

# GROUND FORCE

For UAE-raised artist and designer Talin Hazbar, every fragment of rock or grain of sand tells a story

PHOTOGRAPHY: OLESYA ASANOVA WRITER: MALAIKA BYNG



This page, research references for Talin Hazbar's installation inspired by traditional Syrian courtyard fountains

Opposite, Hazbar in her studio in Sharjah, with a group of sand sculptures exhibited at Noor Riyadh in 2023 under the banner *Earth Records*. They are part of an ongoing body of work on sand solidification

The Syrian-born, UAE-raised artist and designer Talin Hazbar was around ten years old when she began collecting an informal ‘materials library’, picking up stones and other objects from within the citadel in Aleppo when visiting her grandmother. Amassing in earnest began while studying architecture at the American University of Sharjah, gathering sand from across the UAE and beyond to experiment with mould-making. Many of these materials and tests now line the shelves of her studio in Sharjah Art Foundation’s Al Hamriyah complex, including pieces of calcified fishing nets and coral from the sea just beyond its walls.

‘I’m fascinated by how materials behave and the forces that influence how they decay, accumulate and change shape,’ says the artist, whose installations and designs have been exhibited everywhere from the Louvre Abu Dhabi to the NGV Triennial in Melbourne. In her eyes, every mark and fissure in a rock is like a scar, revealing something about shifts in weather patterns, ecologies and social history. These materials can also carry the weight of cultural memory.

When we speak, her studio is filled with the components of her installation for the ‘Arab Design Now’ exhibition at the Design Doha Biennial (now postponed to November 2026): an abstract tribute to the *bah-rah*, a fountain at the centre of social and domestic life in the traditional Syrian home. Instead of one fountain, however, Hazbar has used stones from the Levant to create a totem of interlocking fountains, their geometry and patterns appearing familiar yet strange.

‘It questions what happens when such enduring structures, once central to domestic and communal life, are no longer at the heart of a courtyard,’ she says. The work, *At the center, water gathers what the city remembers*, reflects on the memories we attach to materials and built forms, without veering into nostalgia. ‘It’s an invitation to imagine fragments, not as broken, but as evolving.’

For the curator of the exhibition, Noura Al Sayeh Holtrop, it is this dialogue between different times and traditions that stands out: ‘Talin’s singular artistic approach combines the historical and the contemporary, drawing from her Syrian heritage. She has created a new ornamental language made from a collage of existing typologies.’

Despite studying architecture, Hazbar was always more captivated by what buildings are made from, and what that reveals about social history and the landscape, than in designing structures herself. ‘I was interested in vernacular architecture, and how it was born out of need and context,’ she adds.

Her 2022 work *Earth Readings* in Alula, Saudi Arabia, paid homage to the tradition of building with adobe in the region. She asked local residents to tell her about a space that was meaningful to them, collecting earth and rocks from the site before building two



walls of 1,360 mud bricks within a palm grove. As the passageway between the walls narrowed, you could hear the participants’ stories, bringing the desert oasis to life. The bricks were later strewn across the floor at the 2024 Art Basel Paris in a nod to how mud can be endlessly reshaped and remoulded.

Many of her early works, however, were made from sand – a material she continually returns to because ‘it sits somewhere between a solid and liquid state,’ and it has a rebellious streak. ‘Its behaviour always surprises me,’ she says. Hazbar used different binders to ‘freeze’ the sand in moulds, creating everything from lighting installations to domed sculptures.

‘I became intrigued with working with sand to understand the landscape, but also to see how it responded in the studio,’ she says. Hazbar began talking to archaeologists and noticed a connection with their process. ‘It felt very close because my work is about excavating and giving space for uncertainty. I have to create my own system to navigate through a site sensitively and without definite answers. And there’s a strong sense of time embedded in the work.’ »

Above, ‘Sediments’ is a series of collectable objects made using recycled ghost fishing nets



From here, she began developing what she calls ‘structures of impermanence’, an ongoing body of work exploring ‘temporality’ through forms and materials. In July, she will exhibit a new take on one of these pieces, *Resting Grounds*, at the Le Végétal art fair in France. First shown in Abu Dhabi in 2025, it’s an undulating landscape of encrusted sand, precariously held up by pins, that resembles human skin. She calls it a metaphor of the intimacy and fragility of the relationship between land and body. ‘It proposes art as a practice of excavation and care, attuned to the fragile entanglements of nature and time.’

The artist approaches the sea through the same archaeological lens. In 2017, she was collecting sand on the beach when a fishing net accumulated with shells, salt and organic matter caught her eye. ‘I became intrigued by how organisms colonise nets,’ she says, so she started talking to a local fisherman and later marine scientists at the American University of Sharjah and NYU Abu Dhabi to see how they document these organisms’ growth. With the help of fishermen, she submerged three traditional dome-shaped *gargour* fishing baskets, letting crustaceans, molluscs, algae

and other sea life gather on their forms over six months. Each piece of *Deposits* mapped the specific growing conditions and species of the location where it was submerged.

Hazbar cast a further glow on it with her ethereal ‘Accretions’ lights. She plunged hand-forged steel armatures inspired by deformed *gargour* lost at sea, allowing marine life to finish their form. These ornate yet delicate structures suggested a new path for design made in collaboration with nature.

Sharjah’s bustling port, a short walk from her studio, is a place she constantly revisits. It has inspired ‘Sediments’, her ongoing series charting the importance of marine ecosystems to local communities and how changes along the coastline have affected them. With fishermen and divers, she collects ghost fishing nets before compressing them into slabs. ‘Each slab is a record of the time the materials have been left at sea,’ she says.

Above left, an old fishing net used by Hazbar as a research element for her work

Above right, Hazbar with a model of her fountain installation for the Design Doha Biennial’s ‘Arab Design Now’ exhibition

Now she is ‘exerting a little more control’ over the results by sorting the nets into colours and creating modular, collectable pieces with them – their swirling, colourful textures reading like marble. ‘The divers are excited because it creates more awareness of what’s lost at sea,’ says Hazbar, who hopes the work will support their cleaning efforts.

Notions of time are a mainstay of her practice and a shared interest with her sister, Tulip, a graphic designer and illustrator, who is a frequent collaborator. Their ‘Abacus 52’, a counting frame made of marble and stone fragments, speaks of acts of collecting and record-keeping in daily life. Tulip is an ‘archivist/hoarder’ of print material, music and film clips from Syria and the UAE. For Design Doha, she is dipping into her collection to create an audio accompaniment to Talin’s installation. As Al Sayeh Holtrop says, ‘it reflects the oral transmission of knowledge that is central to Arab culture’. The sounds will add a haunting beauty to the installation, while bringing the past emphatically into the present. ✨ @talinhazbar.

*Le Végétal* will be on show from 3-6 July at *Hôtel Présent*, Arles, 74tharts.com, designdoha.org.qa