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Sarah Al Abdali: "Art defines what a society believes in"

Sarah Al Abdali's Islamic artwork has been shown in the art hotspots in the past few years. From the Saatchi Gallery in London to the 2013 Venice Biennale, AlAbdali democratizes the access and understanding of Islamic art thanks to contemporary mediums. In Paris, she is showing her latest works as part of the Young International Art Fair (YIA) exhibition.

Sarah AlAbadi was born and raised in Jeddah, Saudi Arabia. Originally from Hejaz, she has seen her region undergo a drastic transformation, leaving very little remnants of the past. Through her art, she attempts to bring to light her ancestral cultural by using traditional and contemporary mediums such as graffiti and puppets to explore Islamic and Arab culture.

She is particularly invested in the Kingdom's art scene thanks to her work with the Saudi Commission of Tourism and Antiquities as well the program she developed to support local female artisans.

Majnoun Leila is not very known by French people. Can you tell us about this story in few words ?

Sarah Al Abdali: They are about the traditional story of Leila and Majnoun. It's an old folk story about two lovers that can never meet in reality. It has a very sad ending. You can see it in different languages like Persian or Indian. Each culture took it in its own way. It's kind of a metaphor of separation and what that represents to people.

What's your interpretation of this story?

Sarah Al Abdali: One thing that really intrigued me about this story is separation. It could be a metaphor of a relationship between a person and someone else, but at the same time it could be the relationship between that person and himself or herself. That's what I felt.

A Saudi artist told me last week that all artists have a message. What's your message ?

Sarah Al Abdali: The main thing that affects me as a person is identity and I feel like I'm growing up in a time where it's really hard to tell who you are and who you once were, as a collective, as a community.

As a person who comes from Hejaz, which is the Western province of Saudi Arabia, I feel like we have lost a lot of heritage and culture. So whatever I do, I feel will go into that direction and will give people an image of what Hejaz is, or once was. Everything you know now about Mecca for example, which is the heart of the Islamic world, are towers and skyscrapers and that doesn't represent who we were, who we are.

What's the role of art in contemporary Saudi society ?

Sarah Al Abdali: The role of art would be highlighting certain issues and maybe certain feelings that people do not necessarily talk about everyday. It should target everyone. And as I said, everyone can relate to it in a different way. If I see a painting, I would interpret it so differently than how you would. It's something that in a few years would define what a society or a community believed in and what they stood for

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