Saudi Arabia lifts the veil

Burhan Wazir reports on the kingdom's vibrant arts scene

AHMED MATER
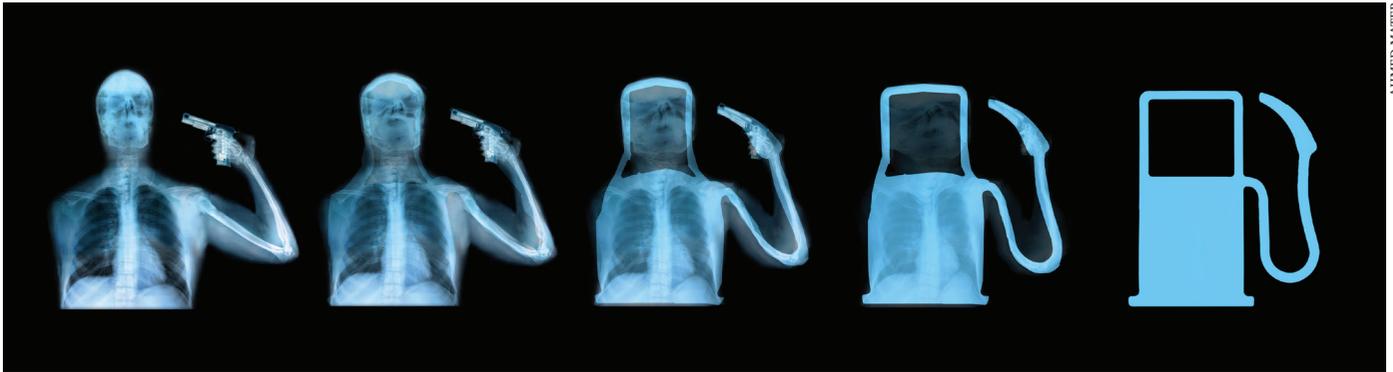
Saudi art viewed from right to left, 'Evolution of Man' (2010) by Ahmed Mater

The Saudi Arabian arts scene has had quite a year: two contemporary galleries – Alaan and Naila – have sprung up in Riyadh; bold new forms of Saudi art have started travelling the world via exhibitions in Dubai, London and New York; and Haifaa al-Mansour has become the first Saudi woman to direct a feature film, *Wadjda*, which has picked up numerous awards along the way.

And there's more to come. In 2015, the King Abdul Aziz Centre for World Culture, a project funded by the state-owned Saudi Aramco oil company, will open in Dhahran, boasting a library, a cinema, galleries and a learning centre.

'Saudi Arabia's art scene has been on the rise for a few years now,' says Munira al-Ajlani, editor-in-chief of the Riyadh-based arts magazine, *Oasis*. 'Every other person you meet is in the arts industry or wants to be. There is an immense appreciation for the creative arts in Saudi Arabia and an impressive development in the facilities, as well as establishments geared towards nurturing future talents.'

The contemporary Saudi Arabian arts scene emerged from humble beginnings. The late 2000s saw the emergence of the Shatta Movement, a group of informally trained artists and multi-media creators who took their name from the Arabic term for an entity which is broken or unfit for use. Using a mix of film, stills photography and X-rays, Shatta gently pushed the boundaries of acceptable political expression in the kingdom.

'The [Shatta] artists were important because they were angry and they wanted to change a lot of things,' explains Ahmed Mater, a Saudi artist who has exhibited in Los Angeles and London. 'There were many tensions in Saudi Arabia. It didn't take the outside world long to realize that there was a vibrant arts community in our country.'

Mater is currently in post-production on his directorial debut, *Leaves Fall in All Seasons*, a feature film looking at societal changes occurring in Mecca, which will be released later this year. A series of art shows will accompany the film.

'There is no academic teaching of the arts in Saudi Arabia,' Mater adds. 'But now we have a generation of young Saudis who have studied abroad in Britain and the United States. The internet and the explosion in communications have also had an effect. They feel they live in the wider world because they are so quickly connected to it.'

The nascent Saudi Arabian arts scene has depended in the past on private finance for survival. The most populous country in the Gulf Cooperation Council has nearly 30 million citizens with an average age of 26, yet arts education is all but non-existent in schools and universities. Earlier this year, Abdulnasser Gharem, a prominent artist who helped found Shatta, launched Riyadh's first artist-run foundation, Amen Arts, to provide studio space and film labs for local talent.

Gharem, who lives in Riyadh and has exhibited in Europe, the Gulf and the US, is mindful of the fact that neighbouring cities such as Dubai, Abu Dhabi and Doha have, for the past decade, pursued ambitious arts and museum projects. 'When people look at the Gulf, they tend to view Saudi Arabia in isolation,' says Gharem. 'The conversation about arts in the Middle East rarely acknowledges Saudi Arabia. In the kingdom, however, people have been very affected by events elsewhere – the Museum of Islamic Art in Doha, the Sharjah Biennial, Dubai Art Fair, the Guggenheim and the Louvre in Abu Dhabi. We want to see similar progress in Saudi Arabia.'

Gharem, whose next exhibition is in November at the *Edge of Arabia* exhibition at SOAS's Brunei Gallery in London, says young Saudi artists are looking for dialogue. 'We were depressed by the war in Iraq,' he explains. 'Now we have to get organized. We have to build bridges between the East and the West.' ●

Burhan Wazir is the Editor of a forthcoming Doha-based arts and culture website, Qulture.com