

"Art and culture now is about exchange"

Read the original article on [The National](#)

Saudi Arabian artist Ahmed Mater has been given an award for Cultural Excellence from the Lebanese organisation Takreem, which honours achievements in the Arab world.

Mater, 39, creates photographs and installations chronicling his native Saudi Arabia. He is well known for his series of images on the development of the holy city of Makkah, a body of work that was shown internationally at the Brooklyn Museum in New York and the Smithsonian in Washington, DC.

Last month, however, Columbia University cancelled a planned talk with the artist, as it wished to distance itself from Saudi funding in the wake of the Jamal Khashoggi killing. Mater is also the head of the Misk Art Institute, part of Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman's Misk Foundation.

'We are on the side of freedom of expression'

The opprobrium around the exiled journalist's murder has put the artist, and the art scene in Saudi Arabia

more generally, in a difficult position. In a recent interview at the Al Burda festival in Abu Dhabi, Mater described the team at Misk as being caught by surprise.

"We are all normal people listening to the news," he told The National. "The Misk team is very young and we were all hit very hard. We are on the side of the future. We are on the side of freedom of expression."

While the foundation receives funding from the government, Mater stressed that it also belongs to Saudi's grass-roots art scene, which grew from the ground up to avoid the restrictions that were formerly in place. "In the beginning we were fighting against our society to accept us," he said. "And now we are fighting against the world to understand who we are."

Mater's Columbia University talk was due to take place last month, on October 22, as part of the Arab Art and Education Initiative, a 10-day programme celebrating Arab art and culture that took place among 12 cultural organisations in New York. The October initiative coincided with the news of the Khashoggi killing. As the events unfurled, the Metropolitan Museum of Art and the Brooklyn Museum each refused the funding they had received from Misk, and Columbia cancelled its talk with Mater. "This is Columbia University – it stands for freedom of expression," said Mater. "People could have asked any question they want. I am open to any question."

'Art and culture now is about exchange, dialogue'

Mater also spoke about Misk's upcoming plans, which include the building of a contemporary art institution in Riyadh and the Riyadh Biennial. "We are thinking about the idea of intimate space," he said about the new centre, whose architect will be announced in January.

"It will look like a majlis. Social spaces like the majlis are missing in a corporate-style world, but the majlis is where it all starts for Arabs. It's very democratic. It

is held daily, and everyone has their ideas and can come to present them."

Mater referred to the work of the Gazzaz brothers, who represented Saudi in the Venice architecture biennale for the first time this year in a Misk-supported event, as likewise investigating social, "in between spaces" in Saudi Arabia.

He also suggested that the Riyadh site, which would be the first contemporary art institution in the Saudi capital, might also take the form of a network of centres spread across the country where discussions could be held. "It is not the time for 'wow' architecture anymore," he added.

"This will connect to people in a nice way, in a grass-roots way. Art and culture now is about exchange, dialogue. That's the secret of all successful cultural institutions."

The Saudi Arabian government's embrace of the art world builds on institutions that existed before the social reforms. In February, Jeddah's art week, 21,39 Jeddah Arts, will return for a fifth year. A team from Palais de Tokyo were due to curate the event, which takes place with support from the Saudi Art Council, but the organisations parted ways in July.

Effat Abdullah Fadag, one of Saudi Arabia's first female artists, will now curate the 2019 event.

Mater, who is originally from the southern region of Abha, was also instrumental in setting up the event when it began in 2014.

STORIES	ARTWORKS	EXHIBITIONS	BIOGRAPHY	BIBLIOGRAPHY	ORGANISATION
A PRAYER FOR MECCA	TESLA COIL	SOLO	BIOGRAPHY	BOOKS	AL-MEFTAH
	ASHAB AL-LAL: FAULT MIRAGE	GROUP	CHRONOLOGY	ESSAYS	SHATTA
	DESERT OF PHARAN			PRESS	EDGE OF A
	100 FOUND OBJECTS			FILMS	PHARAN ST
	MECCA WINDOWS				
	MAGNETISM				
	GUNCAPS				
	THE EMPTY LAND				
	CCTV				
	EVOLUTION OF MAN				
	ANTENNA				
	YELLOW COW				
	X-RAY ILLUMINATIONS				
	X-RAY PAINTINGS				
	SURVEILLANCE ILLUMINATIONS				

SIGN UP FOR NEWSLETTER

Enter your email address

Sign Up

© 2022 Copyright | Ahmed Mater | All Rights Reserved | Privacy Policy |
Terms & Conditions | Site by One Darnley Road