

Saudi's fearless female artists



Manal Al Dowayan is amazed. She has just finished a conversation with one of the lecturers at Goldsmiths art college in London and is reeling. 'She told me that she didn't dare email me because I was such a celebrity!' she hoots. 'She thought I would be too busy. It blows my mind.'

The fact is that Al Dowayan is a celebrity. Maybe not yet in the echoing white halls of art in the West (although both the V&A and the British Museum have just bought her work) but in her home country, Saudi Arabia. The lecturer with whom she had been talking had just returned from Saudi Arabia, where, she reported, all the women in the university where she had been teaching were buzzing about the small, beady 39-year-old artist with a radiant smile.

There is no public gallery dedicated to modern art in Saudi and only a handful of commercial galleries, but there is a burgeoning grass-roots movement of artists who are gaining international acclaim, a large proportion of whom are women. Last year Raja and Shadia Alem, two sisters from Mecca, were chosen to represent Saudi Arabia at the Venice Biennale, the world's greatest showcase for art, thus catapulting Saudi artists on to the international stage.

Al Dowayan has seen her work more than quadruple in value in the past five years (a

recent piece sold for what she will only describe as 'a six-figure sum'). Now a new art centre is opening in Saudi's capital, Riyadh, whose founder, creative director and chief curator are all women and whose inaugural show, 'Soft Power', shows a selection of thought-provoking works entirely by female artists.

Alaan Artspace, as it is called, has been set up by Neema A Alsudairy, 29, an avid collector of contemporary Middle Eastern art. Her plan is for the centre to become a platform for debate and education about art, as well as a showcase for the best work by both male and female artists.

Throughout the Middle East women are making their presence known on the arts scene – most of the top galleries from Lebanon to the United Arab Emirates are run by them. Sheikha Mayassa Al Thani, the head of the Qatar Museums Authority, was described in *The Economist* last year as 'the art world's most powerful woman'.

Manal Al Dowayan's works – photographs and installations in the main – have titles such as *Blinded by Tradition* and *Look beyond the Veil*. One of her most celebrated pieces is *Suspended Together*, a flock of doves made out of the paper chits that Saudi women must get signed by their husbands or male guardians so that they can undergo certain hospital procedures or travel.

Her work on display in the 'Soft Power' show challenges the new conservative trend in Saudi Arabia that forbids men to use a woman's name in public.

Al Dowayan has held workshops in schools and villages to encourage women to shout out and paint their names on to wooden spheres that she hangs from the ceiling like enormous prayer beads. 'In this country women are told not to speak loudly,' she says. 'They are told to wear a veil over their faces and now they are even having their names erased.' The effect of Al Dowayan's 2011 installation, called *Esmi* (My name), has garnered her 2,000 followers on Twitter and many visitors to her website.

'At my first exhibition I wasn't even allowed to stay in the gallery with my art when the men came to look around,' recalls Al Dowayan. As things stand, many Saudi homes and public buildings have separate entrances for men and women and gender segregation is observed even on buses and in restaurants. Staff at Alaan say that there will be special 'ladies' days' at the centre when only women will be allowed to view the exhibitions, and educational events will be set up for mothers to attend with their children.

Sarah Abu Abdallah is a vivacious and attractive 22-year-old who lives in the east of

the country with her parents and siblings. For a year she studied art in the United Arab Emirates – Saudi Arabia's more liberal neighbour – making her return to the strictures of life in the kingdom all the harder.

Her film *Saudi Automobile* tells of her frustration at the ban on women driving. It features a car she found crashed by the side of a road, which she painted a glorious pink. 'This wishful gesture was the only way I could get myself a car,' she says. The metal carcass of the wrecked car makes a surprising object of veneration. But in the film the artist is seen painstakingly painting it in the sweltering sun until she collapses into the passenger seat, defeated.

For the 'Soft Power' exhibition Abu Abdallah will be installing a car in the gallery space, further emphasising the limits of her rights to vehicle ownership. 'I don't call for extreme freedom,' she says. 'But we grow up at a very young age here and the more you grow up the more you realise you will never have full custody of your life.'

Art, it seems, is Abu Abdallah's lifeline. She reads about it rapaciously, ordering massive tomes from abroad about abstract expressionism and performance art. 'Being a woman in Saudi may be really restricting,' she says, 'but being a female Saudi artist is very good at the moment. I want to join that wave.'

Noura Bouzo, 28, the daughter of a high-ranking doctor in Saudi, is an artist who also edits the art magazine *Oasis*, the only one in the country. She set it up with her sister and hopes to make it available on news-stands around the world later this year.

'There are a lot more artists coming up in the younger generation,' she says. 'In particular, there are some very good photographers.' There are a lot of good older ones, too. Maha Malluh, who is in her forties, took a series of photographs, 'Tradition and Modernity', that are poetic, ghostly testaments to the opposing forces within Saudi society. Her picture of hennaed hands projected on to a pair of Marigold gloves says it all.

Jowhara AlSaud, 34, scratches out the faces of women in a photographic negative to express, in stark black and white, the invisibility of women.

However, Bouzo concedes that the infrastructure for making art is still missing in Saudi Arabia. There are no bronze foundries in which to make sculptures, for instance – nor any art schools to speak of. Artists have to seek out inspiration using books, the internet and artistically talented friends and relatives. Many have to travel abroad to receive technical training in art schools in London or New York.

'Things are going in the right direction but still have a long way to go,' says Bouzo, who will be leading a workshop at Alaan as part of its education programme. Her own work is not in the show but consists of paintings of cinema popcorn buckets – the irony being that in Saudi there are no cinemas.

And then there is Sarah Mohanna Al-Abdali, a 22-year-old graffiti artist who gained notoriety by spraying signs around Jeddah declaiming the defacement of the holy city of Mecca with a towering mass of high-rise blocks.

Her 'Four Wives' series of drawings relates to the (largely arranged) marriage system in Saudi that allows men to have more than one wife. 'A lot of men pick their wives as if they were a flower – judging them just by how it looks and not worrying about their brains, which are as if buried underground,' says Al-Abdali. Another work by her features a woman dressed in an abaya standing at the bottom of a well.

All these women's works show how art gives women a voice denied them by the society in which they live. But while many Saudi women are excited by the idea that art might give expression to what they euphemistically call their 'social problems', they also hope it might reveal the dignity of their culture, too.

More than 60 per cent of university students from Saudi are women – a higher proportion than in Britain – and yet fewer than 22 per cent get jobs. Many of them study computer technology rather than the humanities and one suspects that the art these science-literate women produce in future may turn out to be the most technologically advanced yet.

Google reports that Saudi Arabia has the highest amount of image-sharing of any country in the world and it is one of the biggest markets in the world for BlackBerry phones. And although the country may be highly conservative in its social mores, in their attitude to science its people are often ultra-modernist, too, embracing technological advances with fervour.

'There is such a cultural void in Saudi at the moment,' says Manal Al Dowayan. 'All the people have to look at is singers or football players on YouTube. So if other elements come into play, like art – even art celebrities – it's a good thing. And it's booming.'

'Soft Power' runs from 26 September to 10 December (alaanart.com). Manal Al Dowayan and Jowhara Al Saud will exhibit at 'Light from the Middle East' at the V&A, London SW7 (vam.ac.uk), from 13 November