

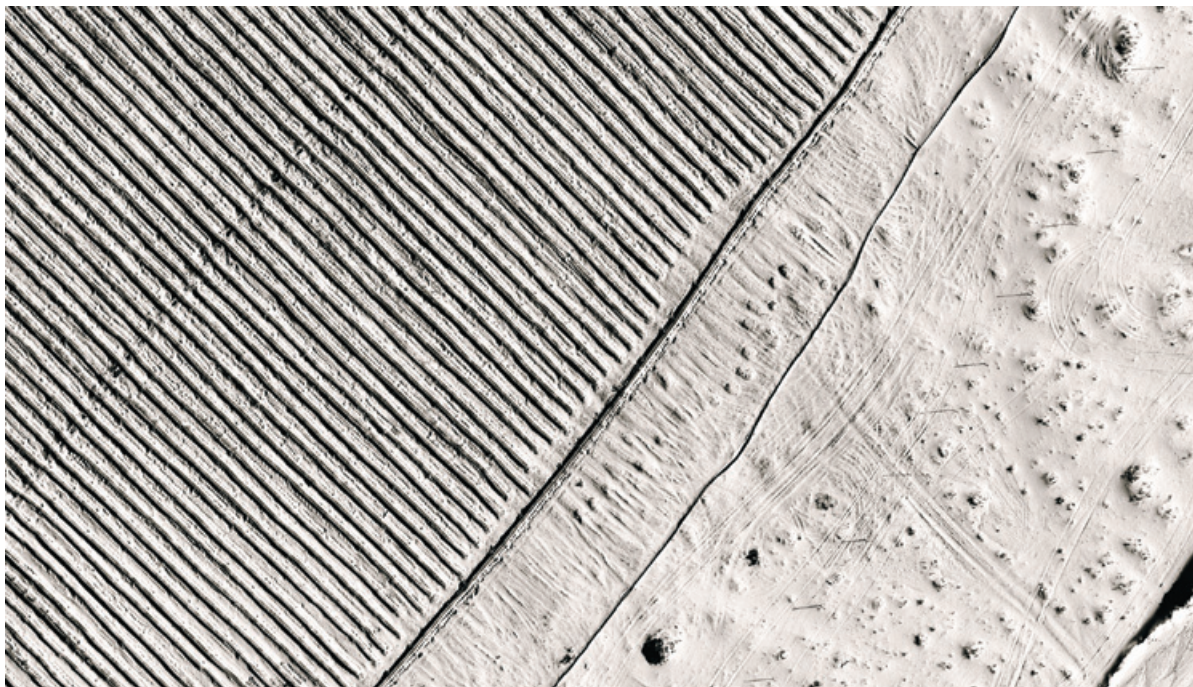
Dr Charles Merewether

# Abstraction: Jananne Al-Ani





Clockwise from top left:  
Aerials II, IV, V and III  
2011  
Production Stills from *Shadow Sites II*  
Single channel digital video  
Courtesy the Artist and Abraaj Capital Art Prize  
Photography Adrian Warren







Noski Deville  
Location stills from the production of *Shadow Sites II*, 2010

Integral to the history of European modernism is the rise of modernisation stemming from the mid-nineteenth century. Part of that history entails the discovery and development of both photography and then cinema. For modernism, such developments contributed to the formation of both abstraction and the abstract in the visual arts, and to the separation of the sign from the signifier. In the modernist engagement of the notion of “land” through the technological advancement of aerial photography, with the increasing circulation of a disembodied view-point of large areas of land, the development of abstraction could then be realised not as detachment from reality but as a renewed means of perceiving and, hence, understanding reality. This desire of knowing is made possible by what can be seen (presently) which, in turn, is determined and driven by what is not seen.

The Russian artist Kazemir Malevich discovered the power of photography to either abstract the subject or see it abstractly. This discovery was made on seeing aerial photographs of landscape and as we review again the extraordinary accomplishment of his Suprematist paintings, we might view some of them not only vertically but as two-dimensional renderings of the landscape looking down from above. These years were, of course, those of World War One (1914-1918) during which aerial photography advanced dramatically with the development of faster film and lens. This allowed for the formation of aerial reconnaissance missions that hence were able to survey land and the location or movement of peoples and military hardware. As a result, they produced both a general and specific cartography for aerial warfare.

Over the past one hundred years, aerial photography has been put to valuable social and economic use. This, for example, can be instanced by the formation of an archive of geographical changes to the land as a result of land use and pollution, or by the creation of historical surveys that register specific land occupancy or the location of archaeological and historic sites.

Jananne Al-Ani, a London-based Iraqi-born artist, has returned to this area of consideration. Of course, there is an intervening history both in regard to modernism and aerial photography as much, of course, as that of modernisation and the camera. However, the more recent work of Al-Ani returns to this earlier history and the critical impact it had on our perception. In particular, she has been exploring the way aerial photography changed our view of the world, at once both appearing to reveal more to the human eye while, equally, abstracting it from the real.

Al-Ani's earlier work focused on Orientalist representations of the Middle East in Western visual culture and in particular, enduring myths and fantasies surrounding women and the veil. The idea of human exposure has always been an important one in the region and the artist's work seeks to bridge the divisions between cultures that have led to misunderstandings and conflicts of views and values. A number of pieces focused on the veil and the idea of what you see and what you do not, a play of misrecognition that nineteenth century European photography had used to create an erotic subject of the gaze.

Since this relatively early body of work, Al-Ani has developed a research-based visual exploration of aerial photography of the land. Examining different records from various libraries and archival resources, her research has led to a discovery of how the land had been photographed, especially at the time of World War One. This was intrinsically tied



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to the development of aerial photography in relation to its use for reconnaissance missions and the documentation of its results, that is, of bombing.

In this process of research, the artist also recognised the way aerial photography documented, to a greater degree, the landscape and both its occupancy and use. In fact, as evident from the various records, one of the great values of aerial photography was its use as an armature for archaeology. With its use, one could conduct surveys of the land and identify potential historical sites. Secondly, socio-geographical surveys were enhanced greatly by the use of aerial photography to document land usage and population. This approach extended also to water with the development of the camera lens that could be used under water.

However, one of the most striking aspects of Al-Ani's work was the focus given to the historical record. What she discovered was the level of abstraction in the photographs. Many of the photographs appeared the polar opposites of forensic photography (with its attention to detail), although we may argue that a form of abstraction was also produced from the focus on detail once separated from the general view. Through the taking of aerial photography, Al-Ani then began to explore the Middle East, especially areas she was familiar with in terms of its social history and that of her family's. There is here an autobiographical anecdote valuable to capturing a dimension of this relationship to the land. In the summer of 1980, Al-Ani left Iraq with her sisters and mother



on a holiday to the United Kingdom. Soon after in September, war between Iran and Iraq broke out and the family never returned; Al-Ani then started schooling in England. One dimension captured by some of these photographs is that of familiarity and estrangement, of a sense in which one may see one's own country at a distance that is unrecognisable and yet somehow familiar. In many respects, Al-Ani's photographs capture the sense of what was, a buried social history. It may be images of a land once inhabited now forcibly abandoned, or a landscape that covers over layers of time and history or one in which the human figure is made invisible by aerial photography's technical abstraction. There is an unexpected pathos to this photography. Abstraction can be used to signify history, as we see in one of William Kentridge's powerful rendering of the South African landscape, laid bare in the light of Apartheid history.

In the film *Shadow Sites II* made in 2011, Al-Ani explores the land from the air for evidence of traces of life. It is part of a larger project called *The Aesthetics of Disappearance: A Land without People*. The film reveals, especially as the sun dips low, evidence of archaeological sites, of small active or past human settlements, of military training and mining excavation locations and industrial farming. Of course, this has changed with the development of satellite navigation and observation but the level of abstraction remains, whereupon signs of human life are merely an interruption in the scanning and description or classification of images.

Al-Ani's work follows these histories of abstraction, its traces and erasure.

*Shadow Sites II* is currently on show in the exhibitions *Shadow Sites: Recent Work by Jananne Al-Ani* at the Freer Gallery of Art and Arthur M. Sackler Gallery, Smithsonian Institution, Washington DC and *Light from the Middle East: New Photography at the Victoria and Albert Museum*, London.

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