

# World-renowned Saudi artist returns to Hijazi roots for exhibition project



- Sarah Al-Abdali has grand designs for historic Jeddah property built by her great-grandfather

JEDDAH: An internationally celebrated Saudi artist has returned to her roots to stage an exhibition in a historic building close to her heart.

Sarah Al-Abdali, whose source of artistic inspiration is her identity as a Hijazi, has taken part in prestigious festivals around the world including Venice and London.

But now the 30-year-old is working on a project to turn “an architectural masterpiece,” built by her great-grandfather in the old Al-Balad district of Jeddah, into a museum and gallery. She currently has an exhibition of her work on display there.

Jeddah-born Al-Abdali was only 17 when she stumbled across the distinctive Bait Sharbatly property while out for a walk in Al-Balad. She told Arab News that her great-grandfather's house was different than all the others in the area.

"I was bewildered as to why I didn't know about such heritage," said Al-Abdali. "It's an architectural masterpiece. It inspired me to question everything and started my career as an artist. So, I thought it would be amazing to hold my exhibition in there.

"We are working to make the house into a museum with collections that will highlight the history of the property and how it was built. It wasn't a residential house and for some time it served as the Egyptian Embassy," she added.

Al-Abdali originates from Hijaz in the western region of Saudi Arabia and draws inspiration from the land, architecture and heritage of the area for her art work. Her exploration of the Arabic language, culture and philosophy and how to weave it into art and illustrations, has been the key to her unique take on life.

"I see my journey as an artist as starting from my identity as a Hijazi," she said. "I constantly question myself and explore the identities, history and heritage of Hijaz."

Al-Abdali has participated in international art festivals such as Rhizoma in the 55th Venice Biennale (2013) and #cometogether by Edge of Arabia East of London (2012), and she has also exhibited in high-profile venues including the Saatchi Gallery and the British Museum, both in London.

Many of her paintings are centered around women, depicting her imagined scenes of times gone by.

Al-Abdali said: "Looking at the history of Hijaz, I am fascinated by the strength of its women. They have strong characters, even in my own family, and I think that portrayal comes out naturally in my art.

"I focus on highlighting the social structure of Hijaz. Usually art related to Hijaz highlights either spirituality or architecture, but you never find out about the people who live there, their characters and their stories.

“More than anything I try to tell the stories of those people. I am fascinated by the tales I was told about Hijazi women throughout history.”

Al-Abdali also creates her own paints and pigments and works with natural materials. “If I am using ceramics, I use handmade ceramics. I like to merge traditional techniques with the modern way, and experiment with my materials while maintaining the traditional essence of the work.”

She added: “My work mostly focuses on the human touch and lost traditions. I have studied Islamic arts and feel a responsibility to continue that art in a very traditional, contemporary way.

“Most of my work is about the power of detail, working with basic materials and highlighting the craft of the artist which is a concept highly lacking in the contemporary art scene internationally and locally.”

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