

“PEOPLE WEREN’T READY FOR US”

DEVELOPING AN ARTS SCENE IN ONE OF THE MOST CONSERVATIVE COUNTRIES ON EARTH WAS NEVER GOING TO BE EASY. BUT OVER THE PAST FEW YEARS, A SMALL BAND OF ARTISTS HAVE SCoured SAUDI ARABIA FOR TALENT... AND THEN TAKEN IT OUT TO THE WORLD.

BY DAVID CALVERLEY-MORRIS

ON FIRST IMPRESSIONS the city of Abha in Saudi Arabia seems an unlikely place for a revolution. A huge national flag rises into view as you drive down the steep valleys of the surrounding mountain plateau of Asir province. In the city centre a few traditional stone, slate and mud-brick houses have been preserved in a small heritage site — a rare sight in a country undergoing rapid urban sprawl. But over this past decade, the city has somehow become a hub for daring contemporary artists who have pushed the boundaries of the kingdom’s ultra-conservative culture. The most successful have found critical and commercial success as far afield as London, Venice and Miami.

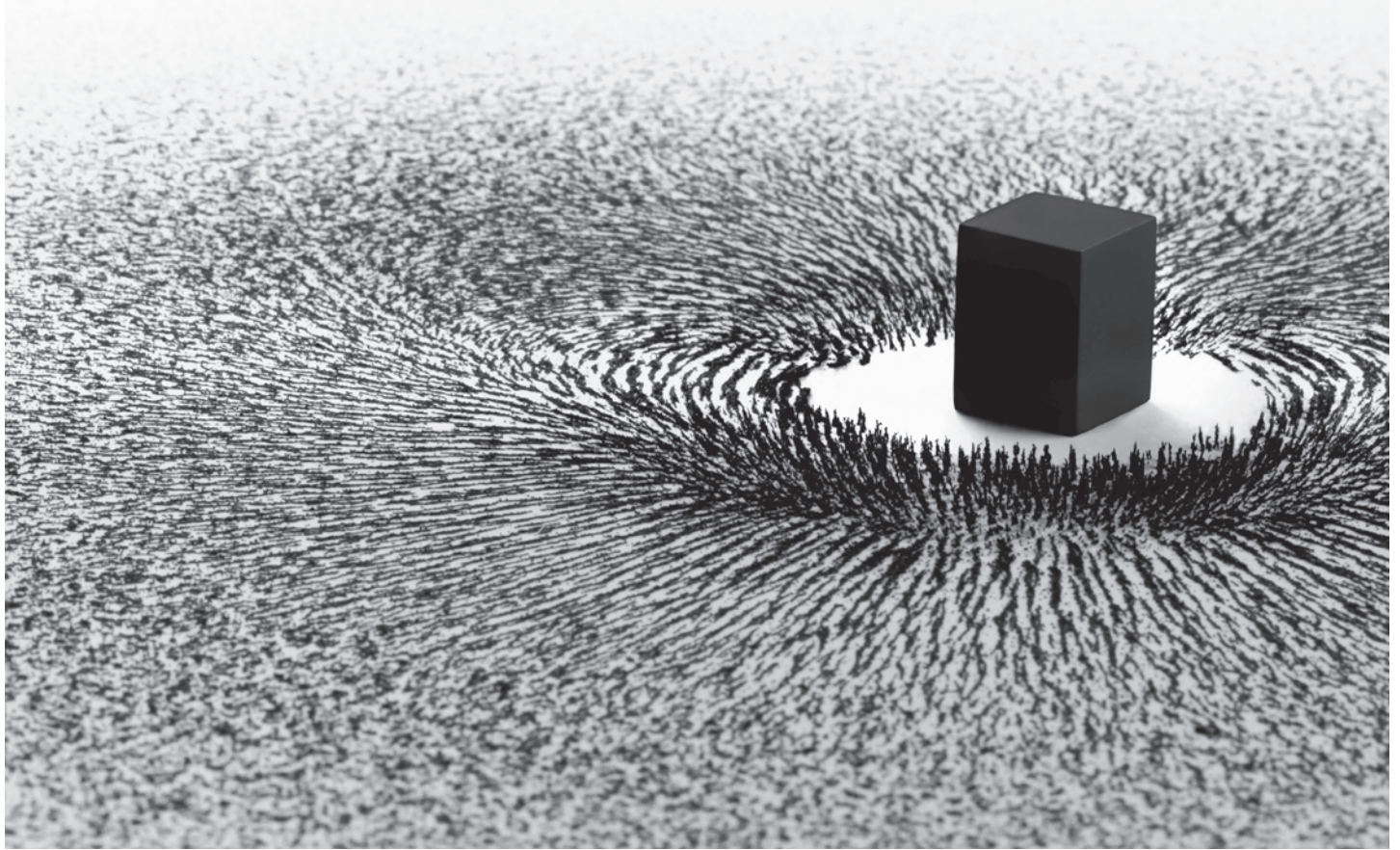
Despite the international acclaim, this new generation still struggles to win acceptance at home. In Saudi Arabia, art has traditionally meant ornate calligraphy, and painting has rarely strayed from safe subjects such as horses and desert scenes. Any aspiring artists without connections to the social elite have lacked the opportunity to develop or show their work to the public. Art is not taught in public schools or at university, and there are few galleries.



Above left: Ahmed Mater, Yellow Cow project, which is based on the Holy Qu’ran story of the Golden Calf. Main picture: Abdalnasser Gharem, “The Capitol Dome” (2012). Mixing Islamic motifs with the neo-classical architecture of the Capitol building, this symbolises the debate in both East and West about how effectively democratic values can be spliced into Arab culture.



Main image: Ahmed Mater, "Magnetism". Far right (top): Abdunnasser Gharem, "The Stamp (Amen)" (2010). Far right (below): Ahmed Mater's "Illumination I & II" (2010).



Ahmed Mater doesn't seem to have been held back by these restrictions. The thirty-three-year-old has shown works several times at the British Museum and at the Venice Biennale, the world's most prestigious art event. Amid stacks of film and camera equipment at his home studio in Abha, prints and photographs are piled up waiting to be sent abroad for exhibitions in London, Paris and India.

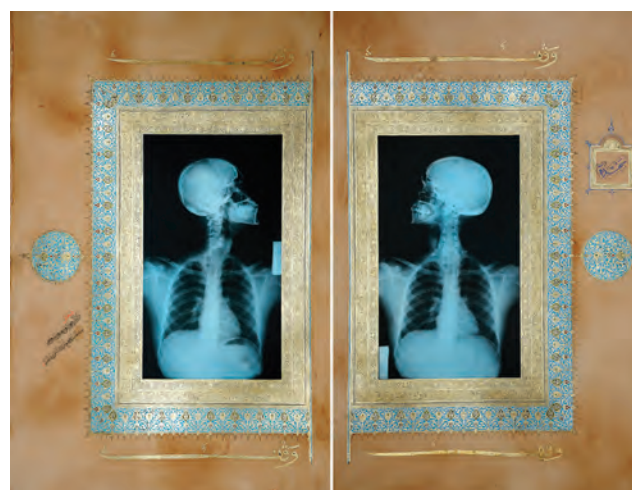
Mater has gained acclaim for blending conceptual art with traditional Islamic aesthetics to create work that offers a subtle social critique. Perched atop a bookshelf in his villa is a small print of his most famous work, "Magnetism". The photograph of a black magnet surrounded by iron filings that evokes pilgrims around the Ka'ba was one of the top attractions in the British Museum's surprise hit exhibition *Hajj: Journey to the Heart of Islam*, which drew record numbers of Muslim visitors in 2012. On the coffee table sits a milk carton from his 2007 project "Yellow Cow", based on the story of the idolatrous worship of the Golden Calf. Mater dyed a cow with saffron then

created a line of dairy products from its milk, which was sold in Abha's market. On one level the project explored the links between consumerism and the commercialisation of religion, but was also a riposte to the extremist stereotype of Islam. "The people didn't make the connection with the Holy Qur'an so I called them ideology-free products," he says.

His current project, entitled "Desert of Pharan", reflects apprehension over the multi-billion-dollar redevelopment of Mecca. Works from the series on show at this year's Sharjah Biennial of contemporary art included a ceiling-high photograph of Mecca at night called "Artificial Light". This work highlighted how the holy site has become almost obscured by cranes, scaffolding and the complex of luxury hotels, malls and apartments under construction. The video installation "\$3,000/Night Room" recreates the interior and view from a suite in the Abraj Al-Bait, also known as the Mecca Royal Hotel Clock Tower, the world's second tallest building. The title refers to the cost of rooms with a view of the Ka'ba.



Ahmed Mater



With no access to formal art education, Mater, like most of his peers, found a roundabout way to develop his practice. By studying medicine he was able to draw the human body under the guise of anatomy research. This led to his first serious body of work called “Illuminations”, a series of paintings that combine X-rays of skeletons with Islamic illuminations — the decorative illustrations in Qur’anic manuscripts. “It started from me drawing on my medical notes. I wanted to use materials related to working as a doctor in hospital and how we used to express ourselves as a culture,” he says. The title of the series refers both to the Islamic patterns and the way X-rays are illuminated when viewed on a light box in hospital. The combination of these images conveys both the physical interior of the body and humanity’s spiritual inner life.

Like most of the Saudi artists before him, Mater was initially able to pursue his art thanks to the patronage of the social elite. In the 1990s he became one of a lucky few to be given studio space in Abha’s Al-Meftaha Arts Village, established under the patronage of the then governor of Asir, Prince Khaled al-Faisal. (The prince, now the governor of Mecca province, is a keen amateur artist and friend of the UK’s Prince Charles, who once painted watercolours at the village.) Here, Mater and his peers would exchange the few art books they owned and discuss the artists — such as Andy Warhol, Jasper Johns, Marcel Duchamp and Joseph Beuys — whose work they spent hours downloading via painfully slow dial-up Internet

connections. It was a far cry from the kitsch landscapes and animal paintings considered acceptable art in the kingdom.

But the turning point in Mater’s career happened a few years later when a British artist visited al-Meftaha.

STEPHEN STAPLETON JOURNEYED TO ABHA in 2003 at the end of a trip around the Gulf. Today he says of the experience: “I saw there was contemporary art being made in Saudi Arabia that almost no one outside the kingdom was aware of. These artists were developing this visual language in a vacuum, with no access to libraries, museums or galleries and no training.”

The meeting led to the formation of Edge of Arabia, co-founded by Stapleton, Mater and another al-Meftaha artist, Abdunasser Gharem. “The name was inspired by a feature on Saudi in *National Geographic* called ‘Kingdom on the Edge,’” explains Stapleton “The cover showed a picture of a sword-wielding Saudi prince and inside were the usual photos of veiled women, camels and youths in fast cars. Ahmed complained about these stereotypical images, but we were interested in the journalist’s use of the word ‘edge’ and decided to turn it around to give it a more positive sense.”

The third partner, forty-year-old Abdunasser Gharem, is a lieutenant colonel in the Saudi army. He recalls how they were ©

also fired up by the U.S.-led invasion of Iraq. “We were so upset with what was going on. All of us were against the war. That motivated us to create something for Saudi and other Arab artists; to tell our opinion through art. The traditional art was a lot of butterflies and mountains, but when you get back to reality there is so much going on around you — the first Gulf war, the second Iraq war, the Afghan war. So how come you’re still drawing butterflies?”

Like Mater, Gharem’s art draws on his “day job”. His best-known work is a series of paintings and sculptures that incorporate the rubber stamps similar to those used by the Saudi military bureaucracy. They include the 2010 sculpture, “The Stamp (Amen)”, which consists of two giant wood and rubber replicas of a bureaucratic stamp inscribed with the words “Have a Bit of Commitment” and “Amen”, subverting the officialdom of censorship into a declaration of his own authority and authorship.

Over a five year period, Stapleton, Mater and Gharem travelled around the country to recruit hidden artistic talent, usually amateurs working in isolation. “Saudi suffers from having a lack of cultural achievement,” says Stapleton. “The art scene has always created mythologies, and the stories of Ahmed Mater and Abdunasser — the doctor and the soldier — are powerful. They’re part of the change in society and they’re illustrating that change. They are heroes and role models; they create followers.”

This led to a first show in London in 2008, and since then Edge of Arabia has also exhibited in Berlin, Venice, Riyadh, Istanbul, Dubai, Jeddah and Doha, and will tour the U.S. next year. The group has achieved both critical and commercial success, with six pieces by its artists selling for a total of Dhs3,859,272 (\$1,051,000) at Christie’s in Dubai in April 2011.

The top sale of the auction was Gharem’s sculpture “Message/Messenger”, which transforms the Dome of the Rock, on the Temple Mount in Jerusalem, into a bird trap. It fetched Dhs3,093,660 (\$842,000) — more than ten times its pre-sale estimate and a record for an artist from the Gulf states. The piece consists of a replica of the Golden Dome propped up over a stuffed dove of peace by the Islamic crescent of the shrine’s spire. A rope tied around the spire implies the threat of the dome crashing down to capture the divine bird. Gharem presented a follow-up sculpture based on the dome of the Capitol Building in Washington at Edge of Arabia’s #ComeTogether show in London’s East End last autumn. Next year the group will have its first American tour, which is planned to open in New York. It reflects how far the Saudi art scene has progressed since the backlash it suffered after 9/11.

AT THE PALACE IN JEDDAH, Princess Jawaher bint Majed bin Abdulaziz, recalls how her efforts to promote the country’s art abroad were shunned following the terrorist attacks on New York. “We had at that time a very big exhibition arranged for one of our very good artists in Paris,” she recalls. “I hired a very big PR company, and we had beautiful booklets. And then 9/11 came and this PR company sent us a fax one week before the show saying they no longer want to support Saudis and their art. Luckily I had a very good lawyer. I sued them for every penny. We were promoting art and culture — nothing to do with politics or terrorism. So I decided to stop doing big exhibitions in Europe. That was not the time for it. People were not ready for us.”

The princess, a granddaughter of King Abdulaziz, the



Main picture: Manal Al-Dowayan, “Suspended Together” (2011). Far right (top): Abdunasser Gharem, “Men at Work” (2010). Far right (below): Sarah Abu Abdallah, “Saudi Automobile” (2011) Below right: Mohammed Hafiz of the Athr Gallery

“A MAIN COMPONENT OF FINE ART EDUCATION IS LIFE DRAWING... PORTRAITS, AND SCULPTURE ARE A MAJOR CHALLENGE IN SAUDI.”

kingdom’s first monarch, had established the Al-Mansouria Foundation for culture and creativity in 1998. She subsequently became the first Saudi woman to be granted the title of Patron of the Arts, and focused her efforts on encouraging contemporary art appreciation back home. “It was very difficult because the people who liked art, who had good art, wouldn’t at that time look at Saudi art. And the older people, even my generation, wouldn’t look at contemporary art.”

But recent international recognition has spurred an incipient gallery scene in Jeddah and the more conservative Riyadh. This past February, the Dubai-based Ayyam gallery opened a new space in Jeddah, while in September the Alaan Artspace opened in the capital with a show for three female Saudi artists curated by Sara Raza, formerly of London’s Tate Modern museum. The artists included twenty-three-year-old Sarah Abu Abdallah, whose film *Saudi Automobile* — shown at the Sharjah Biennial — portrays her frustration at the Saudi ban on women driving through the act of painting a crashed car pink. And there was Manal Al Dowayan, thirty-nine, whose most renowned work “Suspended Together”, consists of a flock of doves made from the paper chits that Saudi women must get signed by their husbands or male guardians before they can undergo certain hospital procedures or travel.

Perhaps the most significant art space in the kingdom at present is the Athr gallery in Jeddah, which has regularly represented the Saudi art scene at Art Dubai. Opened in 2009 by



Mohammed Hafiz and Hamza Serafi in a somewhat odd location at the top of a shopping mall, Athr has nurtured a roster of young artists who have exhibited in fairs and biennials in Europe and Asia.

Hafiz says the kingdom's art scene has grown up rapidly in recent years. "If you'd opened a gallery fifteen years ago, people would be asking whether the art goes with the colour of their couch or the curtains. But now we have a different, more intellectual, audience who are not just thinking 'I don't think this will go with my rug'."

"The first show, we maybe had fifty guests who we personally rang up to invite. At the last exhibition we had to turn off the lights to make people leave. Because of the Internet young people are very aware of the role of art to advance self-knowledge and as a tool for debate and how we can improve as a society. And Saudi artists are becoming stars. Some have thousands of followers on Facebook."

Success is not without its drawbacks. Ahmed Mater is worried about the impact of the growing celebrity of artists like himself and the high prices their work is fetching. He is wary of younger artists trying to pander to the tastes of the auction houses Christie's and Sotheby's rather than developing their own vision. "It's a dream for them to be rich. They think the most prestigious thing they can do is be sold at auction. This is dangerous. In London people are critical of the art market but in the Middle East and especially in the Gulf they're not. There is no art school, no art education and no critical art media."

Cultural sensitivity is another issue. Staff and students at Dar Al-Hekma college in Jeddah, a women-only university, say the growing fame of contemporary Saudi artists has spurred interest in graphic design, fashion and architecture, with nearly half of the 1,200 students now studying those courses. But the advisor to the college president, Pakistan-born Dr Saleha Abedin (whose daughter Huma was deputy chief of staff to former



U.S. secretary of state Hillary Clinton), considers it is unlikely that fine art will be taught in the kingdom in the foreseeable future due to sensitivities over representing the human body.

"One of the main components of traditional fine art education is life drawing," she says. "Portraits, illustration and sculpture will all be a major challenge. So I don't think you will have the typical fine art programme in Saudi Arabia. You have to be culturally sensitive."

The founders of Edge of Arabia are divided as how to tackle the lack of art education and criticism in the kingdom. In March, Edge of Arabia opened its first gallery, not in Saudi Arabia but in London's Battersea district, across the road from Vivienne Westwood's design studio and around the corner from the Royal College of Art's fine art department. Stephen Stapleton acknowledges that the move was partly driven by Britain's status as the world's third-most important art market (after the U.S. and China). But he intends to give Saudi artists the opportunity to come over to the new gallery and use it as a base to educate themselves and explore the international art world.

"One of the main reasons to open the space in London was the massive lack of critical discourse in Saudi Arabia," he says. "We do a lot of mentoring for artists. We'd like the gallery to be a critical hub and to collaborate with the Royal College. It's not healthy to build a wall around the Saudi art scene. By presenting artists in the West we're creating role models." Abdunnasser Gharem agrees: "I think it's a great platform for the young generation in Saudi Arabia, for the Arab world, for the Muslim world."

Ahmed Mater has a different opinion, however, believing the group should focus on encouraging change within the kingdom. He and some other Abha-based artists are building an art space called Ibn Aseer ("son of Asir") in the city to support emerging artists. "It's a platform for artists outside of the commercial scene. It's also a reaction to Edge of Arabia becoming more of a London space. We're against branding. It's not a big space — it's not like the [Tate Modern's] Turbine Hall, it's more like the bathroom. But all we need is a space to have intellectual talks, to have freedom of expression."

Hamza Serafi, a wealthy art patron who studied at the Riyadh Institute of Art, believes while there is some disagreement over how to develop the Saudi art scene, there is consensus that it needs to mature intellectually as well as commercially. He says: "There is a pressure on this part of the world to copy other cultures with a more developed art scene. We should learn from them, but we should also come up with something that is more inspired by, and compatible with, our own ideologies. I see it as a positive challenge."

Such disagreements are perhaps inevitable. Hamza Serafi is, nevertheless, optimistic: "We're not trying to paint a rose garden.

We're as complex a society as any other, but there is a new level of expression because we are more capable of discussing who we are.

This, he argues, is where the contemporary art scene has a vital part to play. "Through art we can reflect a fuller picture of the multi-layered and poetic side of our society instead of just the stereotypes. Not that we deny some of the stereotypical images — some of them are part of society — but it's totally unjust to be framed in that one way. There are still people who only look at art as a visual pleasure, but for the younger generation it's more than that. Because of the Internet they're aware of the role of art to advance self-knowledge, as a tool for debate and how we can improve as a society. That is making a huge difference." **E**