

# Contemporary Artists Rock the Boat Gently in Saudi Arabia

By Vinita Bharadwaj

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DUBAI — “Saudi artists want to talk,” Ahmed Mater says. “I think the world should listen.”

His works, along with those of 21 other Saudi artists, 9 of whom are women, are on display through Feb. 18 at the Al Furusia Marina in Jidda in an exhibit called “We Need To Talk.”

The show is being hailed by organizers as the most significant collection of contemporary Saudi art ever displayed in Jidda. It was put together by Edge of Arabia, an independent arts initiative that Dr. Mater, 32, who also works at a government clinic in the southern city of Abha, helped to found.

The exhibit, curated by Mohammed Hafiz, is divided into Past, Present and Future and features 43 works including videos, sculptures and installations. All the works had to be approved before the display by the government, specifically by a committee of artists within the Ministry of Culture and Information.

Dr. Mater’s piece “Evolution” is a statement on people’s excessive dependence on oil and functions as a potent warning of the potential for self-destruction by societies whose economic engines rely on oil. The arrangement of five light boxes, read from right to left like Arabic script, starts with an X-ray of Dr. Mater holding a gun to his head; the X-ray gradually morphs into a gasoline pump.

While it is a bold and daring statement, coming from a citizen of a petrodollar economy, Dr. Mater insists he is not alone in his concerns about oil transforming Saudi lives.

“In the last 20 years, so much has changed so fast in my country, and I don’t think we as a society have taken the time to reflect on this change,” he said by telephone from Jidda recently. “There may not be a large constituency clamoring for a shift away from oil, but it’s a growing one, and even the government is looking at diversifying the economy from oil.”

Dr. Mater and the British artist Stephen Stapleton initially conceived of the Edge of Arabia idea in 2005, with the goal of creating a social enterprise that would develop the appreciation of contemporary Arab art and culture, with a particular focus on Saudi Arabia.

“That a modern art movement existed in Saudi Arabia was barely known,” Mr. Stapleton said by telephone from Jidda last week. Edge of Arabia opened its first exhibit in London in 2008, and has since organized shows in Riyadh, Berlin, Istanbul, Dubai and Venice.

“Internationally, there is a natural curiosity about Saudi contemporary art,” Mr. Stapleton said. “It’s not the first thing one typically associates with the country.”

The challenge, however, especially for Saudi artists, has been at home, starting with a restricted and limited exposure to art.

“We don’t have the same understanding of the visual arts as our counterparts in Europe,” said Dr. Mater, who is self-taught and was an artist in residence at Al Meftaha Arts Village, a rare example of a creative oasis in the conservative kingdom.

It was at Al Meftaha that Mr. Stapleton first met Dr. Mater and other artists, who were feeding each other with ideas, were creating projects and were eager to express themselves.

“This was right around the Iraq war, 18 months after 9/11,” recalled Mr. Stapleton, who stayed on and decided to help them create a formal structure. “They had a lot to say.”

Abdulnasser Gharem, a lieutenant colonel in the Saudi Army and a co-founder of Edge of Arabia, explained that one of the first steps to creating a formal structure was to introduce art education at a school level.

“Unlike other countries, there is very little — if any — art instruction in Saudi schools,” he said by telephone from Riyadh. “I think we have more barriers to push against than artists from many others parts of the world, but at the same time, this is how creativity flourishes.”

Three of his own installations are on view in the Jidda show, incorporating items from daily life, like street signs, and the concrete blocks that cropped up on Saudi streets immediately after Sept. 11, 2001 as part of the country’s security measures. There is even a giant wooden stamp with the words “Inshallah” and “Have a bit of commitment” inscribed on its rubber face.

“‘Inshallah’ or ‘God willing’ is actually a phrase that denotes optimism,” he explained. “It was never intended to replace our commitment or will to put in our 100 percent best effort, but today sadly in our societies, it has become a phrase that people are using as an excuse to disconnect us from our responsibilities and duties. How does one express that artistically without scaring a public that is not used to art branded as art?”

Apparently by turning objects that Saudis can instantly relate to into artistic statements. The stamp, Mr. Gharem said, continues to wield enormous power within the system that requires all official paperwork to be stamped.

“It symbolizes the bureaucracy, the routine,” he said, “And using this symbol, I want to tell people to be committed to their responsibilities — at work and at home. We must create things and be proactive in society instead of being inactive and just waiting.”

Having said that, creating in a society in which artists are well aware of the parameters and boundaries they operate within, instantly draws a comparison with Iran.

“There are similarities in the conditions they’re working in,” Mr. Stapleton said. “Artists in Saudi work within parameters they know internally and these are constantly shifting — from one month to the next. But it’s not a bad thing because they’re finding their own codes and bringing out more creative works as artists do in China or Iran.”

In Britain, he continued, “we have the power to say anything, do anything, so as an art-consuming public we’ve become blasé. In Saudi, art still has tremendous power.”

The curator, Mr. Hafiz, said that the purpose of exhibitions like “We Need To Talk” is to encourage dialogue between Saudi’s contemporary artists and the local communities. “It builds on the theme of dialogue launched by King Abdullah,” he said, referring to the Saudi king’s initiatives encouraging interfaith and national dialogue.

He also likened a growing passion for arts to the enthusiasm of a soccer fan.

“I predict art will follow football in Saudi,” he added. “When there was no professional league in the Kingdom, no one was interested in playing football, but now that there’s a serious, well-resourced league, it receives good media coverage, more money and players are respectable, recognized heroes. Families, who previously saw football as a shameful career for their children, are now encouraging them to practice towards a professional career. It’s all about creating role models and the change will follow.”

Unlike its glitzier Gulf neighbors, which have opened “starchitecture” museum projects and hold annual art fairs, Saudi Arabia’s most high-profile art project to date is the King Abdulaziz Center for World Culture, a Saudi Aramco initiative. Saudi Aramco is the state company in charge of the country’s vast oil reserves. Within this milieu, the art movement has a firm foundation, which artists like Dr. Mater feel will benefit the country in the long-term.

“The foundation will be strong. Now we need more institutional support — formal art schools, more museums and galleries and dedicated spaces for artists to work,” he said.

The exhibit in Jidda has relied primarily on private funding, from the Abdul Latif Jameel Community Initiatives, supported by one of Jidda’s most prominent families, and Abraaj Capital, a private equity firm headquartered in Dubai. But Mr. Stapleton said progress had been made in terms of the arts community grabbing the government’s attention.

“2011 was a landmark year as Saudi Arabia commissioned artist Shadia Alem and writer Raja Alem — two women — to represent the country in its first ever pavilion at the Venice Biennale,” he said.

Women feature in the Edge of Arabia as artists and even as subjects. They address gender-specific issues, but also present statements applicable to any society in the world as demonstrated by Hala Ali, a 25-year-old fine arts graduate from the University of Sharjah who is based in Dubai.

In this show, her installation “Brainwash” depicts car-wash brushes made from newspapers compressed between two flat metal clamps.

“Brainwash represents the removal of literal, inscribed language as a medium, toying with the idea of the visual pun,” she said last week by telephone from Dubai. “It openly ensconces political intent and a latent distrust of information.”

Previously, art from the Gulf region has been stereotyped as either calligraphy works or paintings of horses. However, with the art movement gaining tremendous traction, the perception of how contemporary Gulf art is viewed abroad has changed.

Horses, however, Mr. Stapleton assured, are still in great demand in Saudi Arabia. “If I were to organize an art exhibition of horses, I can get any amount of funding,” he said. “It is frustrating for me, as Saudi Arabia is changing so rapidly. On the one hand it is the center of Islamic civilization and yet it’s this consumer crazy society.”