

Middle Eastern artists look to their letterboxes for lockdown inspiration

Beirut-born painter and curator sends project in the post to artists in quarantine



Al Kadiri's publishing house, Dongola Books, has posted out from the Middle East more than 50 books to creative types currently in lockdown in their homes and studios so that they can use them to reflect what is happening now or what the shared future might look like. Al Kadiri's Instagram



Jack Dutton
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For many, social isolation amid the coronavirus pandemic has brought about feelings of anxiety and restlessness.

It is precisely these reactions that Abed Al Kadiri, an artist and curator in Beirut, is hoping to channel into creativity, with the launch of a new project for Middle Eastern artists.

In recognition that in these trying and unprecedented times, many artists will have limited materials to work with and will be keen to connect with their peers, he is approaching them through their letterboxes.

Al Kadiri's publishing house, Dongola Books, has posted more than 50 books to creative types currently working in isolation in their homes and studios, so that they can use them to reflect what is happening now or what the shared future might look like. Each one sent out

as part of his Cities Under Quarantine: The Mailbox Project will have the name of the person it is sent to on the front cover, and will be turned into an entire work of art, or “artist’s book”, by the recipient.

Al Kadiri is mainly known for his large-scale paintings. His previous work covers subjects ranging from the migrant crisis in the Mediterranean to Beirut’s abandoned houses.

“Until recently, I had never incorporated my own artist book into my own practice,” he said on a Zoom call hosted by the Arab British Centre on Friday.

Before the coronavirus outbreak, Al Kadiri travelled to Beijing and picked up a book that he made into his own artist’s book. He describes making it as “a very personal experience” and thought it would be a good opportunity for other artists in quarantine to express themselves.

He began the project last month when social distancing measures were first being implemented by governments worldwide. “I’ve always liked the idea of an ‘artist’s book’, and always felt there was a necessity to practice the artist book myself,” he said. “Each book is unique and with it you can incorporate many different disciplines, whether that’s painting, collage, photography.



Abed Al Kadiri. Courtesy: Dongola

“You carry it in your hand and you interact with it in a more personal and intimate way,” he added.

The artists involved in the project are “90 per cent Arab”, he said, but he went on to describe how he had experienced trouble in having the books sent to artists in Iran.

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exhibition and publishing a limited-edition artists' book containing all the finished works.

“There are no obligations. For now, it’s just a project that I hope can empower our relationship as human beings. The current circumstances have questioned the validity of artist powers, but this is a different approach to our own production. I hope it opens a new door to a new practice,” he said.

“Around half of the artists on this project have practised with artist books before so it is an invitation for this medium to have more presence in the arts scene.”

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Middle Eastern artists based in Bahrain, Britain, France, Germany, Lebanon, Palestine, Saudi Arabia and the UAE have all received artist books for them to work on.

Hoda Tawakol, an artist based in Hamburg, the Lebanese artist Fatima El Hajj in Paris, and Jordan-based architect and visual artist Dina Haddadin are involved in the project. London-based Dia Azzawi, Saudi Arabia’s Ahmed Mater, Gaza-born Taysir Batniji, and Syrian artist Ziad Dalloul have also received their artist's books. Four artists from the Emirates - Mohammed Kazem, Hazem Harb, Walid Al Wawi and Christiana De Marchi - are also involved.

The design of each book will be tailored to each artist, all of whom Al Kadiri has previously worked with and considers friends.

Although the "spontaneous" project was intended to initially to be non-profit, if all goes well, Al Kadiri has bigger ambitions about eventually turning it into a touring

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