A World Where Flowers Reign

By Laura U. Marks

In the region spanning from the Mediterranean to India, a motif of extraordinarily fecund flowers recurs in painting, ceramics, textiles, and other media. Lily-like flowers with complexly curving and inter-twining symmetrical petals. A flower seen in cross section, showing its ovaries packed with seeds and tiny flowers to come. A flowerhead from which, impossibly, graceful stems arise, bearing new flowers that in turn branch and reproduce. Historically, these floral motifs occurred in illuminated Qur'ans, and in mosque architecture and carpets. But in some parts of the Islamicate world, particularly in Sunni regions, floral motifs were avoided in favour of geometry. Why might that have been? Flowers are sexy: they are organs of reproduction that shout their sexual availability to pollinators with the help of colour and fragrance. I can imagine being a worshiper distracted from thoughts of the divine by the erotic display going on under my feet. On top of that, flowers and plants, in symbiosis with the animals they rely on, exhibit an independent, beautifully-functioning earthly paradise that has no need of the paradise that religion advertises to humans. Most of all, in my opinion, flowers compete with the Creator, containing within themselves a whole world in virtual form. Mesopotamian art's love-hate relationship with flowers seems to lie in the human indecision whether to worship earthly, or transcendent, creators.

In some carpets from the Caucasus and Turkey, you can see the gradual transformation from flower to geometric crystal over several generations of weaving. It's as though the flowers, knowing they were not welcome, went into hiding. Perhaps to abide for a future return.[1]

Jawa El Khash's haunting virtual reality work, *The Upper Side of the Sky*, hallucinates a world where flowers reign. The first space you encounter

1 Carpets are the most important missing link between the traditional Islamicate arts and digital media art. They translate pictures into boxy geometrical forms, and they are produced according to an algorithm. On the role of plant life in this thesis, see the last chapter of *Enfoldment and Infinity: An Islamic Genealogy of New Media Art* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2010).

within the piece is a majestic arcade, populated by dignitaries not human, but vegetal: the greenhouse. Handsome pots hold olive trees and a fantastical cotton plant, its flowers opaque black, its leaves of delicate blue-and-white ceramic. The architecture pays homage to flowers: floral medallions punctuate the high-vaulted ceiling, and pools of light reveal that the floor is decorated with plum blossoms in the style of Iznik pottery (a Chinese motif that traveled westward after the Mongol invasion). Sparkling white butterflies populate the space. A lacy tower of clematis vine climbs into the sky. In the spacious courtyard too, each arch frames not a human statue, but a plant – wild parsnip, what looks like corn and pepper, a hairy-seeded plant – all ghostly like ancestral daguerreotypes.

El Khash reveals in her research that her grandfather, Dr. Mohamed N. El-Khash, studied the survival of cotton and other agricultural plants as director of the Arab Center for the Studies of Arid Zones and Dry Lands. I am reminded of the angry farmers in Syrian filmmaker Omar Amiralay's documentary *Everyday Life in a Syrian Village* (1974), whose lands were desiccated after the construction of the Euphrates Dam.[2] I am reminded that drought caused by global warming is one of the reasons behind the Syrian civil war (2011–present), as over the decades farmers have been forced to move to the cities when their land ceases to yield.

The Upper Side of the Sky reconstructs parts of the ancient oasis city of Palmyra, located in Syria's Homs province. In the first centuries of the Christian calendar, Palmyra's wealth and sophistication reflected its position at a trade crossroads. As a succession of empires besieged, flattened, and reconstructed the city, it acquired many layers of languages and religions: a lively pantheon of Semitic deities gave way to Roman ones, which were supplanted by the Christian and Muslim monotheisms. Palmyra was just a village when the French Directorate

2 The film was banned in Syria, and Amiralay went into permanent exile in France.

evicted the remaining Palmyrans in order to preserve the city's ancient architecture. In 2015, ISIS yahoos demolished large areas of Palmyra and knocked the faces off statues.[3]

You may have seen pictures of the 3D-printed replica of the 15-metre Arch of Triumph displayed in London's Trafalgar Square, made by the Oxford-based Institute for Digital Archaeology in some sort of cooperation with UNESCO. The replica is making the rounds to Western cities, Dubai, and eventually Palmyra itself. It looks a bit ridiculous in these contexts with dignitaries posing in front of it, feeling good about "giving hope to the Syrian people." I can't help thinking of the Stonehenge in the film *This Is Spinal Tap* (1984), even though the Arch is a full-scale model. In contrast, El Khash used the open-source virtual reconstruction of Palmyra painstakingly produced by Syrian software engineer and internet-rights activist Bassel Khartabil, which is available at #NewPalmyra. Khartabil was imprisoned by the Syrian government in 2012 and executed in 2015.

Unlike the Institute for Digital Archaeology's decontextualized, grotesquely material reproduction, *The Upper Side of the Sky* is ethereal and dreamlike, yet full of life. You can hear high-pitched cries as if from unseen birds. High above the horizon, distant butterflies twinkle like stars. This world is rendered in shades of grey, most of the colours drained away, the shadows of monumental columns and leaf tracery seeming as real as the objects that caused them. In navigating this online virtual reality work, which the artist encourages us to review in 4K, scale keeps shifting: the architecture soars up, miniaturizing the human visitor.[4] The butterflies are sometimes small, sometimes the largest presences of all. One, resting atop a Corinthian colonnade, its

3 Thank you, Wikipedia!

4 I am obliged to note that streaming media at high resolution consumes a great deal of electricity. Since most electricity derives from fossil fuels, streaming media's carbon footprint is calculated to be 1% of global greenhouse gas emissions.

wings beating steadily, would have a wingspan of at least ten metres if the scales were true. Another hovers behind a lone, mute-faced Roman statue in an empty arcade like a scene from the metaphysical painter Giorgio de Chirico. Often El Khash reveals the wireframe armature, as when a drift of enormous butterflies feast on a plate of hemispherical fruits, their skeletal wings moving delicately. The music evokes the contentment of a feeding butterfly, the high, sparkling piano upheld by a steady, cyclical melody like the slow beating of wings.

All these creative decisions suggest that El Khash was not interested in resurrecting historic Palmyra intact, but in turning it upside down to privilege the nonhuman life of the region. Thus she creates for the visitor a Palmyra fantastical in its timeless serenity, its harmonious ecology.

Two towering crystalline poppies guard the temple of Al-Lat. As we approach the temple, there are flashes of light, like an unseen presence. The air shimmers with wireframe camellias and crescents, moving in unison like swallows, their petals sharp as swords. A floral forcefield. Al-Lat was one of the goddesses worshipped by Arab peoples before Mohammed destroyed the idols at Mecca. (Al-lat is "the god" in Arabic in feminine form, while Allah is "the god" in masculine form, and in monotheism, *the* God). It strikes me that these scintillating figures are the rejected deities returned, pissed off at humans but still prepared to do favours and be adored. Have they now turned their attention to the flowers and butterflies? Inside the temple towers a single flower, a five-petaled lily, languidly moving its petals. Each of the orb-like anthers, glowing against the black petals, is a wireframe map of the starry sky. If you traveled into this lily, you would be traveling out to the farthest stars. Like those fecund motifs on garden carpets, this marvelous flower encloses the entire cosmos!

Flowers reign in this world, but it is a world made for butterflies. Suspended among lush green vines, chrysalides are growing. They are pillowy and white with markings of black and flashes of yellow gold, the only time we see this colour in *The Upper Side of the Sky*. Personally, I find these gargantuan chrysalides threatening, but in this harmonious universe, I am the intruder. A couple of the chrysalides hang empty, the delicate behemoths having been born.

Now I understand that it is the butterflies that worship at the temple, as though Al-Lat has transmuted into an Ur-flower, the cosmic embodiment of life-giving nectar. Briefly I wonder, in a world where butterflies worship flowers, who has more power? Who is serving whom? But of course the relationship is symbiotic: the flowers feed the butterflies, the butterflies pollinate the flowers, and so the life cycle continues. It does not really map onto the relationship between human beings and a transcendent god.

El Khash's research, including the work of Cleve Backster, an interrogation specialist for the CIA who famously gave a polygraph test to a cane plant, emphasizes that plants are not passive, but responsive communicators. This view has been abundantly confirmed since Backster's experiments in the 1960s. Flowers learn about their pollinators, make plans for them, and help them find their way, as reports in the journal *Plant Signaling & Behavior* indicate.[5] Also, *The Upper Side of the Sky* appears to be a polytheistic world, where multiple deities are worshipped. In the greenhouse I glimpsed another cosmic lily, and this one has markings like those of the chrysalides. Life seems much more easy-going under polytheism.

5 See for example Moritz Mittelbach, Sandro Kolbaia, Maximillian Weigend, and Tilo Henning, "Flowers anticipate revisits of pollinators by learning from previously experienced visitation intervals," *Plant Signaling & Behavior,* 14:6, March 26, 2019.

Is the world of *The Upper Side of the Sky* ancient, or still to come? The artwork hints at a world takeover by "the 80%," aka the plants. A massive phytoremediation of the damage humans have done. Flowers rebelling against millennia of servitude. Yet *The Upper Side of the Sky* feels more elegiac than post-apocalyptic. The human culture visible in this virtual world already adored flowers and plants — the lovingly observed floral motifs, the stylized leaves topping the stone columns, the attentive botanical drawings, and the devoted work, by Dr. El-Khash and others, to encourage plants to grow in dry soil. *The Upper Side of the Sky* invites us to an inversion of perspective, reimagining humans' role not to subjugate nature but to nurture it — if it is not too late.

Produced in Response to:

The Upper Side of the Sky

Virtual Reality Archive and Online Exhibition

by Jawa El Khash

Curated by Dana Qaddah

12.10.20-30.04.21

Posterity & Expatriation

A Conversation Between Jawa El Khash & Dana Qaddah

28.11.20

Laura U. Marks works on media art and philosophy with an intercultural focus. Her most recent books are *Hanan al-Cinema: Affections for the Moving Image* (2015) and *Enfoldment and Infinity: An Islamic Genealogy of New Media Art* (2010). With Azadeh Emadi, she is a founding member of the Substantial Motion Research Network of artists and scholars working on cross-cultural approaches to media technologies. She programs experimental media art for venues around the world and is the founder of the Small File Media Festival. Marks is Grant Strate Professor in the School for the Contemporary Arts at Simon Fraser University in Vancouver.

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