

What Is and Isn't Art in Saudi Arabia?



A Casual Art Talk hosted in the Edge of Arabia education room (all photos by Ahmed Darwish unless otherwise noted)

JEDDAH, Saudi Arabia — What is art and what is not in Saudi Arabia? We were hoping to answer that in the first monthly Casual Art Talk (CAT) I hosted in Jeddah on November 23, 2011. CAT is a small initiative I started to gather artists and art lovers of all ages to talk about art in all its different forms. We began by discussing the broad definition of art, but all who attended felt that it would be more productive to think about the local art scene. As with so many conversations trying to answer the question of what is art, the only conclusion attendees could agree on is that art is a matter of taste and we will never concur on its purpose.

“One of the main issues plaguing the local art scene is that an elitist group of artists promotes only what they like.”

We looked back trying to remember when we were first exposed to art in Saudi Arabia. There were few exhibitions worth mentioning. I'm sure there have been other exhibitions that we never heard of because the news — or impact — never left tight-knit circles of organizers, artists, gallerists or art enthusiasts. One of the main issues plaguing the local art scene is that an elitist group of artists promotes only what they

like. Well-connected artists invite their friends, who buy their work. It's not about the art but who you know.

None of the exhibitions we could recall showcased work that we could feast our minds on. The art was traditional and didn't break any boundaries. I only remember one interesting solo exhibition featuring the work of [Ayman Yossri Daydban](#) at Jeddah Atelier for Fine Arts five years ago. Most of the shows young art appreciators have attended in Jeddah are photography exhibitions and biannual graphic design showcases at Dar Al Hekma College; these were the only forms of art many of us knew.



Artist Eyad Maghazil at Young Saudi Artists 2011 (photo by the author, click to enlarge)

It was not until the first *Young Saudi Artists* (YSA) exhibition at [Athr Gallery](#) in January 2011 that we were exposed to work by young, contemporary artists based in Saudi Arabia. We finally saw names other than the ones celebrated by the international art scene — Ahmed Mater, Abdunnasser Gharem, Ayman Yossri, Manal Al Dawayan and others, all members of the old guard. Fresh new talents began to emerge in YSA, including [Eyad Maghazil](#), [Sara Abdu](#), [Nasser Al Salem](#) and [Yousef Alshaikh](#). Although

Athr Gallery was founded in 2009, it did not gain followers from my local circle, which was smaller back then, until YSA. Because the gallery was mainly concerned with bringing contemporary art from around the world to Jeddah, it created a niche that only the elite were interested in being part of. All of that changed with YSA, when Athr exhibited the work of young, local artists; it was suddenly relevant, and we immediately noticed!

The monthly Casual Art Talks continued in December, when 12 artists and art appreciators gathered to discuss the local art scene — what's there and what's missing. The conclusion we drew was that there wasn't a specific place or area for people to go to if they wanted to see local art, or any art for that matter. Furthermore, there was no variety of subject matter and concepts. Fatima Ba Azeem, a local artist and leader of the art initiative *Ta'athar wa Yo'ather*, which introduced art into one of the largest malls in Jeddah, said, "Cultural intelligence isn't very strong, and a lot of artwork looks like a copy from something we've seen online."

A month later, Edge of Arabia, an independent arts initiative promoting Arab contemporary art, had its first exhibition in Saudi Arabia, [We Need to Talk](#), which opened January 19 in Jeddah. *We Need to Talk* was a contemporary art exhibition showcasing the work of local artists. Although it was smaller than some attendees expected, it did get artists and art appreciators talking because of the diversity of ideas and media in the artwork. Part of Edge of Arabia's activities was to host an art talk to discuss the effects of the exhibition and what could be the next step for art in Saudi Arabia. "I think there will be more initiatives in art and culture after this exhibition," said curator Mohammed Hafiz at the talk. "People need to take charge of their lives and find like-minded people to help make their vision come true," he added .



Sarah Al-Abdali with her work at Young Saudi Artists 2012

All the local artists and art enthusiasts I have met share one vision, which is for Jeddah to have a rich and prosperous art scene, making it the beating heart of Saudi Arabia. We saw a few new names at *We Need to Talk*, but I believe there is more talent to be discovered. Two participants in the exhibition, [Ahmad Angawi](#), creator of the interactive Street Pulse Project, and [Sarah Al-Abdali](#), who creates stencils about the urbanization of the holy city of Mecca, definitely have the right caliber to help transform the scene in collaboration with other emerging artists.

February 21 marked the opening of Athr Gallery's second YSA exhibition, which had

more attendees than the previous year. Showcasing the work of 23 local emerging artists, it was one of a kind because it included work that members of society could relate to. Sarah Al-Abdali's work, for instance, revolved around Hijaz, the western region in Saudi Arabia also known as Jeddah, and traditions that are now history because extremist locals considered them taboo under the pretext that they were forbidden by Islam. Although some people wanted more traditional pieces in the exhibition, it gave attendees a holistic contemporary experience.

At the fourth Casual Art Talk in March, we focused on three main themes that we've seen in art in Saudi Arabia. They were summed up by Adnan Manjal, who works for an art consultancy that has helped organize many exhibitions, including *We Need to Talk*: identity and heritage, religion and globalization. We saw these themes at *We Need to Talk* and *YSA*, and we are certain that we will continue to see them in local contemporary art because they are what we most relate to.



The opening of Young Saudi Artists 2012

The issue of art education comes up at every talk, and we have all finally realized that we cannot rely on the educational system to help create qualified art critics, let alone a generation of students that appreciates art. Censorship has stood in the way of anyone who wants to teach art history as it should be taught. The parents of one student at a well-known private college filed a complaint against the art appreciation instructor for showing nudes. A massive amount of work in art history has nudity, and schools and

universities refuse to introduce it into their curriculum. It's time to take matters into our own hands and lead the evolution of the local art scene. We should seek knowledge and stop expecting to be spoon-fed! We should share this knowledge among ourselves and connect with our fellow art lovers to create a real community!

"Censorship has stood in the way of anyone who wants to teach art history as it should be taught."

At a panel discussion hosted by Athr Gallery on February 23, founder Hamza Serafi and three local artists including myself talked about the relationship between artist and gallery. "In the future, people will look back at our art and learn about history," said Serafi, emphasizing the importance of empowering local artists.

"A gallery creates a comfort zone for the artist," added Ahmad Angawi. Athr Gallery has participated in several international art fairs, including Art Dubai for four consecutive years, making it the leading contemporary art gallery in Saudi Arabia. It could have a much bigger role to play when it comes to connecting emerging artists and providing a "comfort zone." YSA 2012 was a great indication that there are more than enough passionate artists and art lovers to take the scene to a whole new level. It's only a matter of time now.