

ART

Saudi Arabia Needs to Talk

Adnan Z. Manjal February 22, 2012



A view of the "We Need to Talk" exhibition in Jeddah (all photos by the author for Hyperallergic)

JEDDAH, Saudi Arabia — Contemporary art is not the first thing you might think about whenever Saudi Arabia is mentioned. But if you decide to look beyond the veil of political media and stereotypes you will be quite surprised at what you might discover. *Edge of Arabia*, the nonprofit founded by a Brit, Stephen Stapleton, and

two of Saudi's most important artists, Abdulnasser Gharem and Ahmed Mater, and charged with a mission to promote contemporary Saudi art around the globe, unveiled their first exhibition to the Saudi public in Jeddah last month to a crowd of international art professionals that included directors from Christie's and the Tate Modern.



Manal Al Dowayan "I Am a TV Producer" from her "I Am" series (via manaldowayan.com)

While one might think it's strange that Edge of Arabia has not staged an exhibition of this scale before in Saudi Arabia, they do have a track record of similarly grand exhibits in London, Venice, Dubai, Berlin and Istanbul. Part of

the reason for the organization's lack of Saudi exhibitions may be the fears of not being accepted by your average Saudi visitor who is more accustomed to oil paintings that portray horses and tents than the aesthetics of contemporary art. The day before the opening many of the artists in the Jeddah show attended a related symposium at the Jeddah Chamber of Commerce and some of the uninformed questions that were asked during the sessions suggest there is some truth to the nonprofit's concerns. But like all conversations, someone has to start, and that is exactly what this Edge of Arabia exhibition intended to do. The title says it all, *We Need to Talk*.

The large exhibition was not only a delight, but a moment to be proud of, a historical landmark in Saudi's limited history of art. The highly anticipated exhibition in the city of Jeddah was jointly curated by Stephen Stapleton and Mohammed Hafiz and includes three rooms showcasing Saudi Arabia's past, present and future through the eyes of some of the country's most talented contemporary artists. The exhibition features 43 works including videos, sculptures and installations by 22 artists, 10 of which were women. It should be noted that all the artworks had to be approved by a governmental committee within Saudi Arabia's Ministry of Culture and Information.



Ahmed Mater, "The Cowboy Code" (2012)

The room devoted to the past explore how the artists view their faltering tradition in the context of globalization and questions if it is a good thing. One has to understand that religion obviously plays a very important role in Saudi society, and it is well integrated in every tradition in their culture. Coming to terms with how their ideology fits in within the global context of humanity is a

constant “challenge.” Here is where artist Ahmed Mater showcased his latest piece “Cowboy Code” (2012), which is a dramatically large sheet of plastic cap gun discs that state the virtues and living code of cowboys adjacent to a similar-sounding code as stated by the Islamic Prophet Mohammed. It is a nostalgic piece of how Saudi boys grew up imitating the Wild West, but takes it further to show how in the artist's opinion all “religions” are equal in their message and code of living.

The “Present” room asks questions about the current situation of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia and how slowly it is moving towards modernization — the Kingdom recently allowed women to vote and run for public office in the next



Ibrahim Abumsmar, "Bird House" (2012)

elections though they still cannot drive or travel outside the Kingdom without a letter of consent from an assigned legal guardian — and how the Arab Spring has impacted their way of thinking.



Abdulnasser Gharem, "The Stamp (Inshallah)" (2011) (click to enlarge)

This room featured some of my favorite pieces, including newcomer [Ibrahim Abumsmar](#)'s "Bird House" (2012) installation, simply stating that "if we didn't chop down trees, then we wouldn't need birdhouses." Next to it are three pieces by Saudi contemporary artist superstar (and Lieutenant Colonel) [Abdulnasser Gharem](#), my favorite is the "Inshallah Stamp" (2011), which means "god willing" in Arabic, and evokes how this phrase is casually used in Saudi society to delegate responsibility to the will of God and leaving it at that. The stamp has "Have A Bit of Commitment" written above the central phrase and seems to say "have a bit more intellectual rigor, more bravery, more faith in your convictions. In committing to this action, I become my own authority and the controller of my own destiny."

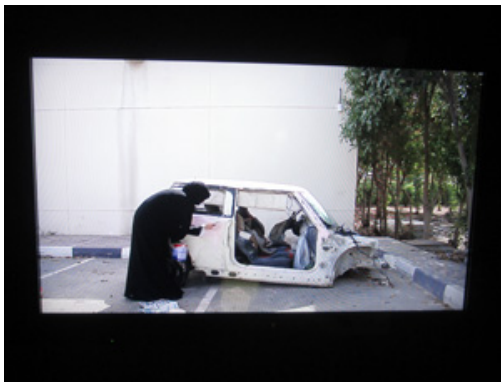
[Manal Al Dowayan](#)'s *I Am* photography series questions the authority that decides what jobs are suitable for women in Saudi society, and boldly asks who is to determine what role she is suited to play. The series shows actual Saudi women wearing their uniforms and working various jobs from scuba diver and petroleum engineer to TV director and United Nations officer. Many of the women in the photographs are covered with traditional Bedouin jewelry, reflecting the harsh obstacles of tradition Saudi women face daily while performing their duties.



A view of "We Need to Talk" with Hamza Serafi's "World Carpet" (2012) installation in the foreground.

Another favorite is the “World Carpet” (2012) installation by Hamza Serafi where visitors are asked to move around the signs while walking on the carpet. The warnings include “CLEANING IN PROGRESS,” “WIKILEAKS,” “EVOLUTION NOT REVOLUTION,” “RE-ELECTION” and “CAUTION: 99%,” which are all obvious commentary on the state of the world from protests to revolutions in the Middle East,

Russia, Greece and the Occupy Wall Street movement. Serafi states “if you walk all over the world as if it was a floor matt, warning signs are bound to appear.”



Shot of Sara Abu Abdullah's "ANEES 999" (2012) video installation. (click to enlarge)

The “Future” room is where the artists raise the warning signals of a fast track society on the brink of losing their traditions — a sign of progress if you ask me — and at the same time showing signs of hope for a better future. One of my favorite artworks in this room is by [Sara Abu Abdullah](#) “ANEES 999” (2012), a video showing the artist in a hopeless situation, where she is trying to paint a completely damaged car in the hopes of trying to fix it. The artist says:

“painting a wrecked car like icing a cake, as if beautifying the exterior would help fix the lack of functionality within the car. This wishful gesture was the only way I could get myself a car — cold comfort for the current impossibility of my dream that I, as an independent person, can drive myself to work one day.”

Another work by Manal Al Dowayan, “Esmi – My Name” (2102), stole the show. The large installation is comprised of giant rosaries bearing the names of women from all over the Kingdom. The work required female Saudi volunteers

to write their full names on the giant beads that are hanging in the space. The installation refers to the ridiculous habit of boys and men in Saudi Arabia who feel ashamed to mention the names of their mothers and sisters. There appears to be no clear indication as to where the root of this behavior stems from, but it appears to have absolutely no relations to religion or even historic tradition.

Al Dowayan asserts and asks:

“ ... identity is deeply linked to several elements of an individual’s personality and one’s name is integral among these elements. So why try to hide or erase a women’s identity? Is my nature as a woman another limitation on my potential that I need to overcome or accept?”

Another key artwork is “Evolution of Man” by Ahmed Mater, a light box showing the X-Ray of the artist holding a gun to his head and morphing into a gasoline pump. Noting the drastic change the oil industry brought on to the Kingdom, whether the change is for the good or the worst is entirely up to the individual.



A view of Manal Al Dowayan's "My Name" (2012) installation.

The art scene in Saudi is still young, but has tremendous potential and things are changing and moving forward. In the past five years alone there has been a great surge of patrons and initiatives — with Edge of Arabia taking a central role — leading the way towards a very promising future. Co-curator Mohammed Hafiz puts the transformation into context:

“I predict art will follow football in Saudi. When there was no professional league in the Kingdom, no one was interested in playing football, but now that they have created a serious, well-resourced league, with good media coverage, more money and proper infrastructure, the footballers are becoming respected and recognized. Families who ten years ago saw football as a shameful career for their children are now encouraging them to practice and work hard towards a professional career. It is all about creating role models.”

While I do agree with the need of recognized role models, I do think that Hafiz is being too optimistic with equating the appreciation for art with the blind enthusiasm for football. But I will say this, that I thank him and the entire Edge of Arabia team for taking the lead role in starting a very interesting and much needed conversation, and for taking the risk of putting on this exhibition. And in Saudi Arabia, the conversation is just starting.

[We Need to Talk](#) *continues at Al Fursiya Marina (Corniche Road, Jeddah, Saudi Arabia) until February 26.*

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