

A Conversation with Ahmed Mater

Interview with James Scarborough

Arab art is hitting the global art world with the force of a *haboob*, a summer sandstorm. A lot of the credit goes to Edge of Arabia. The initiative is the brainchild of two artists, Stephen Stapleton (British/Norwegian) and Ahmed Mater, (Saudi Arabian). Both shared a common desire “to create a real artistic movement inside Saudi Arabia that also connected with the outside world.” Stephen and Ahmed were later supported by fellow Saudi artist Abdulnasser Gharem.

This group of artists decided to challenge the collusion at that time, both in the Gulf and the West, between artists, market forces, elite groups, and a government intent on sustaining the status quo. They wanted to test a new system which would have more independence and, ultimately, more “soft power.”

Stephen and Ahmed met at the Al Meftaha Arts

Village in 2003 in Abha, the capital of Asir province in Saudi Arabia. In 2004, they conceived of Edge of Arabia as a border-crossing collaboration and artistic movement. They developed the collective over five years. In 2008, supported by the Jameel Family amongst others, they co-curated the first ever international exhibition of contemporary art from Saudi Arabia. The exhibition was staged at the Brunei Gallery in London.

Their efforts have paid off. In 2009, Eight Saudi artists exhibited at the 53rd Venice Biennale. The collective followed that up with a world tour: "Grey Borders/Grey Frontiers," in Berlin and "TRANSITION," in Istanbul, both in 2010. In 2011 they staged "Terminal" to coincide with Art Dubai. Later that year, they staged "The Future of a Promise," the first pan-Arab exhibition as part of the 54th Venice Biennale; and in 2012, they presented a provocative public exhibition of Saudi contemporary art in Jeddah called "We Need to Talk". Since then they have returned to East London for #COMETOGETHER (2012) and last year presented a new generation of Saudi artists in Venice with RHIZOMA.

Based between Battersea, London and Jeddah, Saudi Arabia, Edge of Arabia maintains creative independence without government funding. With its exhibitions, educational programs, and publications, it seeks to foster new audiences and cultivate global understanding of Middle Eastern art and culture. It also serves to inspire young artists to develop independent and authentic practices and to collaborate across borders.

Edge of Arabia has embarked on a multi-year tour of the United States in partnership with Art Jameel. The tour brings Middle Eastern artists to the USA through events and exhibitions — introducing them to American audiences and fostering cross-cultural dialogue. Along with bringing artists to FotoFest in Houston (March 2014), Edge of Arabia has also partnered with the ISCP in Brooklyn to support a three-month artist residency with the Foundland Collective and Taysir Batniji – and with the Rothko Chapel for a multi-disciplinary event in September.

Mater's work is currently part of the "Here and Elsewhere" exhibition at the New Museum in Manhattan.

This conversation with co-founder Ahmed Mater will discuss his thoughts on the origins of Edge of Arabia, the recent popularity of Arab art, the challenges that Saudi artists face, and the Saudi art scene.

JS: For starts, where does the phrase Edge of Arabia come from, especially the Edge bit?

AM: In 2003, we had a common concern against the backdrop in that moment in history, that artists were too much part of the system from advertising, artists too much in system of Government. We were also against the war at this time in Iraq. Our concern at this time was to give artists a voice in different issues: in the socio-political and economic context behind this time of conflict and transformation. We aspired to influence our societies. To have a part in transforming it.

We were the first generation in this region to be connected through technology. We were the first Internet generation. We wanted to position ourselves as protagonists in this moment in history. We felt so much on the periphery of the main conversation at that time. For example, Stephen, myself, and a group of friends were discussing a recent edition of National Geographic that had a feature on the Kingdom. On its cover was a sword-wielding Saudi prince, while inside were photos of veiled women in malls, camel markets and the urban youth in fast cars. The article was called "Kingdom on Edge." I asked Stephen what the word "edge" meant in this context. We began to talk about ways of turning it around and using it in a positive rather than a pejorative sense. Being in Abha, we were on the edge of the country. Contemporary art was at the periphery, or edge, of what you would expect to read about from Saudi Arabia, and so Edge of Arabia seemed to encapsulate what we wanted to do by raising the profile of Saudi contemporary art. Stephen and I committed there and then to build a project under that title.

JS: You met Stephen shortly after 9/11. How did events of that day influence your decision to create Edge of Arabia?

AM: We were the same age and met in 2003; at that time the real formal reaction and impact to 9/11 was only just becoming evident. We were in some ways children of that event and all the reactions that happened afterwards. We were interested in the idea that voices from the periphery at that time might become voices at the center. And that centers of energy and history were shifting and being replaced by places that used to be on the edge.

Along with the horrific loss of life in that moment and in the wars that followed, we know what the real financial cost of 9/11 was. For example, [a recent New York Times article](#) estimates “that Al Qaeda spent roughly half a million dollars to destroy the World Trade Center and cripple the Pentagon. What has been the cost to the United States? In a survey of estimates by The New York Times, the answer is \$3.3 trillion, or about \$7 million for every dollar Al Qaeda spent planning and executing the attacks.”

JS: Does Edge of Arabia have a primary audience?

AM: Because we were grassroots and cared a lot about the cultural narrative of our time, we have always been part of the audience. We presented things that we would be interested in ourselves. We were interested in the idea of accessibility and “common”. We were learning and educating ourselves through the process of developing the project. We were part of the primary audience and we did not necessarily expect other people to be interested.

We have built an interactive audience in order to create dialogue: there were those we connected with directly: who came to our exhibitions, or passed through our education programmes. We have had over 300,000 people through these activities.

We also have a virtual audience, which has become much more important with the explosion of social media over the past few years. This audience is much

bigger and more diverse and includes ordinary people who have watched reports on the project and its artists through news articles or online. These might include a farmer in Kansas, a musician in Tokyo and a teacher in Yemen. We believe in the potential of our project as a storytelling democracy. We estimate to have reached a much larger audience through this virtual storytelling. This is why we try and push the story and virtual archive as much as we do physical events.

JS: Creating a formal infrastructure for Edge of Arabia, you emphasized art education for all grade levels. We're really talking two things here. There's Edge of Arabia's educational efforts for the rest of the world. There's also your educational efforts in Saudi Arabia. What are the similarities, differences, and challenges of both? How do you think your efforts will encourage young Saudi artists working at home and abroad?

AM: We wanted our grassroots story to give hope for those around us and, especially, to inspire the new generation to start moving. Grassroots has to start with education. Internally and externally, education and information about Saudi art is a "blind spot." When we started Edge of Arabia, there was little information or opportunity for outside audiences to learn about what was happening in Saudi. There was also no foundation of archive or books on which to form any continuous narrative of our artistic development. Religious education is very, very strong in Saudi Arabia, both in the home and in the school and the mosque. The imam was the most important teacher in Saudi. The most important voice at that time was the religious teacher (and not the celebrity like in the west). There was a need to develop the cultural side of teaching.

JS: How do you fund your shows? I see you get support from the Abdul Latif Jameel Community Initiatives in Jidda and from Arraaj Capital in Dubai. Is there progress being made for government support?

AM: From 2003-2008 we funded the project ourselves

and developed the project hand to mouth. Our main supporter since 2008 has been Fady Jameel of [Art Jameel](#). We have also had support from other sponsors but it has always been individuals behind these organisations that believed in us. The artists also supported the project through sale of work to raise funds for exhibitions, for example, when we first went to Venice in 2009 the artists raised half the funds for that show.

JS: Arab art is suddenly getting a lot of attention. Why do you think that is? What had to change? Is it timing? For instance, could you have had the same success with *Edge of Arabia* had you started it ten years earlier?

AM: Usually art follows social/political tension. This leads to better understanding. International attention after 9/11 led to a big spotlight for the Arab world. 100 years after the colonial carve-up of the Middle East and imposed control from outside, there was a need for change. The time was right at the beginning of the 21st century to start something different and significant. The political changes in the region demanded that artists wake up. Many factors changed: the Internet, mobility, links to the outside ... but most important the time was right for a break from the past in an attempt to release the full potential of artists as change makers in this society and between this society and the rest of the world. I am working at the center of the Islamic world, in Makkah, every day. The changes in this city will affect every Muslim community across the world. So what the artists are doing is both significant in terms of history but also art history

JS: You once said "Saudi artists want to talk. I think the world should listen." If they could speak with one collective voice, what would they say?

AM: They would say we are frustrated of being presented without our voice. The Saudi artists are eager to get involved in a conversation with the world. They would say: "we need to talk". Having said that, we need to work together towards an environment in which we can develop a collective

memory ... not a collective voice. It is artist's job to not have a collective voice but to offer multiple perspectives. Without conflict. To build our authentic voice and then to test these ideas against society.

JS: How would you characterize Saudi art? Does there seem to be a prevalent medium, subject matter, themes? What about the balance between esthetics, politics, religion, and history? I read somewhere that Saudi art tends to be hybrid, the better to reflect a fluid society. Do you agree?

AM: Generally, it's the same as any art scene: there are shared concerns and shared aesthetics that come from our local context and our moment in the global history. There is a problem in defining the "Saudi" art scene within a western art history frame. Our scene is emerging, it's nascent, and history will tell if it is important. It is not for us. What people see outside is very different what is happening inside.

JS: Co-founder Abdunasser Gharem says "I come from a background of bureaucracy, not democracy." Artistically, how do Saudi artists respond to bureaucracy?

AM: They negotiate it with creativity and patience and more negotiation. They negotiate it creatively, from the artist's point of view. Artists have a very important role in negotiating bureaucracy because they can approach situations with a different frame of mind. Democracy is not our aspiration. It is not our role. We are looking for something else. It is not a contract. It is very shallow to think about Saudi becoming democratic ... even across the Middle East. This is an American project. And it has not negotiated with the societies where it is trying to implement this. Artists can play an important role here in helping to imagine new systems. It's like TV, a game of democracy. Be involved in the development. Artists should be involved in the opportunity to shape change. Not just to be critical of it.

JS: You come from a turbulent region. How do you think Saudi art reflects this change? Do you think art has a role to play in Saudi society?

AM: Art is performing a very important role in Saudi. It is as a mirror to ourselves, helping us imagine things from different angles and perspectives, so we might make better choices as a society

JS: How do you balance artistic expressive freedom and living in a strict, religious-oriented society? Saudi Arabia is ruled under Sharia law by the al-Saud royal family. There are powerful, influential and conservative clerics, there no legislature and no political parties. King Abdullah encourages dialogue among his subjects. Yet theatre and cinema are banned and artists can't openly criticize the government. The Ministry of Culture and Information has to approve work that's displayed. How do artists get around that? Do you think it makes them innovative? I'm thinking that, in this respect, Saudi artists employ the same strategies of humor and irony as their Russian Cold War counterparts.

AM: We are a product of our complex society and culture. We cannot resist that. We take the position of cultural activists, negotiating all the complexities of our situation, and using the tools we have, which include humor and irony and visual impact. We are also part of a wider network of activists within our own society (both within the system and outside of it) and internationally. It is more interesting to be an artist surrounded by challenges like ours than to be an artist surrounded by too much choice and unrestricted opportunity.

JS: In a profound and reverberating statement, Stephen Stapleton said, "In Britain, we have the power to say anything, do anything, so as an art-consuming public we've become blasé. In Saudi Arabia, art still has tremendous power." What is the power of Saudi art?

AM: The power to create new perspectives and broaden possibilities. This is a very urgent matter in our society. The Arabian Peninsula is a very important historical place. For example, the recent Roads to Arabia exhibition and the Hajj exhibition both showed the centrality of this place in the development of global trade, ideas and religions. Now the

contemporary artists are re-imagining this place. For example, my Desert of Pharan project is looking at the unofficial histories behind the transformation of Makkah (the most visited and most exclusive place on earth). So our power, as Saudi artists, is directly related to our access to this place in this moment in history.**JS:** Let's talk about the challenges that Saudi artists face at home. How do Saudi women artists fare at home?

AM: The women still have many challenges with their freedom in Saudi Arabia. My wife is an artist and I can see how it is more difficult for her than for me; to move around, to access places, to get support. Having said that, there are many women artists in Saudi and they are brave and deserve our support. They are challenging many things.

JS: What about limited exposure to Western art via shows or publications?

AM: Artists are traveling and studying abroad more than ever. The younger generation is also researching a lot on the Internet. But there is very little direct exposure to Western art within Saudi because of the lack of exhibitions, specialist libraries, art critics and curators.

JS: Publically or in private, are there dialogues about art's role?

AM: Yes. In independent spaces: like Ibn Aseer, U-Turn, Tesami, Telfaz 11. And especially on the Internet, Twitter, and Facebook.

JS: What is art education like in Saudi Arabia?

AM: There are art in schools in Saudi but the curriculum is not relevant to the society, especially to the new globalised generation. There are no art schools at a University level but things are changing within some private universities who are developing art courses within faculties of design and architecture. This is a good way to develop in our context. The main challenge will be to develop a relevant curriculum that draws both on local cultural

and civic identity and positions the Middle Eastern art history within the international canon.

JS: Can Saudi artists at home make a living selling their work?

AM: Very few ...

JS: What are the biggest challenges for Saudi artists and art students abroad? Stereotyping? Xenophobia?

AM: In the 70's, during Saudi's economic boom, artists began to study abroad, mainly in Europe, and this led to a tension within the Saudi art scene between local identity and modernism. This was clear in the literature and cinema and TV programmes of that time. After 1979, Saudi became more closed because of a religious awakening which swept the country. During this time Saudi artists lost their connection with the outside world. After 9/11 and with the introduction of the Internet, a new generation of artists began to connect with the outside world again, both physically (through independent platforms like Edge of Arabia) and virtually. This is the foundation of the new movement. We are now negotiating our position in the international cultural conversation, and with that comes great opportunities and tensions as you mention.

JS: At present, how would you characterize the Saudi art scene?

AM: Energetic. Hopeful but still disconnected. There is much work to do but there are many good people committed to developing the scene.

JS: Do you have a critical tradition, as we have in the West?

AM: Of course, but it's more focused on literature and cultural practices specific to our society. Cultural activism has a long tradition in Saudi Arabia.

JS: Are there any notable collectors?

AM: Yes, both individuals in the Middle East, Europe

and America and institutions like The British Museum, LACMA, Centre Pompidou, The Smithsonian Institute, et cetera.

JS: What gap do you think the King Abdulaziz Center for World Culture, a Saudi Aramco initiative, will fill?

AM: It is a new thing and the society is waiting to see what will happen. We are full of nervous optimism about the potential of these new institutions to interact with the real movement that can be part of the change needed in this society.

At the same time we are aware and respectful of the constellation of entities and individuals that create art, that experience it, and that build and maintain the arts infrastructure in this country. This includes the individuals and public and private sector institutions that support the arts, for and non-profit organizations that provide support and venues for artists, the artists themselves who interpret the world around them and create works of art, and the general public, which participates in and supports the arts movement.

JS: There's a famous quote by Winston Churchill that concludes, in a wholly different context, "we are at the end of the beginning." Along those lines, Stephen Stapleton has said "I think the exhibition in Jeddah is the end of a chapter, and it feels as if the original vision has been fulfilled. We set out to create a bridge between Saudi artists and the art world." If that's indeed the case, what now?

AM: Now is the beginning of a new chapter. But the traveler cannot STOP, so the journey continues to be the destination. It is important to establish and archive the story so far (from 2003 to now) and we want to build on it into the future in many ways. The journey that we started is now influencing others. It is not just a physical journey to different parts of the world; it is also a spiritual journey towards artistic and cultural awakening ... towards a new way of cultural sharing.

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