

The logo for MOCA Cleveland, featuring the letters 'MOCA' in a stylized, white, sans-serif font. The 'O' and 'C' are connected, and the 'A' has a unique shape. Below the logo, the text 'MUSEUM OF CONTEMPORARY ART CLEVELAND' is written in a smaller, white, sans-serif font.

MUSEUM OF CONTEMPORARY ART
CLEVELAND

FATIMA AL QADIRI: CHINAS OF THE MIND

Elena Harvey Collins, independent curator | September 25, 2015 — January 10, 2016

Fatima Al Qadiri's music articulates the disconnect between what is experienced and what is imagined, how places are distorted and romanticized in our collective memory, and how they can endure as a feeling or a mood. Pulling from multiple cultural references, Al Qadiri builds sonic architectures that spatialize both past and future. A particular hook pulls me into her music: the icy, skittering sounds of Grime, a genre of music originating in London during the early 2000s. Grime was a very specific sound that could only have sprung from London's hybridized, bustling, DIY music scene, coming by way of jungle, UK Garage, 2-Step, dancehall, and rap. It was music made by teenage musicians on computers in housing estate bedrooms, music for dancefloors, characterized by a moody scene and raves that got shut down early by the police. Living in New York at the time that artists like Dizzee Rascal and Wiley were first becoming well known, Al Qadiri heard this music at a remove and was struck by how it sounded both childlike and sinister.¹ The hallmarks of grime—catchy, icy synths, video game sound effects, humming, rolling basslines, gunshot beats that halt and skitter, ready-made faux-Asian rhythms—form a key part of Al Qadiri's vocabulary, sonic fragments that she implements to immersive and evocative effects.

Al Qadiri's 2012 EP *Desert Strike* was inspired by the artist's personal experience of conflict during the first Gulf War. "Oil Well," a beautiful and haunting track, scores a sense of intense loss and longing for a beloved place irrevocably changed. Such works connect to a shared sense of vulnerability and instability in an increasingly chaotic global scene including ongoing attacks by the self-proclaimed Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL)

upon historical sites and museums in Iraq and Syria. The fact that many works of art, such as the Assyrian statuary recently attacked in Mosul, Iraq, are in fact plaster replicas of originals held in European museums adds to the layers of confusion and to the sense of things not being where they belong, or where we left them. However, there is a plastic quality to the melodies of Al Qadiri's album, a distancing that comes from the way that the artist's raw memories are overlaid with removed experience, including sounds sampled from the video game *Desert Strike: Return to the Gulf*, based on the US military's response to Iraq's 1991 invasion of Kuwait. Al Qadiri evokes the strangeness and alienation of re-experiencing a war as entertainment, conveying a sense of cultural slippage—how sounds, places, and events are mediated by distance, politics, and commercialism. Often working with material that is several times removed from its source, a key subject of Al Qadiri's music is the rippling effects of mediation itself on culture, architecture, and the way we know the world around us. This knowing is increasingly articulated in visual terms above all else: the counterfeit handbag, the game that simulates violence, the simulacra mash-up of Las Vegas's Paris, the plaster replica of a statue that smashes again and again on YouTube.

Continuing this exploration into the effect of mediation on authenticity, Al Qadiri's debut full-length album *Asiatisch* (2014) moves away from memory and towards speculation, from Kuwait (where she lived as a child) to China (where she's never been). The album mines the concept of "shanzhai," a slang term in both Mandarin and Cantonese that loosely refers to pirated or counterfeit goods produced in China. Al Qadiri reverses this concept,

referring to the ways in which vague notions of China as a cultural monolith and an economic superpower are disseminated through media and how the country acts as the subject of projected hopes, fears, and dreams in Western culture. Equally important are suggestions of China's spaces. The track "Shanghai Freeway" makes use of up-tempo percussive synths to evoke the disorienting sense of speeding down a highway through a futuristic city. It acts as a sonic representation of the country's rapidly modernizing and growing urban centers, with architecture and infrastructure that are high, sharp, shiny, and fast, forming dramatic neon skylines best viewed from a distance. This competitive and aspirational style of building, intended to demonstrate strength and progress, mixes elements of retro science fiction movie sets, video games, and fantasy.² They are imagined futures realized in steel and glass where "national narratives and master plans play out cleanly in 3D animated intros, divorced from the real sweat and consequences of their construction."³ These characteristics are part of "Gulf Futurism," a term coined by Al Qadiri and artist and writer Sophia Al-Maria to describe the phenomenon of development in wealthy Gulf states acting as a predictor for a global future powered "by a deranged optimism about the state of oil reserves and late capitalism."⁴ In this future, the effects upon society of isolation, religious fundamentalism, consumerism, and environmental destruction are acute.

The most overtly symbolic of the three tracks playing in Stair A is "Star Spangled" (2014), an electronic rendering of the United States' national anthem that honors the flag. The track calls to the work of other artists engaging critically with the nature of American identity, including David Hammons, for whom the flag has been a frequent and mutable subject, such as in *African-American Flag* (1990) rendered in red, green, and black. Barbara Kruger's 1991 work *Untitled (Questions)* replaces the stars and stripes with a series of queries, such as "WHO IS HEALED? WHO IS HOUSED? WHO SPEAKS? WHO IS SILENCED?" The flag is a frequent and strategic motif in Robert Frank's 1958 photographic study *The Americans*, where it amplifies the gap between the ideals of the country and the effects of poverty and racism upon its citizens. Such works are a reminder that the ideological territory of the flag is unfixed and up for constant negotiation. Al Qadiri's rendition of the national anthem is slow and dissonant, reminiscent of a science fiction soundtrack gone wrong; the song restarts or resets itself over and over again as a minor-keyed bassline and rising synth-strings reach for, but never attain, the soaring heights of the original anthem. The effect is bittersweet. There is menace—a sense of paranoia and discontent, perhaps a nod to surveillance culture—but also sadness, articulating the current mood of uncertainty in the United States, itself a young country where a sense of national identity, sustained by the dream of prosperity through hard work, seems to be less confidently shared in recent years.

The ability of sound to create a sense of space is another key theme in Al Qadiri's work. Art historian Nermin Saybasili notes that "listening is a spatial practice," an observation that is affirmed by experiencing MOCA Cleveland's installation of Al Qadiri's work in an emergency exit positioned entirely within the Museum's Kohl Monumental Stair.⁵ Painted an intense shade of yellow and breaking with the emphasis on transparency throughout the rest of the Museum, visitors to the space experience the installation while traveling between floors. As philosopher Jean-Luc Nancy states, "To be listening is always to be on the edge of meaning"—to be constantly tipping over into not knowing, non-comprehension.⁶ This suggests that listening circumvents other, more semantically stable mechanisms by which we understand. As an embodied experience disassociated from a visual referent, it asks that we go around the long way to build an understanding in a slower and different manner. Inside the stairway, Al Qadiri's music tells its stories; untethered from any clunky, visual objects, the sound waves bounce around the space in a searching way, finding corners, turns, twists, and echoes. Here appears a superfast highway, there a burning oil field, a threadbare flag: a soundtrack to an emergency.



FRONT: Stair A, the installation site for *Fatima Al Qadiri: Chinas of the Mind*, MOCA Cleveland 2015. ABOVE: Album cover to Fatima Al Qadiri's album *Asiatisch*, 2014. Courtesy of the artist and Hyperdub records, London.

¹ Lauren Martin, "I Want To Blast My Record In Chinatown": an Interview with Fatima Al Qadiri," *Thump* online, March 19, 2014.

² Burj Khalifa, in Dubai, United Arab Emirates, is the world's tallest building at 2717 feet. The second tallest is China's recently completed Shanghai Tower, at 2073 feet.

³ Sophia Al-Maria, "Chewing the Data Fat," *Uncommon Grounds: New Media and Critical Practices in North Africa and the Middle East*, ed. Anthony Downey (London: I. B. Tauris, 2014), 235.

⁴ "Al Qadiri & Al-Maria on Gulf Futurism," *Dazed* online, Nov 14, 2012.

⁵ From Saybasili's consideration of artist Cevdet Ereğ's 2012 installation *Room of Rhythms*, in which speakers projected disembodied voices into an empty room. "The Magnetic Remanences: Voice and Sound in Digital Art and Media," *Uncommon Grounds: New Media and Critical Practices in North Africa and the Middle East*, ed. Anthony Downey (London: I. B. Tauris, 2014), 209.

⁶ Jean-Luc Nancy, *Listening: Perspectives in Continental Philosophy*, trans. Charlotte Mandell (New York: Fordham University Press, 2007), 32.