

Bold Contemporary-Art Scene Emerges in Saudi Arabia



Outspoken Saudi artists gain recognition at home and abroad; taboos remain, including nudity and sculptures of living beings

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AHMED AL OMRAN and MARGHERITA STANCATI (http://salam4cc.com/?tag=AHMED-AL-OMRAN-and--MARGHERITA-STANCATI)



When a crane crashed into Mecca's Grand Mosque in September, Ahmed Mater got on the first plane from Dubai back to Saudi Arabia. He went not as an aid worker or journalist but as a Saudi artist keen to chronicle through photography the costs of commercialization in the Islamic world's holiest city.

"It made me more worried about the city," said the 36-year-old artist who grew up in the southwestern city of Abha and is now based in Jeddah. The development of Mecca "is destroying everything—all the heritage."

To Mr. Mater, the accident marked a horrific capstone to the construction boom he had spent years documenting with a series of photographs that trace the transformation of Mecca, where hotel towers and shopping malls today surround its Grand Mosque.

Some of those photos will be part of his coming show, "Symbolic Cities: The Work of Ahmed Mater," (http://www.asia.si.edu/exhibitions/current/ahmed-mater.asp) which will be on display at the Smithsonian's Arthur M. Sackler Gallery in Washington D.C. from March 19 until Sept 18. It will be the first

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Mr. Mater is emblematic of an outspoken new generation of Saudis who are making a name for themselves, and Saudi Arabia, in the world of contemporary art. Like Mr. Mater, some of these artists are using their work as a tool of critique, testing the limits of what is permissible in the ultraconservative kingdom.

"Art has a big role to play for a change," Mr. Mater said in an interview in his studio in the Red Sea city of Jeddah. "We are needed to push these red lines, the restrictions. It's more interesting here than where there is freedom of expression."

Those such artists and their brand of art is flourishing in Saudi Arabia is a sign of the country's many contradictions. The austere brand of Islam that dominates here, Wahhabism, is generally opposed to the visual arts, but art spaces within the kingdom are proliferating. There are now galleries in most major cities, and a soon-to-open museum in eastern Dhahran—part of the King Abdulaziz Center for World Culture, an initiative of the state-owned oil giant Saudi Arabian Oil Co.—will include a space dedicated to contemporary art. Events such as Jeddah's annual art festival "21-39 Jeddah Arts" and the edgier "Loud Art," spotlighting new talent, have added to the momentum.



The emergence of a local contemporary art scene appeals, above all, to the country's younger, globally connected population. It also allows Saudi Arabia to project a more moderate, modern image of itself to the world. This has become important at a time when the extremist Islamic State is destroying artworks and blowing up heritage sites in the name of the religion they share.

In this complex climate, Saudi artists are beginning to strive for and receive recognition abroad.

One of the country's most celebrated artists, 42-year-old Abdunasser Gharem, created a series of oversized stamps with words like "Inshallah," or God willing—a thinly veiled criticism of the government's notoriously slow bureaucracy. For one of his early works, a performance called "Flora and Fauna," Mr. Gharem stood in the middle of a street wrapped in plastic with a tree. The spectacle took aim at the government's decision to import trees from Australia, thereby upsetting the Saudi ecosystem.

Saudi authorities are caught between the desire to promote art and wanting to control the messages that are conveyed through it. Taboos include nudity, anything that insults the state or Islam, and sculptures of living beings. That leaves room for interpretation, and the boundaries of what is allowed keep shifting.

The work of Khalid Zahid, a Jeddah-based artist, even features Saudi Arabia's sheikhs or clerics. But photos from a series that showed them engaged in activities like eating ice cream and riding a merry-go-round were rejected by government censors, who must review all works that go on display in the kingdom. Photos from the same series had previously been cleared for an earlier show in Jeddah.



"The whole idea was to show the lighter side of religious people—to support them so that they are not seen in a negative light," said Mr. Zahid, who is also a businessman. "I don't think they got the point."

It wasn't an isolated incident. Several shows were recently denied approval and, privately, several artists and curators complained it's getting harder to receive clearance. Some say they would rather just show their more daring pieces abroad.

The Ministry of Culture and Information in Riyadh, the arm of the government that reviews artworks, didn't respond to requests for comment.

Mr. Mater, the artist who is a doctor by training, is a lifelong friend of the Palestinian poet and art curator Ashraf Fayadh, who was detained last year and convicted of apostasy for his poetry. His death sentence was recently overturned and replaced with an eight-year prison term and 800 lashes, a verdict his lawyer said he would appeal.

Still, provoking dialogue on subjects that challenge convention remains central to the work of many Saudi artists, including some of the kingdom's female artists. Manal al-Dowayan's installation "Suspended Together," for instance, shows doves made of porcelain frozen in mid-flight, each carrying a travel permit—a reference to the rule that requires women to obtain a male relative's permission to travel abroad. For that project, Ms. al-Dowayan collected travel permits from many accomplished Saudi women—professors, scientists, and writers among them. "These are women who brought change to their country and beyond," says the artist, who is now based in Dubai. "But when it comes to travel, they are treated like a flock of doves." The work fetched \$329,000 in a 2013 Sotheby's (<http://quotes.wsj.com/BID>) auction and is now part of the permanent collection of Qatar's Mathaf: Arab Museum of Modern Art.



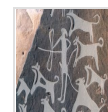
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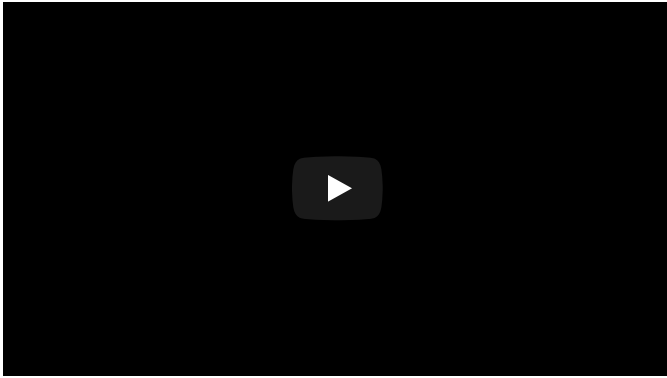
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Sarah Abu Abdallah: 'Saudi Automobile', 2012

In a 10-minute video called "Saudi Automobile," another female artist, Sarah Abu Abdallah, paints a car wreck baby pink—a protest gesture in a country where women still aren't allowed to drive.

For the most part, gallery owners and artists court cooperation rather than confrontation. They say the government has responded positively to the emergence of a grassroots art movement and to the desire to broaden the appeal of contemporary art locally.



"People always want to ask about censorship," says Hamza Serafi, a co-founder of Jeddah's Athr Gallery, a pioneering space that opened in the coastal city of Jeddah in 2009. "We don't deny these issues are part of our community, our society. But what we ask is to see the wider picture. There is a real movement that is happening."

A turning point was the 2003 creation of the artists' collective Edge of Arabia, which Mr. Mater and Mr. Gharem helped found. It brought an exhibition of Saudi artists to Venice in 2009, paving the way for Saudi Arabia's official participation at the Italian city's Biennale exhibition two years later.

Conceptual works of art, because of the subtlety of their messages, are more likely to get a green light from censors.

In 2011, an installation titled "Message/Messenger" by Mr. Gharem, sold for \$842,500 at an international charity auction, making it one of the highest prices ever paid at auction for a work by a living Arab artist. The artwork shows a gilded dome reminiscent of Jerusalem's Dome of the Rock set up to look like a trap, with a white dove of peace in its middle.



Mr. Gharem, who was classmates with two of the 9/11 hijackers, said the experience of growing up in a conservative society in the southern part of the country than dealing with the shock in the aftermath of the terrorist attack has shaped many of the artistic ideas he now shares with the world.

"It is hard for journalists and tourists to come here," said Mr. Gharem, who spent two decades as an officer in the Royal Saudi Arabian Armed Forces before dedicating himself to art full time. "The mission of artists is not just doing art but to communicate our culture. Artists are the window."

Source: AHMED AL OMRAN and MARGHERITA STANCATI of The Wall Street Journal (<http://www.wsj.com/europe>)

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