



#### A unique Saudi viewpoint

The leading cultural practitioners in Saudi Arabia (artists, curators and patrons) incorporate uniquely Saudi qualities in their work—qualities related to Islam, Saudi society, the monarchy and the nature of Saudi power and the ways in which that power has either a direct or invisible hand in cultural production.

Saudi patrons have now mobilized in an unprecedented way to support local arts and bring non-Saudis to Jeddah (and elsewhere) to experience contemporary art in the Kingdom and also general Saudi culture. This is not particular to just Saudi Arabia but linked to a general reawakening of the importance of art and culture in the non-Western world, a recognition that art and culture play important roles in domestic politics, international relations, and power structures.

Unlike its neighbors, Saudi Arabia has yet to garner significant press and attention for its cultural activities. But within the Kingdom there is an increasingly rich and continuously evolving cultural scene fed by artists, patrons, and interested locals.

The celebrated artist Ahmed Mater, in ‘Young Soul Rebels’ (published in *Asia Art Pacific* in December 2012), discusses the local climate in an explicit way in terms of market signifiers but his text is easily read as a manifesto on larger issues of what culture means to him and his fellow artists: “2012 was an important year for me and for many artists in Saudi Arabia. We decided to come back to the original movement of contemporary art which began in my hometown of Abha over 10 years ago, and to return again to the source and foundation for our inspiration—namely our role in this society.”

Mater continues to explain that “As Saudi artists, we seek to find a system and platform relevant to our local context, we seek to preserve and nurture our communal voice. Because we know that only

## The Local Evolution of Saudi Arabia’s Contemporary Art Scene

*by Alia Al-Senussi*

*Local art scene flourishes in Saudi Arabia*

**S**audi Arabia has witnessed an explosion of local art production in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, driven in large part by a variety of grassroots efforts. These efforts are often tied to traditional centers of artistic production like the Abha arts community or the Hijaz, a crossroads of pilgrims and commerce. The exponential growth of and interest in art in the Kingdom has spurred a surge in local collectors and enthusiasm, especially for art with a local viewpoint or voice. Despite its grassroots origins, something uniquely Saudi, art continues to be patronized and overseen by the kingdom’s ruling elite.

through a solid, paced and strong movement can we make our way upstream, against the current of society and its potential to materialism. We are full of nervous optimism about the potential of this real movement. We believe that art galleries, institutions, organizations, ministries, patrons, local and social media can support each other to instigate and develop a movement that will become part of the change needed in this society.”

#### **The evolution of art and patronage**

Even as Saudi artists explore increasingly diverse subject matters, members of the ruling elite establish organizations to shape and oversee the growing field. For example, the recent creation of the non-profit Saudi Art Council (SAC) was an important step forward in bringing a more official voice to the Saudi art world. The body is chaired by a senior member of the royal family, HRH Princess Jawaher bint Majid bin Abdulaziz Al Saud, and comprised of a selection of the Saudi commercial elite.

Museums are a prosaic part of life in most Western developed countries, but they do not exist in such a visible manner in Saudi Arabia. This only magnifies the importance of organizations like the SAC and Edge of Arabia, the non-profit arts organization co-founded by Mater and his fellow artists and activists Abdunasser Gharem and Stephen Stapleton.

On the other hand, the involvement of Western museums in the discourse and happenings in the region informs their cultural development and is integral to the evolution of the regional scene, providing an external counterpoint to the more insular goings-on. Culture can be a description of the contemporary situation of a society and a reference point for scholarship related to political movements and the structure of power. Saudi Arabia is no different from any other nation with a nascent and evolving art scene, and the relationship between visual culture and power in Saudi Arabia is something that the state has

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only recently adopted in a direct manner with the museum.

However, senior government officials and members of the royal family have involved themselves with cultural initiatives more frequently as official as well as non-official representatives of the state. Ahmed Mater expressed how cultural production and politically charged arts are important to Saudi artists, as opposed to those who cater to outside tastes: “How can we paint butterflies and scenes of the past when our region is in turmoil and change is upon us?”

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