

# Harper's BAZAAR

ARABIA

# ART

ISSUE 24

## PENETRATING THE SILENCE

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THE NEW  
TATE MODERN  
*A conversation with*  
**FRANCES  
MORRIS**

BLACK FRIDAY  
MALL CULTURE *with*  
SOPHIA AL MARIA



For the first time on the West Coast, the San Francisco community welcomed *GENERA#ION*, an exhibition of contemporary art from Saudi Arabia this August. Spearheaded by the King Abdulaziz Center for World Culture and in partnership with Gharem Studio and Culturunners and Gharem Studio, the exhibition was part of a multi-city tour trekking across interstate highway systems ranging from Houston, Texas to Aspen, Colorado. During the US Presidential election year, *GENERA#ION* came at a perfect moment to narrate an honest story told by the centre of the Islamic world.

Escaping the doldrums of the New York summer heat, I decided to venture out to San Francisco, interviewing these Saudi artists as a chance to uncover the hidden mystique behind a city that has come to be known as the “City of Rebels” for its literary and artistic movements. Tapping into a hot spot for technological innovation, I witnessed a new metaphorical bridge connecting the ports of Riyadh to the San Francisco Bay Area formed by 15 artists. Representing a new generation of Saudi artists, each one is using the Internet to collaborate amongst themselves as a way to reach the global community. They are working seamlessly across disciplines and borders, redefining art practices against a backdrop of constant change.

Aya Mousawi, co-founder of The Moving Museum, was invited to be the exhibition’s Creative Director. Aya has worked with many of the artists between 2007 and 2012 when she was Assistant Curator for Edge of Arabia, the first travelling project of Saudi contemporary art. “It’s really amazing to have followed the careers of these artists and now to see them evolve as their local environment begins to support further cultural developments,” she says. “Now more than ever, with this rise in Islamaphobia across the world, it is so important to offer audiences everywhere an alternative voice from the region. *GENERA#ION* is a call to this action, and we were excited to invite and engage with the local community in San Francisco.”

Just as Saudi is undergoing rapid transitions in both their urban and social landscape, San Francisco is combatting their own technological developments through creative and sustainable projects. Located in a city where skyrocketing rents are forcing artists to relocate, *GENERA#ION*’s space at Minnesota Street Projects proposes an alternative

# SAUDI ART HEADS WEST

*A contemporary art exhibition in San Francisco’s new gallery complex Minnesota Street Project reveals art from the Kingdom, reports* **Suzy Sikorski**

approach to innovation, offering affordable gallery spaces and studios as a chance to rekindle the community’s appreciation for the arts.

*GENERA#ION*’s opening night welcomed over 1,000 people, featuring performances from artist Nugamshi and dances inspired by Ahaad Alamoudi’s Khabeti thobe creations. Attracting a diverse crowd of Arabs and non-Arabs alike, the show was attended by local tech start-ups from Google and Uber, and also welcomed earlier visits from the UAE art scene such as William Lawrie from Lawrie Shabibi and Fady Jameel.

“The artists in this show present a new intellectual paradigm that utilises unique concepts and terminology to define the artists’ role within their society and their generation,” says Abdunasser

Gharem, founder of Gharem Studio and a driving force behind the tour. “Rather than analysing art and society separately, the artists confront art as a reflection of society, positioning themselves as its mirrors.”

Illuminating the main atrium, Manal AlDowayan’s 2014 *Tree of Guardians* installation became the centre point for weaving narratives of shared histories and remembrance. Travelling throughout Saudi Arabia, the artist interviewed over 400 women and then asked them to construct family trees by recalling the names of only women in their families. Comprising over 2,000 brass leaves with the written names of their female relatives dating back to nine generations alongside their family tree drawings, *Tree of Guardians* became a participatory

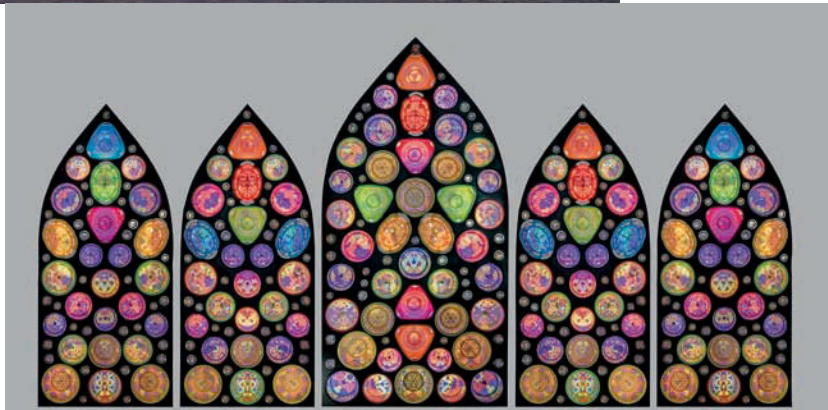


Above: Dhafer Al Shehri. *Despersonalization*. 2013. Diasec mounted digital print. 165 x 115 cm.



Above: Aijlan Gharem. *Paradise Has Many Gates*. 2015. Diasec mounted C print. 140 x 220 cm.

Right: Rashed Al Shashai. *Heaven’s Doors*. 2014. 575 x 270 cm. Image Courtesy of Hafez Gallery, Jeddah, KSA







project not only for the women interviewed, but also for viewers as they considered their own family histories.

Part of a generation that relates to the mass circulation of images, whether through consumer products or digital news feeds, artists are combatting orientalist imagery by visually documenting their histories through pop-cultural icons. Shaweesh and Ahaad Alamoudi are part of the youth who are exchanging their memories and images on a global network, framing both works around orientalist discussions about the historical and represented image of Lawrence of Arabia.

Shaweesh's *Vader and Delegation* (2013) features an old found newspaper with an article of King Faisal and his delegates, one of which includes T.E. Lawrence "of Arabia" at a Paris Peace Conference in 1919. Countering the orientalist accounts of Lawrence through his Arabian mystical adventures,

Shaweesh showcases the colonel's darker, relatively unknown side to Western audiences.

Just as Shaweesh pivots his images as a way to enlighten his Western audiences, Ahaad uses the image of Auda, a leader of one of the Arabian tribes in her work *v=noyFIYKIFJU* (2016) as a way to memorialise the Bedouin Arab and point towards future development within the region. Using the representation of Auda from the 1962 *Lawrence of Arabia* film, she then lays it on a thin acrylic shelf surrounded by five three-dimensional digital recreations of Arabic desert dates. Romanticising the past, through their personal childhood memories ranging from superheroes to legendary film characters, both are graphically designing a new path merging the virtual with the realistic.

Providing a powerful overview into the diversity of the Islamic world, Rashed Al Shashai's *Delicious* (2015) became a

constellation connecting artworks and viewers, as it merged past traditions within abstracted forms. Shashai's work is constructed out of three large Persian rugs cut up and rolled into a form resembling a delectable Swiss roll. Enlightening the room through humour while also withstanding centuries of gathering families together throughout the Middle Eastern world, the rug allowed viewers to dissect an open-ended conversation on the many hidden socio-political layers of the region that many outsiders do not see.

Non-Muslims and Muslims alike are creating a conversation within a space that acknowledges different routes for attaining similar goals for innovation. As they participate in a discussion with the global community, these young Muslim artists are also developing a contemporary approach to their Islamic heritage by fusing individual expression within collaborative spaces. ■

*GENERA#ION runs until 8 September at Minnesota Street Project in the Dogpatch District of San Francisco.*