

Saudi artist Manal Al Dowayan: 'Arab speakers are taught to communicate in poetic language, and we learn to read between the lines'

The London-based artist is representing Saudi Arabia at this year's Venice Biennale with *Shifting Sands: A Battle Song*, incorporating sound, participatory practice and sculpture. 'My work is highly critical,' she explains to Jessica Lack, 'but the language I use is deliberately aesthetically pleasing'

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Manal Al Dowayan with her commission for the National Pavilion of Saudi Arabia, *Shifting Sands: A Battle Song*, 2024. Photo: [venicedocumentationproject](#). Courtesy of the Visual Arts Commission, the Commissioner for the National Pavilion of Saudi Arabia

When [Manal Al Dowayan](#) moved to London to train in computer science, her mother secretly sent her money so that she might study art. It was, says the Saudi artist, 'a big, beautiful sacrifice', and revealed to her that there are many ways of being a feminist.

Today, Al Dowayan is one of Saudi Arabia's leading artists, creating beautifully austere works that reflect the changing role of women in Arab society. Taking the form of photographs, sculptures, multimedia installations and participatory practice, Al Dowayan's art has ranged over the past 20 years from highlighting the way women operate in the workforce, encumbered by cultural traditions, to the documentation of unnamed women teachers killed in road accidents.



Manal Al Dowayan, *I am a Saudi Citizen*, 2005. Courtesy of the artist

Born in Dhahran in 1973, the daughter of an oil executive for Aramco, Al Dowayan developed a love of geology as a child and later followed her father into his profession. Having completed a residency at the Delfina Foundation in London in 2009, she quit her job the following year and became a full-time artist. In 2013, she moved to Dubai, where she set up her first studio.. Revealingly, she describes her art as ‘a journey of understanding — it’s just me, trying to figure out my tiny little life’.

With Al Dowayan representing Saudi Arabia at the 60th Venice Biennale, she spoke to Christie’s about singing sands, desert roses, and why so many of her early artworks are now historical documents.

How was your experience of Venice?

It was a wild adventure. I was there for six months working on the project. It’s a beautiful city, but there’s this underlying sense of crisis, both inside and outside the Biennale. Inside, with the artists who are trying to accomplish their visions in such a short amount of time; and outside, because of climate change. It rains too much, you get stuck, everything floods, you have to engage with the idea of rising waters and temperatures. You can’t ignore it in Venice.





Manal Al Dowayan, *Shifting Sands: A Battle Song*, 2024. Multimedia installation. Tussar silk, ink, acrylic paint. Dimensions variable. Sound, multichannel, 30'48". Photo: venicedocumentationproject. Courtesy of the Visual Arts Commission, the Commissioner for the National Pavilion of Saudi Arabia

You are representing Saudi Arabia with the work *Shifting Sands: A Battle Song*. Can you tell us about it?

It is a multimedia installation in three layers. The first is sonic, the second is participatory action and the third is a sculpture of a desert rose. The artwork is inspired by a war ceremony performed by men in Saudi Arabia. A poet stands in the middle, while the men surround him. He recites a poem, and the men respond. The difference with my artwork is that the ceremony is performed by women singing.

Let's talk about the sonic aspect of the work: it is very haunting.

The sound is a recording of the sand dunes of the Rub' al Khali (the 'Empty Quarter') in the south of Saudi Arabia. The dunes make this singing sound when sand granules rub against each other and create a vibration. We invited 1,000 women to listen to the sound and harmonise with it through humming, chanting, or singing. To me, the artwork represents the status of women in contemporary Saudi Arabia.



The artist working on *Shifting Sands: A Battle Song*, 2024. Photo: venicedocumentationproject. Courtesy of the Visual Arts Commission, the Commissioner for the National Pavilion of Saudi Arabia

My role in Venice is to present a contemporary image of my nation. I never wanted that to be a singular voice: I believe in the plural, and multi-plurality is very much a woman's language.

Arab women's identity has been diluted and othered by the media for many years. I am constantly defending myself from this. So I asked the women to imagine they were the poet in the middle of a battle dance. What would they say to their sisters? How would they prepare them for the next phase of history? I asked them to think about what Saudi women will have to face in the future.

What kind of challenges did they foresee?

Saudi Arabia is changing rapidly. The percentage of women in the workforce has nearly doubled since the early 2000s. That is transformational. It has resulted in financial independence for women, empowerment, and women are now involved in decision-making. But this is just the beginning. When I ran the singing workshops, I noticed that each generation used their voices differently. Older women would often feel inhibited about speaking out, so they would encourage their daughters to talk on their behalf.



Desert rose crystals, a natural phenomenon that the artist sees as a symbol 'of what a Saudi woman is. Something formed under extreme circumstances'. Photo: Alessandra Sarti / Alamy

The sculptural aspect of the artwork is inspired by the desert rose. Why?

I have never understood why a woman is often visually represented as an English rose in religious books. Plucked and sitting in a little water, just enough to keep her alive. It is a flower that does not grow in the Middle East, and it does not represent the women I knew growing up.

There is a small patch of desert just across from my mother's house which produces crystals every year. We call them desert roses, and I have been collecting them since I was a child. They are formed when extreme rain hits the sand followed by extreme heat, which then crystallises. I felt this was a much closer symbol of what a Saudi woman is. Something formed under extreme circumstances.

The nature of your work means that the context can change when the political circumstances change. How do you deal with this?

I am very proud that most of my artworks are now historical. I have nieces who love hearing about the religious police who used to chase us. We found it quite traumatic at the time, but to them it seems unreal. I look at my older artworks as milestones in my life: they reflect the ups and downs and emotional impact of everything that was happening in my country.

The problem I have now is that the pace of change in Saudi is so rapid that I must continually explain that these works are 10 or 20 years old. People in the West think they were made yesterday.

Your 2011 work *Suspended Together* is a good example of that. It makes reference to a law that all Saudi women required a permission document from a male relative in order to travel. That law has since been withdrawn.

Suspended Together is a very personal work, made at a time of transition for me. I received more than 100 permission-to-travel documents from female friends and acquaintances and printed them onto the wings of fibreglass doves, which I then suspended, as though they were frozen in flight. The work was made at around the time I left my job at Aramco and moved to Dubai, when I began thinking about where I belonged. I later made porcelain doves that could be sold separately.

Suspended Together was featured in *Terminal* in Dubai in 2011, an exhibition produced by the art collective Edge of Arabia, of which you were a member. How important was it to be part of that initiative?

It was incredible. It was the first time I got to interact with other artists from my own country, like [Ahmed Mater](#) and [Shadia Alem](#). Just to have a gang was so inspiring. I hope history will remember this gathering of Saudi artists. Our first show was at SOAS in London in 2008, and it became the trigger for events such as the [21,39 Jeddah Arts](#) festival and the [Diriyah Contemporary Art Biennale](#).



Installation view of Manal Al Dowayan's *Suspended Together*, 2011, at Mathaf: Arab Museum of Modern Art, Qatar. Courtesy of the artist

Is it difficult to balance political issues with your aesthetic vision?

My work is highly critical, but the language I use is deliberately aesthetically pleasing. I've thought about this a lot. I think it is because I take two different paths: one inside Saudi Arabia, the other outside.

Inside Saudi Arabia, shocking, in-your-face artwork does not connect with people. It is not our language. Aesthetics is the way Arab people communicate. I want you to look at the artwork and think, "Wow, that is beautiful", and then when you get closer, to realise that you might be looking at something that also engages with an important issue.

When I was studying at the Royal College of Art in London, my professors would often tell me my statements were too flowery. They would tell me to get to the point, be more direct. Arab speakers are taught to communicate in a very elaborate, poetic language, and we learn to read between the lines, always. In the West this is seen as being evasive, as though you are not being brave enough; but inside Saudi Arabia, they know I'm bringing women's issues to the table.

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How do people outside Saudi Arabia respond to your work?

A Western journalist walked up to me at the press view at the Venice Biennale and asked if I could show this work in Saudi. I explained it was commissioned by the Ministry of Culture. I can't babysit that mindset for the rest of my career. It is not my job to present a geopolitical analysis of my country before presenting my artwork.

It is a common issue for many female artists: that demand to represent one's gender or identity first and foremost.

When I started reading Western feminism, I couldn't really relate to it, because it was not my experience. It was only when Arab, Pakistani and Indian writers began deconstructing white feminism from the point of view of the Global South that I really began to understand it. It is one of the reasons I have a participatory practice, so that I can represent different women's voices.

But, you know, my art is simply a deep reflection on my own life. All I'm really trying to do is figure out who I am.

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(B. 1973, DHAHRAN)

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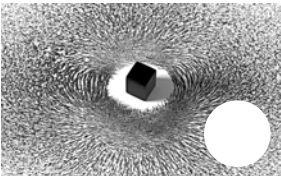


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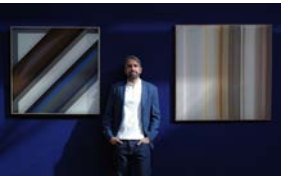
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