Screening Room No. 16 with Ahaad Alamoudi, in conversation with 11:11's Giulia Shah

Giulia 00:01
Hi Ahaad, it's really nice to have you screening with us and have a chat with you about your film, Green Light, that will be screening with us in our screening room for September and October. And yeah, we've known each other for a while. And it's really great to finally chat to you more about your work and what's next as well.

Ahaad 00:25
Amazing. Hi everybody. I'm very excited to be chatting with you today, specifically about Green Light, but also about my wider work as well, and the thinking behind everything that I'm kind of working on and developing.

Giulia 00:36
It's always nice to just start with you kind of briefly introducing yourself and your practice.

Ahaad 00:48
I'm a moving image artist based between Jeddah, Saudi Arabia, and London. My work looks at the social politics of the spaces that I'm in, looks at community, looks at the body and landscapes in contexts. Yeah, that's a quick summary of a lot of the themes I've been looking at recently within my work.

Giulia 01:18
You're currently ending or working on your PhD, right? Is that correct?

Ahaad 01:22
Yeah, I'm currently doing a PhD at the RCA around change, what is lost and what is gained in the process of change. And, yeah, I'm almost done. Got my write up here, left to do, so I'm excited for that to be over.

Giulia 01:41
I can imagine.

Giulia 01:43

Am I correcting thinking that you did an MA in print at the RCA, but predominantly with a moving image practice? I'd be interested to understand where kind of print and moving image meet. I can really see it in your work, but it would be interesting to hear your thoughts in this.

Ahaad 02:00
I have a visual communication background, so I studied that, and I was always doing art on the side, and I wanted to commit to art. So I was like,let me try doing an MA in print, or, like an art in general. And I thought print would be a good kind of intersection between visual communication, arts and what I was producing at the time. And then I started printing on fabric while I was on the MA, and then I wanted to animate the fabric. And that's where I started getting into filmmaking and moving image in general. So that's how I got into it. And I think that studying at the RCA is very interdisciplinary in general. So there's lots of, like, mergers. You're meeting people from different kinds of departments and stuff like that. So it was really fun to really get into that and learn about it in a space that's so, like, connected, in a way. And I just fell in love with film and moving image, and I kept producing. It just fit a lot of what I was developing at the time, and still I'm thinking about and developing now.

Giulia 03:07
That is really interesting. How you speak about printing and wanting to animate that, because I think a lot about patterns and rhythm in your work. Also, when I look at your films without having this specific background information about how it kind of almost started from fabric and then the relationship to kind of rhythm and patterns and like structures in this kind of flat fabric surface.... Yeah, I can, yeah, it's interesting, because I really feel that in your films now.

Ahaad 03:35
I mean, just theoretically, if you think about print and what the core aspect of it was, it was like to share information at its core, like, that's what it was designed for. And I think video and film, and, you know, this kind of digital type of realm of sharing and disseminating information is just a continuation of that language. So I don't really see a large separation between the two aspects. They're connected in so many ways. It's just like a more innovative or like a newer version of the same content or production process.

Giulia 04:09
Absolutely, I couldn't agree more. On that thought. I think the first time I saw your work was, I think it was the pomegranate piece at the RCA, I don't know if that

was like in 2017 or so, yeah. And after that, I think I started following you on Instagram. So I accessed lots of your work through Instagram and your website and online, but it also almost felt like that was also a very relevant space for it. And then recently I saw Green Light as part of the New Contemporaries at Camden Art Center. And it's very different to kind of encounter your work in an exhibition setting and looking at it through the screen. They're both relevant, but one is very kind of immersive and an installation-like format. It's almost a kind of sculpture. And yeah, the phone screen, of course, is this kind of flat dissemination of knowledge in a very fast paced and wider reaching platform. But they both feel relevant. And it feels very relevant, and it also feels very considered. So I'm wondering if you have any thoughts about that.

Ahaad 05:19
It's really interesting that you have kind of seen the trajectory of my work, from the pomegranate piece to the Green Light. Like you said, they're quite similar in language, and you've seen, like my interactions online, and I feel like it was also a reaction to a lot of the things that were happening back home as well at the time. I feel like during the pomegranate era, that's where things were really opening up within Saudi itself. But prior to that, and during that, a little bit, it was like social media, and the internet was a way to share information and share art and share experiences and create dialogs around things. And then when we move on to the space that I'm in now, and like the Green Light and the works that I've been producing now, and my interaction with social media is kind of also dwindled. It's not as interactive as I was before, because I feel like there's now mediums and platforms and spaces of sharing that are very considered and are like very present right now, within the communities that I'm within. But yeah, it's been interesting to see my development in social media. I do want to return back to it. I think I've been a bit far away and removed from that world a little bit recently. So it's been quite interesting to also think about it from that perspective, and seeing how I've moved and shifted based on what's happening around me.

Giulia 06:44
When you were using social media more, did you like producing work with the phone screen in mind, as this is how it's accessed?

Ahaad 06:55
Absolutely, I think the works themselves exist as they are, as films separately, and then I would just shift and twist a little bit the content that I was producing

and making online to fit that kind of conversation and create other conversations around the work itself. So it's been quite interesting now that you're kind of stating that, just realizing this as well, that I was shifting a lot of the things that I was doing on that platform differently to what's happening within the work. And I think it adds on to what the work is talking about in general.

Giulia 07:29
Definitely. I guess that makes sense with your kind of background in visual communication, there's a relationship to pop culture, cultural movements, these kinds of subcultures within the Western world and the Arab world. And I also can see these kinds of symbols sometimes back in your work, like with Green Light. Is it the Hulk that is.... ?

Ahaad 07:55
Yes. So there's, there's different characters and toys that the men are carrying, but some of them are like WWE wrestlers. Some of them are just like Hulks, but they're just figurines, and they're very known ones. Like, when you look at them, you think like, Oh, I know this character. Like, I know this toy.

Giulia 08:12
And I think because of all these references, and because I feel like your work very much sits within these spaces of art, culture, pop even. It's very contemporary. It's very like, now. And I always find this a very kind of, a bit of a boring question, but it's interesting to know: like, where you kind of find your inspiration, or what you kind of look at, to find inspiration for your work?

Ahaad 08:41
Yeah. I mean, like, signs and symbols within my work are very important, and maybe that stems from my visual communication background, like with semiotics, and, you know, the study of science in general. But I feel like I really enjoy taking these things that carry heavy connotations and placing them within different contexts and creating a different narrative around them and different stories around them. And, you know, it's just this idea of, like, what you said, like, oh, is this the Hulk, or is this something that I've heard before, like the song? Do I know this? It's a way for me to create a context around a lot of the conversations that I'm having within my work. And some of them are quite sensitive as well. It's just about like accessing the work in a.... Sometimes humor, like, a huge part of what I do as well. So like just accessing the work in a different way, and allowing there to be some connections between the work. But I'm glad that you see kind of this western kind of influence or a western connection, because a lot of times when I

do show my work outside of Saudi, some people find it really difficult to connect to the work, because most of the references that I do, specifically pop culture ones, are very regional. So it's been quite interesting to see how different people interact with my work. And how they engage and how they choose to connect, or kind of choose to remove themselves from it in general. But I think that also proves, like, sorry, there's like a plane. I don't know if you can hear it. I'm outdoors, guys. So yeah, this is the only place I have internet connection. But anyways, yeah, so it's been really fun to kind of play with these references that a lot of people have access to in general.

Giulia 10:24
yeah, it's interesting. I feel like people like to, you know, separate things and categorize things, but especially with pop culture. I mean, I can't speak so much for, you know, Saudi references. But I think nowadays, with the internet and this very globalized world, like all pop references, wherever in the world, are influenced by each other. It's interesting when you speak about things like... The pop references that you have a lot in your work. I might not recognize them directly, but they also remind me of pop references that I know in the south of Italy, for instance. So, yeah, I always feel like there are connections to be made. But then it's really nice to have these moments or little instances of symbols that you recognize and you can kind of gravitate towards to find your own narrative, I guess, within the work.

Giulia 11:19
I think talking about that, something that is very present for me in Green Light is this very endearing quality to the men, and it's quite confrontational. And maybe that's about the sensitivity that you speak about in your work, that it's also a light in which I've rarely seen Arab men represented in the Western world. And, yeah, I also know that this is very much part of your practice, this kind of idea of dismantling Western stereotypes, of, the Arab and Saudi world. So I was wondering if you could speak a bit about that.

Ahaad 11:55
I mean, I am a huge fan of stereotypes. I just, I love them, and I I really try to, like, lean into them a lot within my work, whether it's like a pomegranate as a representation for a female, or like it's a camel or a falcon or the desert, or in this case, like it's like Saudi men in this, like, traditional attire They all look very stereotypically like, what a Saudi man you would envision to look like, and they're all presented in a way.. And even the way that we shot them, they have a sense of power to them. And in the video themselves, they're like screaming at you,

these, like pop kind of song lyrics that I've shifted slightly. But the reality is, if you actually listen to what they're saying, they're actually like, asking for help. So that's where the endearing aspect of it kind of comes in. I think, the juxtaposition and the tension that exists between like this really heavy stereotype of what a man, or men in general should be, and then listening to what they're actually saying, you realize, wait, this is them asking for help, or this is what's happening between them. And it's just like a power play within the video. When the light is switched off, they're silent, and they only speak or only make noise when the light is switched on them. So there's this power play that I wanted to highlight and represent. And it's a reaction to a lot of things that are happening back home, with the changes that are happening and the power that the females are having within Saudi. And it's just like I wanted to add my kind of voice in that. In that situation.

Giulia 13:41
There's also, like, these instances where they kind of laugh a bit, or giggle a bit. Yeah, I think endearing is, like the perfect word for it. Can you speak a bit about the symbol of the light, of the green light?

Ahaad 13:55
Yes, I've been looking at light in general a lot, and in a lot of the performances that I've been doing, even after the green light, have involved a lot of light, and I've been studying that in general. But I think for me, it started, as now that there's a shift in attention, so the light is no longer on the men in general. Now the light is on the women. And like, I understand what it feels like to not have light on me. So there's voices within the region that are existing now that we didn't hear before, and there's voices that we didn't hear before that we no longer hear. So it's just giving power to both light and darkness, and in a way that piece for me highlights that like it showcases okay when the light is placed and the power of light in general, and the power that light has within spaces and, you know, countries and cities and communities in general, yeah.

Giulia 14:49
I also think about light as this spiritual kind of symbol.

Ahaad 14:54
Exactly. The whole piece itself is very performative. The way that it's staged. The way that the lighting exists, the way that the men are standing and the toys are on them. And they're laughing at you, or they're laughing at themselves, and we don't know exactly what they're laughing at. And they're in this, like void space,

and you can't really locate them. So it's just like a continuation of what is happening, like what's going on here. Why are they in this, like pyramid form? And, you know, it's just like a lot of questions that I think I'm having that I'm trying to find answers to as well. And I think a lot of the works that I create and make are a way for me to find a lot of answers, like guiding me towards or creating a conversation around things that don't make sense to me.

Giulia 15:37
That leads on to my next question. I think all of your work feels very much kind of in between performance and almost like narrative film, like it's abstract, but it goes towards having a very clear narration or script. And it's interesting that you said your background is in visual communication, because I always had the sense that your background might have been more in a kind of performance kind of setting. Like, I can also sometimes imagine your films as like a live performance, for instance. So I'm interested to know how you feel about this relationship between performance and film and the camera. Of course, there's a very, very strong connection between them. And yeah, maybe the importance of the camera as a tool in itself to you.

Ahaad 16:25
I think, the lens and the camera in general, like there's a lot of power that exists within it. And I think in my works, I try to have space for the performers to claim their power. And I do see my power existing more in the staging of the situation, like what elements are included within the video, what they're wearing, like what's happening. So I see myself or my voice exist within the production, and the post production. That's where a lot of my power kind of lies. And I really like working with performers and people that I've... A lot of the men that I've worked with, they're usually people that I know and my friends, and they also are a source of a lot of what I'm inspired by, and that's why I choose to kind of work with them and develop a lot of pieces with them. But yeah, the lens and the camera itself is quite a sensitive space. And recently, I've been removing the lens from my work. So some of them are becoming just performances now, where, in the past, I used to just record and have films as my main pieces. But now I've decided to kind of remove the lens from some of the works that I'm creating. There's like this temporality that exists now, and exists in that moment, in that time, and I I enjoy that aspect of it, and performance in general is something that has developed as I've been kind of going, I love it so much, and collaborating with people is a huge part of what I make and what I create. So it's been interesting to kind of learn a lot from the people that I work with as well, and through that process, it's been

interesting to see where I choose to remove the lens and where I choose to keep it, and just like play around with that aspect of it,

Giulia 18:11
I guess I'm thinking a lot about the power that you hold, and how you were speaking previously about, not newly found, but more this developing power of women in Saudi. And you are often filming, in your work, men, is there a kind of relationship between holding the power and directing men? Is there some kind of gender dynamic that happens between that?

Ahaad 18:37
Absolutely! I think a lot of people, when they view my work, they think straight away, oh, she just works a lot with men. There's no female voice that exists within her work. But I feel like me making the work is enough of a position to have on that subject. And it's interesting, because, like most of the pieces that I make, yeah, it's, if it's a man, it's like men, obviously, that I work with and that I collaborate with, and if it's a female, it's usually myself that's in the piece. So I don't know, maybe this changes in the future, but for now, this is what it's been and how I felt like it's worked for me. But, yeah. Just, I think having that position, I feel like, is enough of a power play to have, like, behind the lens, in the editing, in the staging, that's where I feel like my voice and my narrative and my storytelling can really shine. And I'm very happy in that space.

Giulia 19:40
I think that makes a lot of sense to me, like, I think all of the work is, is your voice, whether you're like, visibly there or not, and also you're not kind of pushing your voice onto another woman by representing them visually.

Giulia 20:01
Working with other people is a huge part of your work. You know, the people that are actors or performers, sound, costume... I'd be interested to know about how you produce your work and how you kind of collaborate and work with other people within that.

Ahaad 20:22
Yeah. I mean, I think working in film in general, when you have this idea and you want to develop it, I have to go to people that really understand how things are made and done, and I'm learning through making the work. So that's why it's been so exciting for me, and that's why I've really leaned into that medium, because it's just kept me engaged, to be honest. And, yeah, collaboration is a

huge aspect of what I do, and I tend to work with people that understand my vision, understand what I'm kind of working towards. I mean for Green Light, I worked with Taha Gill, who was like the DOP for the project. Yasir Zaharani is also a friend, and he's helped me with my production. I work a lot with my brother Abdullah Alamoudi, and he's either in my performances or he's behind the scenes. And I think a lot of the pieces require a lot of effort, whether it's getting a two meter by two meter ice cube in the middle of the desert, or even just creating the pyramid where the men are standing on (in Green Light). I just need a lot of help in building the worlds that I'm trying to build. And it's a very crucial aspect of how I make… collaboration is a very crucial aspect of a lot of my process and my methodology in general.

Giulia 21:44
Would you say that a lot of the work is pre-set in how/what needs to happen, or do you feel like it kind of evolves through collaboration and working with other people? How much kind of space is there for I don't know, change, I guess

Ahaad 21:59
Great question. I feel like it's so interesting. Because in the beginning when I was like, making these films, I really wanted to control large aspects of what comes out. It was just a real struggle to kind of control a lot of the outcome of what happens. But I feel like now more than ever, and now that I'm leaning more into as well. It's become like, actually, each work has its own rhythm and its own systems, and I really try to allow that. It's been a lot of like pushing and pulling in every work that I make. It's like where do I decide to really stand my ground and have my voice and where do I decide to actually let go?… For example there's a piece I did called Iron Man and it's this man ironing a large yellow fabric in the middle of the desert. And I actually had to live with that work for a year. I couldn't edit it, because when I was working with the performer he took the character in a way I never really imagined or really thought through. But I had to actually just sit with it for a year to really understand the direction that he was taking it and have space to edit it in a way… just be able to give him space in the editing kind of phase. So, yeah, it's been a learning process in general.

Giulia 23:29
Yeah, that's interesting. Are the characters - I mean, you've mentioned there are people you know, friends, are they also actors or performers, or are some of them just doing that for you basically?

Ahaad 23:42

Yeah, it's funny, because in the Green Light, a lot of them are, like influencers, slash social media, like, you know, people. So a lot of them in Green Light weren't actors. Some of them actually were. So it really varies in some works, my friend is actually a script writer. He's a poet. He sings and he does like performances. So really, it's really different for each role. And for example ,in the pomegranate piece, my friend was the production manager of the shoot. The actor that was meant to do it decided he was uncomfortable being in the pomegranate and in the pomegranate background. So he didn't really show up to the shoot. And then Saleem, being the amazing production manager, there he is, but also an amazing friend. Was like, I understand this piece, let me do it for you. And in the end, he was like, the most perfect person for it. And I'm so happy that that's what went down in the end. But obviously, at the time it was like a breakdown, like, Oh my God, I don't have an actor. What's gonna happen? But yeah, it's just yeah, the work becomes the work in the end. Yeah. So I'm very happy with how it turned out.

Giulia 24:53
It's interesting that you're saying that the men, a lot of the men in Green Light, are like social media people, influencers, and that kind of refers back to that pop culture or visual culture topic that we were speaking about earlier. Are they also, then, like, recognizable? Do people recognize them?

Ahaad 25:15
Yeah, some of them are quite famous, but most of them are, to be honest, up and coming. They're all quite young, and they all really want to get into the scene. Some of them are also models, so it depends, like there's some of them that are quite famous and others that aren't really but they're kind of on the rise. And Yasser really helped Yasser, my production kind of manager really helped me in the selection process for them and getting access to them. The number as well, was meant to be 32 initially, but then we had to push it down to 18 only because of, like, different aspects of whether they were uncomfortable or, you know, we couldn't get them in the time that we needed. I think 18 was a good number and it still feels like a lot of men.

Giulia 26:00
It does feel like a lot of men!

Giulia 26:04
Lastly, I would really like to know about sound. Sound is so important in all of your work, and feels extremely considered and is beautiful. Do you work with

someone specific on that? And yeah, how do you kind of decide on the sound element?

Ahaad 26:22
The sound has been one of the hardest aspects of the work that I make. I feel like it's not something that really comes naturally to me. And I think whether it's in the recording at the time, or it's in, you know, the editing of it. It's very difficult for me to get right, because I have a sound in my head that I want to get to, but it never ends up where I kind of envision it. But I work with a lot of different people, and each work is very different. The person that I've worked with the most is Nasir Ashemimry. He's an amazing sound engineer composer, based back home in Jeddah. But yeah, each piece has a different voice, and I've worked with different people as well within the works.

Giulia 27:11
Do you sit and edit with them, or do you commission them?

Ahaad 27:16
Mostly, we sit and we talk a lot about what I want and how I want the sound to be. Sometimes, I'm in the room with them, and we're editing together, and sometimes they take the footage and they respond to it. It's really different for each work. Like I recently did a piece in Greece, and I worked with a musician there, and he saw the piece, he was like, I have this instrument that I think really fits well with what you're trying to say, and I really want to use it. So it's like, also learning about different things like that. I never learned about this, like this instrument that they use during funerals, that he wanted to use in the piece. So it's been quite beautiful. But to be honest, one thing, just a side note, I feel like a lot of the musicians' reactions to my work, or responses are quite dark. I don't know why this has happened, but this is kind of what's been happening. So it's been quite interesting. But for this one, the Green Light, it's simple, it's just a recording of the men's like, saying, singing the thing, or, yeah, screaming it.

Giulia 28:26
But it is edited in a certain way to create a certain atmosphere and sound. And, kind of sound acts in the same way that the light acts, like this on-off, fading in, out. Maybe lastly, it would be nice to hear what you have coming up next. I had the chance to get a sneak peek of a new work. It's amazing. And, yeah, just nice to hear what you've got coming up.

Ahaad 28:55

So I have a solo at ATHR right now titled Moving Mountains, and it's quite an interesting piece because I think I'm now really leaning into this idea of community and the power of the people, and what role we have within communities, and how we can build worlds or destroy them. So that's been an interesting kind of space to be in. And I'm also have a new piece now coming up in Misk Art Institute, and that's going to be unveiled at the end of the year hopefully. Very excited about that one. Yeah.

Giulia 29:38
Great! Thank you so much. Is there anything that you would like to share that you haven't had the chance to?

Ahaad 29:46
I mean, no. I mean, this was a lovely conversation. Thank you so much. It was nice to also have a different perspective on a lot of the things that I'm making. It's good to have like time to really discuss some of my ideas and a my processes. So thank you for this. Y

Giulia 30:03
Its been really enlightening for me as well to hear where you started and where you're going and where everything sits. So yeah, I'm really excited to see what you've got coming up next, and I hope to have the chance to see your live performance sometime. But for now, yeah, we'll be showing Ahaad Alamoudi' film Green Light for September and October in the screening room. And yeah, thank you so much for sharing your work with us so generously.

30:35
Thank you. Thank you. Thank you so much.