

Next-generation dialogue for regional art

Twitter, the development of Mecca and Arab identity are explored in a new Middle Eastern art exhibition opening in a London warehouse this week.



The work *Come Together* by Hala Kali is part of the Brick Lane exhibition. Courtesy Edge of Arabia



Jessica Holland
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In a cavernous converted brewery on London's Brick Lane - an area packed with Bangladeshi supermarkets, Huguenot buildings, bagel shops and hipster coffee bars - three artists are setting up a huge exhibition of work from the Middle East, and it's not easy to install. There are Persian carpets with models of cities rising out of them, a sound installation using 90 speakers, mock roadblocks, a spinning globe and a custom-made board game called *A Rather Trivial Pursuit*. A tent will be set up as a library, and one of the many video installations, by two Dubai-based artists, changes depending on the movements of the viewers.

The show, run by the social enterprise Edge of Arabia, is called **#COMETOGETHER**, in honour of both online networks and real-life gatherings, and it's significant that it's happening on Brick Lane, a street that has been home to immigrant communities for almost 400 years. Stephen Stapleton, the curator and an Edge of Arabia co-founder, points out that just outside the exhibition space there is a travel agent specialising in Haj trips, Moroccan restaurants and an Algerian music shop.

"It's a healthy place to have this kind of a gathering," he says. "In the last 10 years, with September 11 and the Iraq War, there's been a lot of pulling apart [of East and West], but also a lot of coming together. The violence did motivate a lot of people to start talking. It's an interesting moment."

He's keen to get locals into the show, especially those who don't usually see contemporary art, and especially Muslims. "We have a chance to champion moderate voices from the centre of the Islamic world here, where you have some of the most conservative Muslim groups in London," he says. "I think it's a really good opportunity to see artists from somewhere like Saudi Arabia who are very forward-thinking and open."

They are also technologically sophisticated. The Jerusalem-born artist Larissa Sansour, who is based in London and has had solo shows in Paris and Copenhagen, will be exhibiting her video work *A Space Exodus*, a reworking of Stanley Kubrick's *1001: A Space Odyssey*. The artwork, which shows a Palestinian flag being planted on the moon, was shot in glossy HD and was nominated in the short film category at the Dubai International Film Festival in 2009. Referencing exoduses relating to both Palestine and the Bible, Sansour says it is intended to deliver "a slick, powerful take on Palestinian identity, something one does not see very often".

Another piece of video art in the show is by Ahmed Mater, another co-founder of Edge of Arabia, whose work has been collected by the British Museum and the Los Angeles County Museum of Art. Shown across four screens, it looks at the rapid development of Mecca into a high-rise, neon-lit city. (A preview clip can be seen at Edge of Arabia's website.)

A similar theme has been pursued by Sarah Al Abdali, who made her name spray-painting stencil art in the streets of Jeddah of a modified road sign to Mecca, replacing the traditional image of the Kaaba with a cluster of skyscrapers. In an interview with CNN earlier this year, she said that people have been taking photos

of the work and sharing it on Facebook and Twitter; it's an example of how social networking technology is transforming the consumption of art. Al Abdali is spending the week before *#COMETOGETHER*'s opening working on brand-new graffiti work that will be on show on a courtyard wall outside the exhibition space.

Artists such as the 23-year-old Al Abdali are part of a new online culture, Stapleton says, in which learning things on the internet and thrashing out issues on web forums is the norm. "The show wants to acknowledge this new connectivity," he says, "because the tech is dissolving all these man-made borders, definitions, ideas like 'the Arab world' and 'the Gulf'. I think this will create a totally different generation."

Duo represents the UAE

The UAE is represented in the show in the form of Hala Ali and Lantian Xie, two Dubai residents who have collaborated on *Approximate Feast*, a video installation hooked up to motion sensors so that the film changes as the viewer approaches the screen. Hala Ali, who was born in Saudi Arabia, grew up in the UK, and is currently studying in Sharjah, is thrilled to be exhibiting alongside "giants from the Arab World". She will be performing slam-style poetry on opening night, as well as showcasing her co-produced video work, which depicts illustrated, stereotypically Arab-looking figures feasting on lamb and rice, but becoming more cautious and eventually leaving as the onlookers get closer to the work. It's about "critiquing a media construction" of Arabs, she says. "The idea is that when the viewer approaches they're becoming aware of their own prejudices and biases." Ali will be performing her poetry in Sharjah, Dubai and Abu Dhabi later this year.

Edge of Arabia: a history

2003: Stephen Stapleton drives around the Middle East with artist friends, setting up exhibitions. Meets Abdunasser Gharem and Ahmed Mater in Saudi Arabia; they later decide to set up Edge of Arabia, a social enterprise promoting links between artists in the Middle East and the rest of the world.

2008: Edge of Arabia's first exhibition opens at the School of African & Oriental Studies in London.

2009-10: Shows are mounted in Berlin, Venice, Istanbul and Riyadh

2011: Edge of Arabia returns to the Venice Biennale in the same year as a new national pavilion for Saudi Arabia. A pop-up exhibition called Terminal is mounted in an abandoned space in the DIFC to coincide with Art Dubai.

2012: An Edge of Arabia show in Jeddah called We Need To Talk is reported in The Art Newspaper as "the most ambitious ever show of Saudi contemporary art in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia."

• #COMETOGETHER runs from today until October 28, Old Truman Brewery, www.edgeofarabia.com

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