as Morris is concerned it exists, like her paintings, not as a representation or a reproduction of the thing it's associated with but as a film or a painting in its own right.

"The paintings are phenomenologically a painting, they're not a building, they're not a reproduction of a building they're virtual architecture and space," the artist insists of works that bear titles such as *Maqta*, *Emirates Palace* and *Al Wathba*. "When I'm titling artworks I'm trying to make a sort of map, if you will, like a game of Monopoly, and what they conjure is this sort of mapping of society, of entities, institutions and organisations that you have to pass through to be a participant in that society."

Despite the slippages, there is much in *Abu Dhabi* that feels like a closely observed portrait of the nation at a key moment in its history. Scenes shot at Abu Dhabi's bus station and fish market, the Sheikh Zayed Stadium, Masdar, and even inside the personal

library of Zaki Nusseibeh, Sheikh Zayed's former interpreter who, as Minister of State, now heads the UAE's Office of Public and Cultural Diplomacy, are combined with archival footage of Sheikh Zayed and Abu Dhabi to create an intimate study of a rapidly changing society that is both instantly recognisable and unquestionably strange.

"Due to the fast-paced development of the region, I thought that I had to use archival footage because the development and the change has been so fast and the architectural spread, from one thing to another, has been so amazing," Morris says.

"That's what I like about Abu Dhabi, because all of those elements, at the moment, are still there. They haven't been knocked down and you see that in all really great cities, the different decades, almost like baklava, an archaeological dig where everything is manifest."



A still from the film. Sarah Morris/Guggenheim Abu Dhabi

If the themes of the film are familiar: the physical and intellectual construction of a nation, the impact of oil, breakneck change and the power of ambition and sheer willpower, perspective is, as always with Morris, everything.

Although *Abu Dhabi* is being exhibited without accompanying materials or paintings at Manarat Al Saadiyat, where it will be on show until January next year, that perspective was provided on the evening of November 14 when Morris sat in conversation with the curator Philip Tinari as part of Abu Dhabi Art's public programme.

As well as being the director of UCCA, Beijing, Tinari was also responsible for mounting Sarah Morris: *Odysseus Factor* at the same museum this year, the largest and most comprehensive display of the artist's work to date.

The show featured films such as Morris's *Beijing*, her portrait of the Chinese capital at a time when, as an Olympic city, it was obsessed with the projection of wealth, power, prestige, and identity and *Capital*, about Washington, DC, which captured the waning days of the Clinton administration at work in the White House. While each work addresses a location, they also investigate key issues, in the case of *Capital*, the

mechanics of a ruling party, in the case of *Strange Magic* (2014), the manufacture of France's self-perception and identity as a country of fashion, luxury, taste and refinement.

As with *Abu Dhabi*, *Strange Magic* was also an institutional commission, made for the opening of the Frank Gehry-designed Foundation Louis Vuitton in Paris. Morris's works address issues of power, national identity, cultural capital and political influence, forming a visual and impressionistic cartography of late capitalism. Taken together, they reveal the interconnectedness of the globalised, post-industrial economy in which Abu Dhabi – as an emirate, a city, a transport hub, a supplier of oil and increasingly as a commissioner of art – is an integral part.

“You have a feeling of the overall interconnectedness of things, of their design and the way they look, but there are other connecting threads such as the history of ideas and the history of people and the history of capital, flowing,” Morris says. “I like the feeling that the viewer feels encompassed in this world and that there is no outside. They are overwhelmed by the fact that they are part of it, and there’s no way not to be part of it. You have to be engaged.”

Despite having been completed in 2016, *Abu Dhabi* is unusual for one of Morris's films because it has returned to the place of its making relatively quickly. Her film *Rio* (2012), another Olympic subject, has never been shown in the Brazilian city, while it took a decade for *Beijing* (2008) to be shown in China.

Taken together with her studies of other cities, Morris’s corpus represents a more than two decade-long act of urban exploration and analysis that manages to engage with specific local issues and contexts while maintaining an international perspective.



Sarah Morris in action. Wendy Bowman

"I feel strongly that the films and the cities are a chain of effects and influences and that it's pretty impossible to separate these places," she tells me. "Yes they are distinct, but at the same time there is a lot in Abu Dhabi, for example, that is of elsewhere. There is no pure place that is only local."

In the case of Abu Dhabi, this dual-perspective not only expresses itself in Morris's command of global and strategic themes but in her ability to engage with current local issues, such as the potential loss of Abu Dhabi's historic urban fabric and the need to balance the relationship between the present and the past.

"There are a lot of things in the films and in the paintings that are not yet landmark," she admits. "But that is always a process in every place, of recognising what is interesting about the past. It's not all about the future."

Sarah Morris's 'Abu Dhabi' is on display in Gallery S at Manarat Al Saadiyat until January 27, 2019. Following the Abu Dhabi Art fair, the installation will be free to attend and open to all visitors