

AFAC visits Saudi Arabia **Riyadh and Jeddah** May 2013



آفاق AFAC

The Arab Fund For Arts and Culture
الصندوق العربي للثقافة والفنون – آفاق

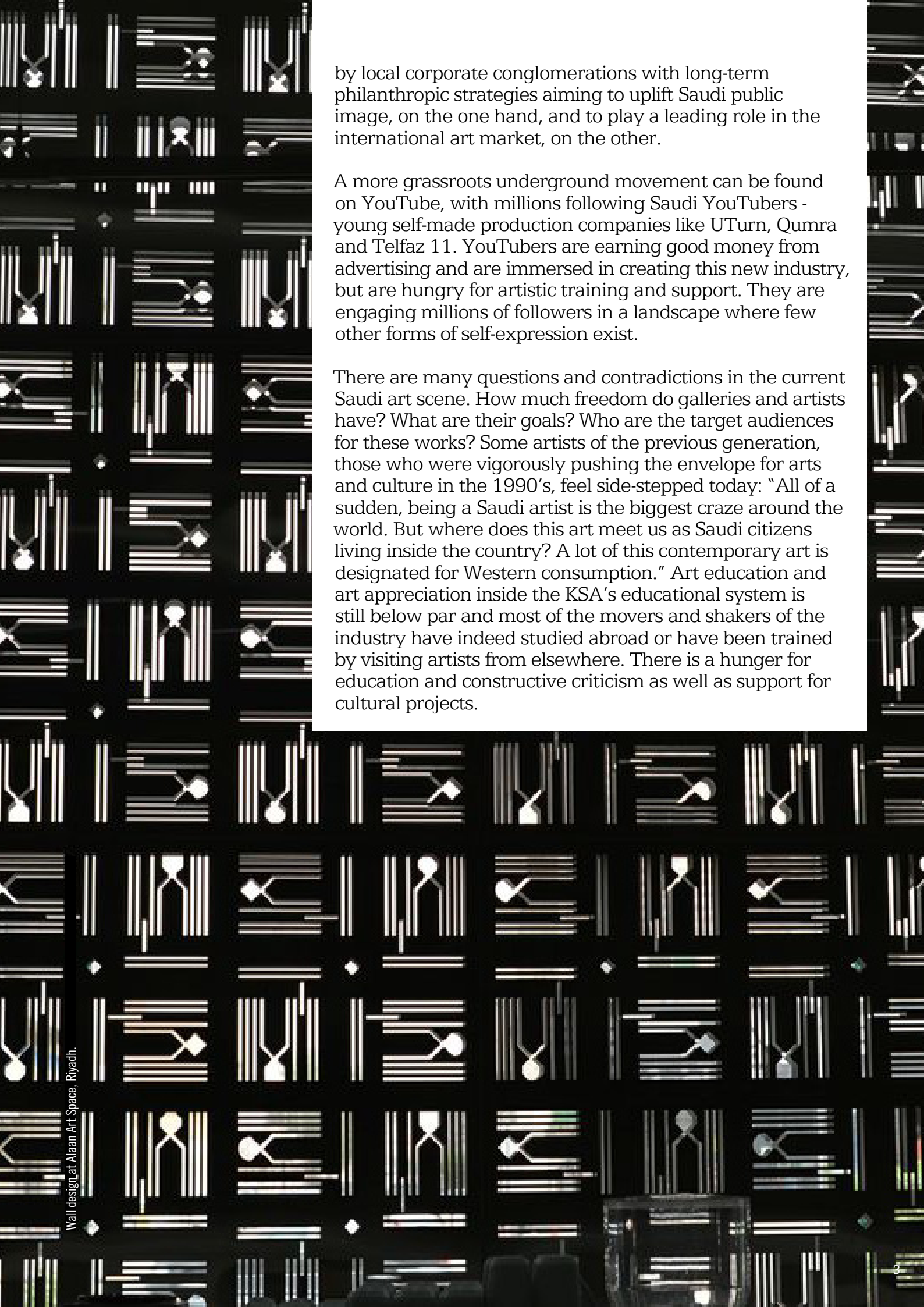
"Caravan" (2013) by Saudi artist Fahad Basudan, Arabian Wings Gallery, Jeddah.

AFAC seeks out the contemporary artists and cultural practitioners of the Arab region in order to offer them granting and training opportunities. Every year, thousands of applications are received and over 100 grants are distributed to artists, authors, musicians, playwrights, , composers and filmmakers

Introduction

across the region. Field trips are conducted to those areas where AFAC's reach seems to be least penetrating and artists are in most need of support. The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, though the largest Arab country in all of Asia, and second largest only to Algeria, has had relatively low engagement with AFAC's programs. In recent years, however, some of the taboos around artistic production have been lifted and a new openness towards arts and culture – especially the contemporary arts – can be perceived. There is an underground scene engaging the young generation across the different parts of the Kingdom and an above-ground global-bound artistic elite receiving international acclaim in prominent festivals and museums. Yet, in between these two niches, experiencing art is not a prioritized aspect of the country's public life. In fact, several Saudi artists chose to live abroad. The outliers – those openers of new galleries, founders of new art magazines and producers of new music, films and conceptual installations – have been gradually and carefully gaining local grounds in recent years. There is an important role for AFAC to play to support the creatives in the Kingdom and to integrate their works into wider perception. AFAC visited HRH Princess Adila bint Abdullah bin Abdulaziz Al Saud in January 2013, through the contact of AFAC's board member Mrs. Abla Lahoud, and we were able to connect with some of the key figures playing a role in the contemporary art scene in the Kingdom.

Art galleries and curators coming to the fore include Athr Gallery, Arabian Wings, Alaan Artspace, Lam Art Gallery and Naila Art Gallery, many of whom are displaying high quality artworks by established, emerging and international artists. An important initiative to mention is the London-based Saudi-run Edge of Arabia, an independent art initiative supported by the ALJCI and that tours large-scale Saudi artworks to prestigious international venues and is currently exhibiting at the Venice Biennale. Many of these initiatives and new galleries are supported



by local corporate conglomerations with long-term philanthropic strategies aiming to uplift Saudi public image, on the one hand, and to play a leading role in the international art market, on the other.

A more grassroots underground movement can be found on YouTube, with millions following Saudi YouTubers - young self-made production companies like UTurn, Qumra and Telfaz 11. YouTubers are earning good money from advertising and are immersed in creating this new industry, but are hungry for artistic training and support. They are engaging millions of followers in a landscape where few other forms of self-expression exist.

There are many questions and contradictions in the current Saudi art scene. How much freedom do galleries and artists have? What are their goals? Who are the target audiences for these works? Some artists of the previous generation, those who were vigorously pushing the envelope for arts and culture in the 1990's, feel side-stepped today: "All of a sudden, being a Saudi artist is the biggest craze around the world. But where does this art meet us as Saudi citizens living inside the country? A lot of this contemporary art is designated for Western consumption." Art education and art appreciation inside the KSA's educational system is still below par and most of the movers and shakers of the industry have indeed studied abroad or have been trained by visiting artists from elsewhere. There is a hunger for education and constructive criticism as well as support for cultural projects.

Riyadh, the capital city, is an impressive world-class capital in terms of wealth and infrastructure, a sparkling skyline with elegant sky-scrapers and a growing population; a metropolis where Wahhabi fundamentalism and American consumerism strangely coexist. Given its formal nature, located in-land in

Riyadh Art Now

the heart of Najd, it has been the most recent

to jump on to the contemporary art band-wagon and it is questionable how far the city can open up towards supporting artistic experiences in public spaces. Some members of Saudi royalty are gradually and carefully leading the way in opening up the country, little by little, aiming for gradual change that can be handled by the society's more traditional elements and, more importantly, the religious police, but it is a delicate process.

AFAC's first visit is to the Alaan Art Space, a new gallery opened by a brother and sister team, Neama and Mohammed Al-Sudairy. For the Riyadh context, it is an innovative concept as it offers an educational space and screenings of art documentaries that are open to the public. The gallery also includes a revenue-making section through its café, design gift shop and space rental to host cultural talks, film screenings, workshops as well as corporate events. Most interesting of all, the space holds a collection of art and design books and aims to play a public library role for contemporary artists. Art books are notoriously difficult to find in Saudi Arabia and Alaan's book collection has been carefully selected to pass through censorship's control while offering high quality publications. The gallery emphasizes its educational programs and aims to host a series of workshops and panel discussions; its most recent is a photography training for women.



Exhibition featuring Italian artist Teresa Emanuele at Alaan Artspace, Riyadh.

The Creative Culture Catalyst, or C3 films, is next on our list of target visits as we drive across town to meet with renowned military-man-turned-artist, Abdunnasser Gharem, together with some of the city's YouTubers. Telfaz 11, a television production company, is attracting the most talented show

From Space to Production

producers,
filmmakers,
writers and
animators of

Riyadh. In just a one year period, they acquired nearly one hundred thousand subscribers and over 1.5 million views; they have transformed social media into showbiz.

Wondering how the YouTube phenomenon took off the way it did in the kingdom, Telfaz 11 marketing manager Abdulaziz Al-Shalan explains: "First of all, the internet infrastructure in KSA is excellent. You can be connected anywhere. Distribution channels are open. Secondly, the official TV channels that exist don't represent us at all; there are no Saudi productions on TV. And thirdly, there are so few entertainment alternatives around. A group of us found YouTube as the best



Interior detail at the offices of the Creative Culture Catalyst, Riyadh.

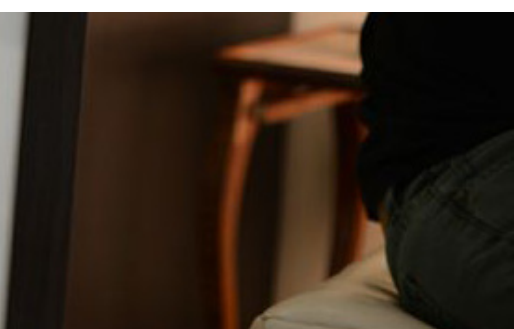


Ahmad Shaweesh holding up his image of Asmahan.

place for an authentic Saudi expression and creative industry." True, most of it is entertainment and comedy, but there is clear attention to showcasing different local customs, dialects, and senses of humor from different parts of the country – a very traditional Arabian attention to the diversity of Arab accents comes through these YouTube shows and offers a great platform to learn real Saudi culture. "The characters we come up with are from all the different parts of the kingdom with all the different accents and traditions. We are inspired by shows like Saturday Night Live but our content is all about Saudi. We have animation shows, puppetry shows, talk shows and mini-series. It is a huge industry." Not surprisingly, young people who would have typically followed an education in medicine or engineering, are now choosing to take more creative and artistic career paths.

Picking up on this hunger is Abdunnasser Gharem. He enters the discussion to distinguish between the entertainment industry and the creation of art. "We don't want your money," he says. "What we want is training, technical expertise, archiving, residencies, exposure, art books, travel. We have been isolated for too long..." As one of Saudi Arabia's foremost conceptual artist, his installations have toured internationally with much positive acclaim. "I am a generation older than these YouTubers, the future is in their hands. It would be an excellent joining of forces to bring their enthusiasm and creativity towards more artistic works and I am eager to help make this happen." Abdunnasser is originally from the southwestern province of the Kingdom, Asir, whose main city, Abha, has served as a small incubator for the country's artists and cultural practitioners during the governorship of Prince Khalid bin Faisal (1971-2007) and several of the Saudi artists currently in the limelight originally developed their practice there.

Abdunnasser is teaming up with the young 20-somethings of the YouTube generation with the aim of creating a non-profit initiative that nurtures creativity and cultural education in the kingdom. "I have done my research on how to set up a foundation," says Abdunnasser. "Foundations are not traditionally part of our culture, so we are inventing something pure and new, something that is based on our own needs. We will need expertise, we will need help." He presented his idea of setting up the Al-Ameen Art Foundation which would be a non-profit and education-focused initiative, the other side of the coin of the commercial creative industries. Abdulaziz nods his head in agreement. "We are making it big in the entertainment industry but we don't want it to take over all our focus. Art is the real fuel of creativity."



Pop artist Ahmad Shaweesh joins us mid-conversation. He doesn't say much, but his artworks are striking. Not sure whether they fall under 'art' per se, or more fitting as flippant postcards, his repertoire includes digitally edited black & white photographs of historic Arab images where American icons - like Star Wars characters and American comic heroes - are seamlessly embedded. One example places the Star Wars character of Yoda seated next to King Faisal ibn Abd Al-Aziz Al Saud, the modernizer of the Saudi Kingdom. Shaweesh explains that Yoda is a symbol of wisdom and idealism; it is a sign of respect to place him next to the King. American references in Saudi art abound.



Abdulnasser Gharem's stamp imprint, "Have a bit of Commitment"

An afternoon drizzle cleared up the dusty Riyadh sky just in time for the casual gathering hosted by friends of AFAC, Dr. Fayez and Haifa Takieddine, introducing AFAC to some of Riyadh's society. AFAC shared its first day's experience in Riyadh as well as its over-arching strategy for cultural

AFAC friends host dinner

philanthropy
in the Arab
region to this
gathering of

resourceful individuals and potential supporters of AFAC's vision. Samples of grantees' works were also displayed: a three-minute animation film by Syrian artist Wael Tobaji called "One Hand" and a nine-minute high-definition science fiction film by Palestinian artist Larissa Sansour called "Nation Estate". A decidedly different kind of evening than what is usually available in Riyadh, questions about the meaning of the works of art themselves ensued and also enquiries into AFAC's sustainability and how the granting programs are run. We also informed our guests of the public talk AFAC was scheduled to give at the Saudi Arabia Society for Arts and Culture the following evening, more colloquially known as 'Jam3iyyat al-Funoun'.



Riyadh, highways through the sand.

The next morning over lunch, we met with our friend and AFAC donor, Huda Kitmitto. She is supportive of Arab artists and cultural practitioners, focusing particularly on artists from Palestine, and she has an interior design practice between Saudi Arabia and Switzerland. We updated her on

Gallery-hopping in Riyadh

AFAC's plans to promote greater participation from the

Saudi population in both the creation of arts and in cultural philanthropy and we discussed the gradual steps that are taking place in the Kingdom towards more openness. "It may



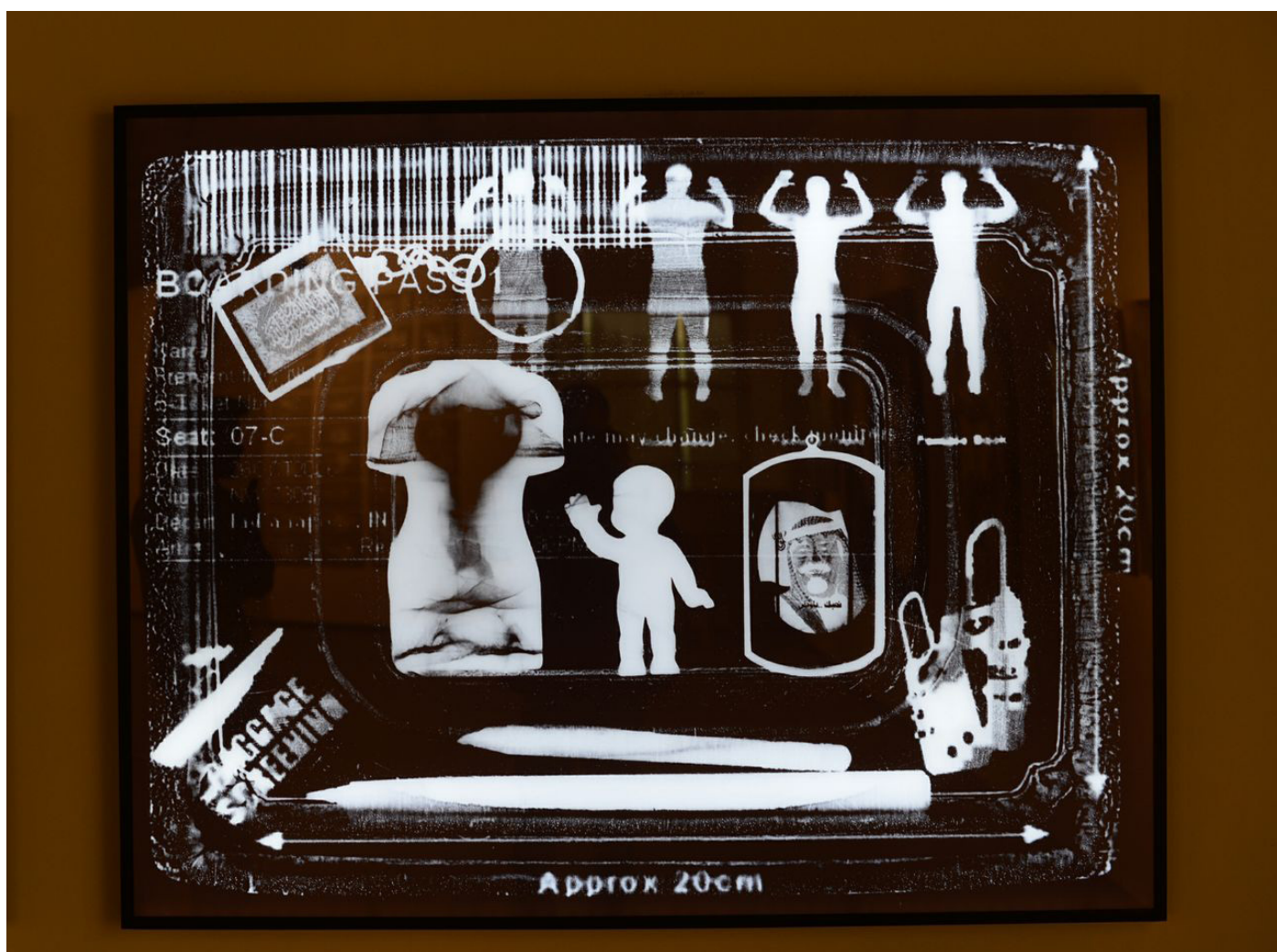
Friend and donor of AFAC Huda Kitmitto watching the video "Running" (2008) by Saudi artist Sami Turki, Gallery Naila.

be the only country in the world that prohibits women from driving, but given the way people drive here, that might not be a bad thing," she said jokingly. Huda showed us some of the local art cafes around and, together, we even went gallery-hopping in Riyadh. The Institut du Monde Arabe's exhibition "25 Years of Arab Art" had just opened (April 29th, 2013) at Riyadh's newest gallery, Naila Art Gallery – a great credit to the galleryists Naifa al-Fayez and Laila Fahim who have lobbied with tremendous personal effort to bring the exhibition into the Kingdom. It features a large number of artists from the Gulf, the Fertile Crescent and North Africa, with a diversity of visual forms. From Saudi Arabia, works by Abdul Nasser Gharem and Ahmad Mater are on display and the exhibition also features the work of AFAC grantee Basma Al-Sharif, a young visual artist from Palestine. Speaking to the curator, Laila Fahim says the exhibition aims to portray "the role of contemporary Arab art at a global level."

We then went to visit Lam Art Gallery, owned by young Saudi curator Lamia Al-Rashed and aiming to create "a platform that promotes the awareness of Saudi and Middle Eastern culture and values through art." Lam Art Gallery has been selected to participate at SCOPE BASEL next month to showcase works from the MENA region.



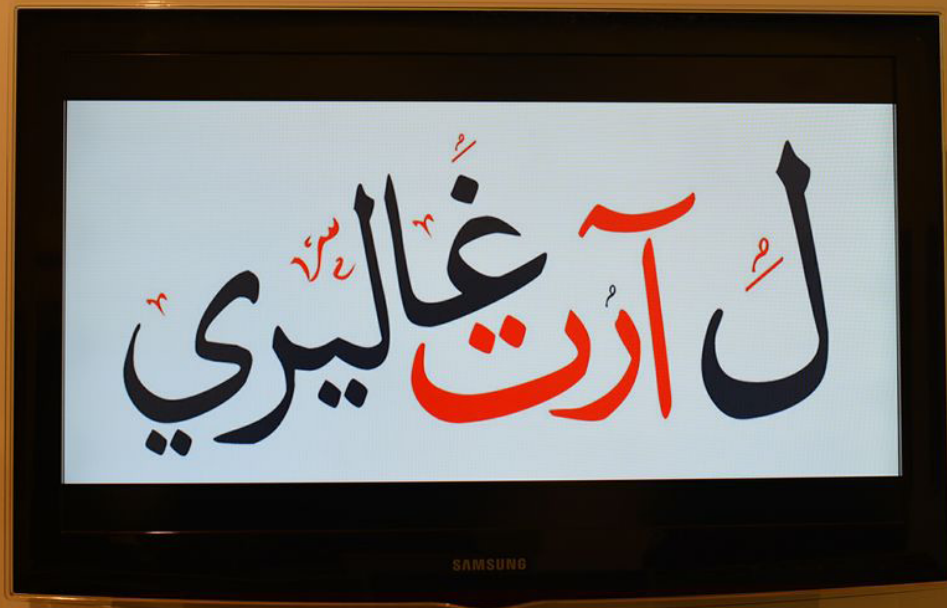
Zena Takieddine, Gallery Naila co-founder Laila Fahim, Huda Kitmitto and Gallery Naila artist in residence Toufic Hamidi standing next to installation, "The Stamp (Inshallah)", by Abdunasser Gharem.



"Barcode 2" by Maha Malluh (2011), Gallery Naila.



"Rain is Mercy" by Arwa Abouon (2007), Gallery Naila



By evening, AFAC drove to the central office of the Saudi Arabia Society for Culture and the Arts to meet with the society's Chairman, Dr. Sultan Al-Bazei. The society is the arm of the Kingdom's Ministry of Culture and organizes nationwide workshops and events through a network of committees

**Public Talk at
the Saudi Arabia
Society for Culture
and the Arts**

dedicated to
theatre, visual
arts, calligraphy,
photography,
music as well
as heritage
preservation

and traditional crafts spread across the 16 districts of the Kingdom. Dr. Sultan Al-Bazei gave us a cordial welcome and introduced us to a venerable figure in Saudi theatre who is passionate about reviving and archiving pre-Islamic poetry. At the same time, Dr. Sultan recognized all that is happening in terms of artists and cultural expression on YouTube and credited this phenomenon as the catalyst urging the Ministry to include contemporary arts and new productions into their strategies of supporting Saudi artists. We drank delicious Arabian coffee while discussing the challenges of adapting towards contemporary realities without giving up on heritage preservation.

We also discussed Saudi cinema. Many Saudis who recall life in Riyadh during the 1970's also recall that it was more lenient and that there was even a street called "cinema street". The current hype for Saudi filmmakers, especially female filmmakers, with Haifa Al Mansour's "Wadjda" and Ahd Kamel's "Sanctity" attaining international visibility at prominent film festivals, is a whole other ball game and

Public presentation at Saudi Arabia Society for Culture and the Arts, Riyadh, May 5th 2013.





Saudi artists, authors, musicians and theatre performers gathered to meet AFAC at the Saudi Arabia Society for Culture and the Arts.

speaks of the unprecedented accessibility of filmmaking technology. The question of screening these films within the Kingdom, however, is probably premature to ask at this point, but it is not off the radar. It will require sensitivity to local custom and the traditions of segregations, even if only symbolic. And it will take time. The level of SASCA's engagement with new artists, as opposed to traditional ones, is still a growing process.

Dr. Sultan and his team led us to a large tent where the AFAC presentation would take place. The space could fit a couple of hundred people easily, and there were photographers and camera men to record the event. A partition down the middle of the seating area designated men's seating and women's. The attendees, mostly in-house members of the society, asked very telling and pointed questions during the Q&A session proved eager to engage. They enquired about AFAC's funding and granting programs and how it would best fit into the Saudi context. Commenting on the lack of Saudi applicants to AFAC to date, one attendee pointed out the legal barriers to transferring funds and whether these barriers can be alleviated. Since the events of 9/11, the Saudi authorities control very closely all cash flow to and from the Kingdom, making it very difficult for foundations and trust funds to receive or disburse donations. On this point, Dr. Sultan responded that the Saudi Society for Culture and the Arts will work on formalizing a way to facilitate the functioning of AFAC's programs within the Kingdom and issued a statement to the press that SASCA and AFAC's vision are complimentary to each other, that SASCA support AFAC's work and will call on AFAC's "consultancy role" to support the development of contemporary artistic and cultural production in the Kingdom.

Another good question, coming from a director of a literary club in Riyadh, Hamad Zaid, was whether AFAC is looking into corporate sponsorships for its sustainability. Private sector supporting the public sector is at the core of much of the Kingdom's social development and Dr. Sultan underlined the crucial role that CSR programs of prominent corporations can play in supporting cultural works. AFAC also assured the attendees that discussions are underway with a number of Saudi corporations, including ARAMCO in Dhahran, SABIC in Riyadh and the E.J Juffali & Brothers in Jeddah. On a closing note, Dr. Sultan and his team thanked AFAC for the presentation and were eager to spread the word about AFAC's programs across all of its 16 branches across the kingdom.

Arriving to the coastal city, Jeddah, the contrast with Riyadh is striking. The architecture of the city is more modest, the traffic is less congested, and the people are visible in the street. Women wear abayas with a touch of color; young people swim in the sea, rollerblade on the corniche, and

Visiting the Coast

drink coffee on picnic mats. An array of public

sculptures also peppers the city, including works by Henry Moore (UK), Victor Vazarely and Cesar Baldicini (France), the Joan Miro (Spain), Alexander Calder (US), Jane ARB (Germany), and Arab artists including Mustafa Sunbul (Egypt) and Rabi'a Al Akhras (Syria).

In addition to the urban vibe and the public art, people's faces in Jeddah also show diversity and openness. Being so near the holy cities of Mecca and Medina, Jeddah has long attracted a diverse mix of settlers; pilgrims and merchants from Africa, just across the Red Sea, from the Levant and from as far afield as Indonesia, Malaysia and the Far East, rendering the local population with a diverse mix that is clearly not segregated by race and united by faith. Many of Jeddah's families have marriages of diverse Arabian and Islamic origins.

As per our usual modus operandi, we set out to meet with the creators and the supporters of Jeddah's contemporary art scene and spent the morning bringing Hatem Abd Al-Jabbar, CEO of the Khalid Juffali Company, up to date with AFAC's developments and arranging for a meeting with Sheikh Khalid, one of AFAC's earliest supporters. Khaled Juffali has recently launched a child health care initiative in collaboration with The Gates Foundation and is recognized as a benefactor throughout the Kingdom.

We also set up a meeting with Hakeem Abdul Hakeem who has been in close communication with AFAC to spread the word about our programs and activities within his artistic circles. Hakeem, together with his wife Reem Al-Habib, have been working hard to develop the acting and directing skills of Saudi youth and are aspiring to create a filmmaking residency, or at least a series of intensive filmmaking workshops, in collaboration with the Manhattan Film Academy. They had already run such a workshop in 2007 and 2008 in Dubai with the aims of developing the art of cinematography in the Gulf. Since connecting with AFAC, Hakeem has been arranging for a public talk for artists, filmmakers and musicians to meet us and learn about the support that we offer. "We are doing all that we can to help elevate the art scene. So much of our

talent is leaving the country because it's hard to find technical and creative support here," explained Hakeem. "Of the 10 female filmmakers I know, 7 have already moved abroad," he said.

The ambition and vision of these Jeddah artists are quite clear. "We need space, training and exposure for our artists to grow. We want to form a legal non-profit organization for filmmakers. We would work as a team and create an artistic hub that supports collaborative efforts. Film also includes music, arts, photography, writing, acting and directing. The talent exists and we are doing everything we can to help it grow. " But the restrictions are visible too.



Gallerist Hamza Serafi in front of artwork by Ahmed Mater "Evolution of Man".

Our next appointment was to meet with Sheikh Khalid Juffali and share with him how far AFAC has grown since 2007, the revamping and consolidation of AFAC in 2011, and the new endowment begun as a sustainability fund for AFAC in 2013. Sheikh Khalid, an early supporter of the AFAC initiative

Meeting the Patrons

and an active philanthropist on many fronts, was

pleased to see of the growth of our progress and invited us to the Juffali residence to present more details on AFAC's work to his wife, Olfat. She welcomed us warmly and we discussed together the different trends in collecting art, the over-hyped contemporary art market and the alternative approaches to supporting the arts. She found the accessibility and transparency of AFAC's granting mechanisms, together with our non-profit orientation, refreshingly level-headed and was happy to introduce us to some of the local galleries and schools to present AFAC's work.

Olfat also shared with us the premiere issue of a new bimonthly publication, Philanthropy Age. It presents the growing dedication among the Saudi elite to support philanthropic causes across a wide spectrum of social needs, with an eye on sustainability for generations to come. Sheikh Khalid Juffali is featured in the publication and states: "The philanthropic potential of Saudi Arabia is huge, and we have not even seen the tip of the iceberg. However, it needs to be well coordinated and organized, and this will be done best on a private basis. The government does a tremendous amount of philanthropic work, but it is unwieldy. Individuals and families are key, through the pooling of intellectual as well as financial resources. There has to be a collective effort because, with numbers comes strength." (White, Andrew. "Strength in Numbers," Philanthropy Age. Issue 01, April – June 2012, p28 – 31). The Sheikh also adds, however, that foundations may have difficulty functioning in the kingdom due to the heightened level of concern about money being channeled to the wrong ends.

الشباب
السعودي. ١٣

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معرض جماعي
أثر غالري

SAUDI
ARTISTS.13

23RD APRIL - 9TH MAY, 2013
GROUP EXHIBITION
ATHR GALLERY

Athr Gallery, Jeddah's leading art gallery, is our next destination. Just a few weeks ago, the gallery had launched its third Young Saudi Artists exhibition (April 23rd) and we are eager to see the works on show. Athr gallery caters to a young and urban vibe and offers a spacious venue suitable

AFAC Speaks at Athr Gallery

for installations
and video works
and all forms
of visual arts.

We have been in communication with Athr Gallery Director, Maya El-Khalil, for several weeks now in order to arrange for a presentation of AFAC to the artists and art patrons of the city. Everything is set and Maya also informs us that her partners in the gallery, Hamza Al Serafi and Mohammad Al Hafez, would like a meeting with AFAC the following afternoon. We set a date and went on with the presentation.

As in our previous talk in Riyadh, the attendees in Jeddah were also very attentive and asked pointed questions on how AFAC's programs can cater specifically to Saudi needs. Local artists are keenly aware that other areas of the Arab world probably have different challenges to face than those of Saudi Arabia. The desire for education, training, guidance and some sort of quality assessment and critical debate about art were strongly called for, especially since the majority of Saudi artists are self-taught and have little theoretical or analytical background in understanding the arts. One visual artists, Mecca-born Ghadah Alrabee, famous for her collages made out of candy wrappers – imagine Vermeer's "Girl with the Pearl Earring" recreated entirely out of Cadbury Chocolates foil paper – wondered if AFAC could offer art education grants instead of art production grants. Another artist questioned the granting mechanism itself and wondered how AFAC can ensure that a grantee doesn't simply 'take the money and run'.

Is Saudi art naïve? Is it sophisticated? Many conceptual works are cleverly critical while remaining open to interpretation. Yet, the accelerated stardom of some of Saudi's contemporary artists, in a context that was once a cultural vacuum, is leaving several young artists with the impression that there's a straight-arrow path from oblivion to success, as if artists can be molded on a conveyor belt. Moreover, few Saudis have ever heard of granting programs or of non-profit foundations interested in supporting the arts for arts' sake. Some are dubious and wondering where's the catch, while others are elated by the idea. Yet most are unfamiliar with the process of writing up concept notes and grant proposals. The need to go more deeply into the arts is expressed by many of the attendees. As one artist said, "technical education is quick and easy, what we want to learn about is creative content."



“Marhaba” (2010) by Sami Turki, Athr Gallery



“World Under Pressure” (2009) by Batoul Shimi, Athr Office



Exterior at Bab Rizk Jameel

We started the day with a morning meeting at the Abdul Latif Jameel Community Initiatives – ALJCI - with Mohammed Yehia Al-Hakami, the director of business development. The fundamental philosophy of the ALJCI founder, Mohammed Abdul Latif Jameel is: "Never forget that life is not just about

Meeting the Abdul Latif Jameel Community Initiative

you – it is about what you can do for others." Building on a resource of wealth initially earned from

the Jameel family's Toyota franchise in 1945 and exclusive dealership in 1955, the ALJCI has over half a century of accumulated wealth dedicated to put supporting the community and giving back to society. The initiatives scope of attention is far reaching, both in terms of target goals as well as geographic spread. It devises and implements strategies for community support in all the cities in which its offices exist, thus benefitting the Middle Eastern region in general, and the Saudi people in particular. With clear strategy and long-term vision, the ALJCI is effectively tackling five main issues: unemployment, education, health & social care, poverty alleviation, and supporting the arts. Visiting the offices, a sense of community service and pride in being part of the ALJCI is evident, as is a high-level awareness and cohesiveness to the different parts of the team.

There is a two-fold approach to ALJCI's programs in that they run parallel tracks, one focusing on internal development and support, the other focusing on international reach and visibility. When it comes to the arts, this too is tackled on many fronts. Contextualizing identity in time and space, connecting past and future, relating the local to the global, and vice versa, are all underlying themes in several of ALJCI's art initiatives. The Jameel Gallery opened at the Victoria and Albert Museum in 2006 offering an important new collection as the permanent exhibition of Islamic arts and a refurbished design highlighting the educational quality of the display. The Jameel Prize is a prestigious award given biannually for contemporary arts and design projects inspired by Islamic culture, also in collaboration with the V&A. The London-based Edge of Arabia seeks to develop the appreciation, recognition and visibility for contemporary Saudi and Arab artists by reaching new audiences and improving understanding through international touring of non-commercial and free exhibitions. Locally, ALJCI is cooperating with the Municipality of Jeddah to restore its rare collection of public sculptures – over 27 steel works of various sizes, created by renowned regional and international artists – under



the supervision of the British company Plowden & Smith specialized in sculpture restoration. A public art park on the corniche has been set aside on 700 square meters to become an open-air museum for Jeddah residents and visitors.

AFAC presented in brief the goal and scope of its region-wide programs and its vision for a thriving cultural scene across the Arab region. We also expressed our desire to spread awareness about AFAC to the local artists so that Saudi contemporary production can be supported and recognized within an independently run system that allows them deeper engagement and visibility on the regional cultural landscape. Mohammed Al-Hakami viewed our endeavor positively and recommended we visit Arabian Wings. Together with the ALJCI's art and culture manager Zain Zedan, we set up an appointment to meet the artists and sculptors of Arabian Wings later that evening.



Abdul Latif Jameel Community (ALJCI) Initiative director Mohammed Y. Hakami, Oussama Rifahi, Zena Takieddine and ALJCI Art & Culture initiative manager Zain S. Zedan.

EDGE OF ARABIA

INTRODUCTION

EDGE OF ARABIA IS A GROUND BREAKING INITIATIVE PROMOTING AND EMPOWERING CONTEMPORARY ARTISTS FROM SAUDI ARABIA. THIS IS THE FIRST PROJECT OF ITS KIND AND IS PLAYING A SIGNIFICANT ROLE IN ENHANCING INTERNATIONAL CULTURAL RELATIONSHIPS AND DEVELOPING CREATIVE INDUSTRIES WITHIN SAUDI.

FOLLOWING EXHIBITIONS IN LONDON AND VENICE, EDGE OF ARABIA, IN PARTNERSHIP WITH ABDULLATIF JAMEEL COMMUNITY INITIATIVES AND SAGIA, LAUNCHED A WORLD TOUR FROM THE 2010 GLOBAL COMPETITIVENESS FORUM IN RIYADH.

مقدمة

EDGE OF ARABIA هو حجر الأساس لمبادرة وليدة تهدف لتعزيز وتمكين الفنانين المعاصرين في المملكة العربية السعودية. وهذا المشروع هو الأول من نوعه. ومن شأنه أن يلعب دوراً هاماً في تحسين العلاقات الثقافية الدولية. وتطوير الأعمال الإبداعية في المملكة.

بعد إقامة معارض فنية في لندن وفينيسيا. فإن EDGE OF ARABIA ومبادرات عبداللطيف جميل الاجتماعية والهيئة العامة للإستثمار يشعرون بالفخر للإعلان عن إطلاق جولة فنية عالمية إعتباراً من منتدى التنافسية الدولي ٢٠١٠.



Saudi Arabian General Investment Authority
SAGIA
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Saudi Arabian General Investment Authority



Abdullatif Jameel
Community Initiatives

FOUNDING SPONSOR:
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We then went to meet with the leadership team of Athr Gallery to follow up on the public talk we gave the previous evening and to discuss strategies for supporting the contemporary art movement. Athr's three-member team is a promising combination which will probably succeed in

Lunch with the Athr Team

becoming a world-renowned gallery. Hamza Al Serafi, larger-

than-life, embodies the heart and soul of art appreciation, the fiery Mohamed Hafez is the driving force with competitive edge to bring recognition to Saudi talent on an international level and Maya El-Khalil is the elegant and quiet strategist laying the groundwork for the gallery's long-term vision. For the fifth consecutive year, Athr Gallery has been chosen to represent the Saudi art scene at Art Dubai 2013 and aims to expand its presence beyond the Gulf and on to a global level. Oussama commended them for their aspiration and advised them to keep a well-organized record of these early days as it will be a valuable archive for the future. The possibilities of hosting a residency program for artists and of offering a prize was also discussed, with recommendations to meet and discuss further in Beirut. Hamza then swiftly swept us all off to a Sushi lunch in one of Jeddah's trendier venues, making it just in time before the doors closed for prayer. We were joined by Lebanese artist Ziad Antar who is also working with Athr Gallery on his latest photography project.

Athr Gallery director Maya Khalil, Oussama Rifahi, Mohammed Hafiz, Hamza Serafi and Zena Takieddine.





Ziad Antar and Maya Khalil planning the next art move over lunch.

The space at Qutouf is ultra-modern, creative and user-friendly; Google-esque. It has an open design with flowing energy that would make a feng-shui expert proud. Nor would it be misplaced as an SME incubator in Silicon valley. Yet, here we are in Jeddah, meeting the city's young YouTube

Meeting the Jeddah YouTubers

celebrities. The gathering has been organized by Hakeem Abdul Hakeem and his wife Reem Al-Habib for us to meet some of the most active YouTube producers, actors, scriptwriters and musicians. It is a very different vibe from corporate offices, gallery showrooms and art patron's homes. Here, we feel the energy of possibility and creation, spontaneity and enthusiasm. Many thanks go to Reem and Hakeem; they are a dynamic duo, forming a support group for the artistically inclined, hosting acting workshops in their family home to hone the YouTubers' skills, and connecting the right people with the right places.

The Saudi artists have their own 'hippie' look that mixes Islamic and traditional Saudi garb with clear statements of originality and independence. Gathering at Qutouf's lecture hall, it is also an attractive fusion of old and new, a tiered semi-circular modern auditorium with Bedouin style cushion. We presented the overview of AFAC's programs and cultural philanthropy strategy to this eager crowd and expressed our frank admiration for the success that Saudi YouTubers have made. The real question was, can there be a place created alongside the YouTube industry for more creative production? The distinction was also made between the Riyadh YouTube scene and the Jeddah one, whereby the former is perceived as one of higher quality, though it emerges in a stricter atmosphere, while the Jeddah productions are more light-hearted and popular, but perhaps not as deeply meaningful. A heated discussion ensued about the impact of YouTube on creative production and the need to develop quality standards. "Anyone can film something and post it, there are no quality standards," said Saudi musician and producer Diya Azzony of Al-Farabi. "Saudi artists are so skilled in learning the techniques of filming, but we are missing high quality content," said Salwa Baarma, director at Hekaya Productions. "We don't need grants with some training on the side; we need training with some grants on the side," emphasized Mohammad Al-Asadi.

Oussama informed the group of the new documentary program launched by AFAC and of the annual Cinema program which is currently open for all forms of film: short, experimental, animation and feature-length narratives. He encouraged the attendees to think of a different format for

work, not to replace the commercial industry that currently occupies them, but to create alongside it a space for more serious artistic content. Why not make quality films, short to medium length, for YouTube dissemination, since the audiences and distribution channels are so clearly present? "You know, the films that make it to the big screen festivals are probably seen by no more than a couple of thousand viewers at best. Here you have millions of viewers! Somewhere in between these two ends of the spectrum, we can cultivate high quality creative productions. They will be less entertainment-oriented and will probably have less viewership than your current millions, but they will still be more than what gets seen in the festival circuit and it will allow you to develop your creativity into a more thoughtful level of production, free of commercial constraints." The attendees reflected on this idea and were eager to explore it, though many still insisted that a filmmaker's dream is to make it onto the big screen, no matter how popular the YouTube hits are.



To encourage applications from the attendees, Hakeem then made a surprise announcement. The first local filmmaker to win a grant from AFAC's cinema program or documentary film program will be awarded with 5 days of free camera and film equipment usage from their partner company, Millimeter - a leading production equipment company owned by Adnan Badeed.

Hakeem also announced his plans to invite experts from the Manhattan Film Academy to offer workshops and intensive trainings, news that was received with another round of enthusiastic applause. A pleasing aspect of this group is that, while they all do commercial work and the industry has grown competitive, the sense of collaboration and mutual support remains at their core when it comes to developing non-commercial projects and works of art.



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Qotuf



Salwa Baarma, Director at Hekaya Productions –speaking with Abdullah Mando, Executive Producer at Uturn, during the AFAC public talk at Qutouf.



Jeddah's YouTube filmmakers and musicians meeting with AFAC at Qutouf.



Producer Abdullah Mando, actress/filmmaker Rima Al-Habib and Oussama Rifahi holding up the Uturn business card.

The day was not over yet and we drove northward across the entire length of the very long Prince Sultan Street to meet again with Mohammad Al-Hakami and Zain Zedan at the Arabian Wings Gallery. Run by husband and wife team Mohammed Bahrawi and Najlaa Felemban, the gallery first

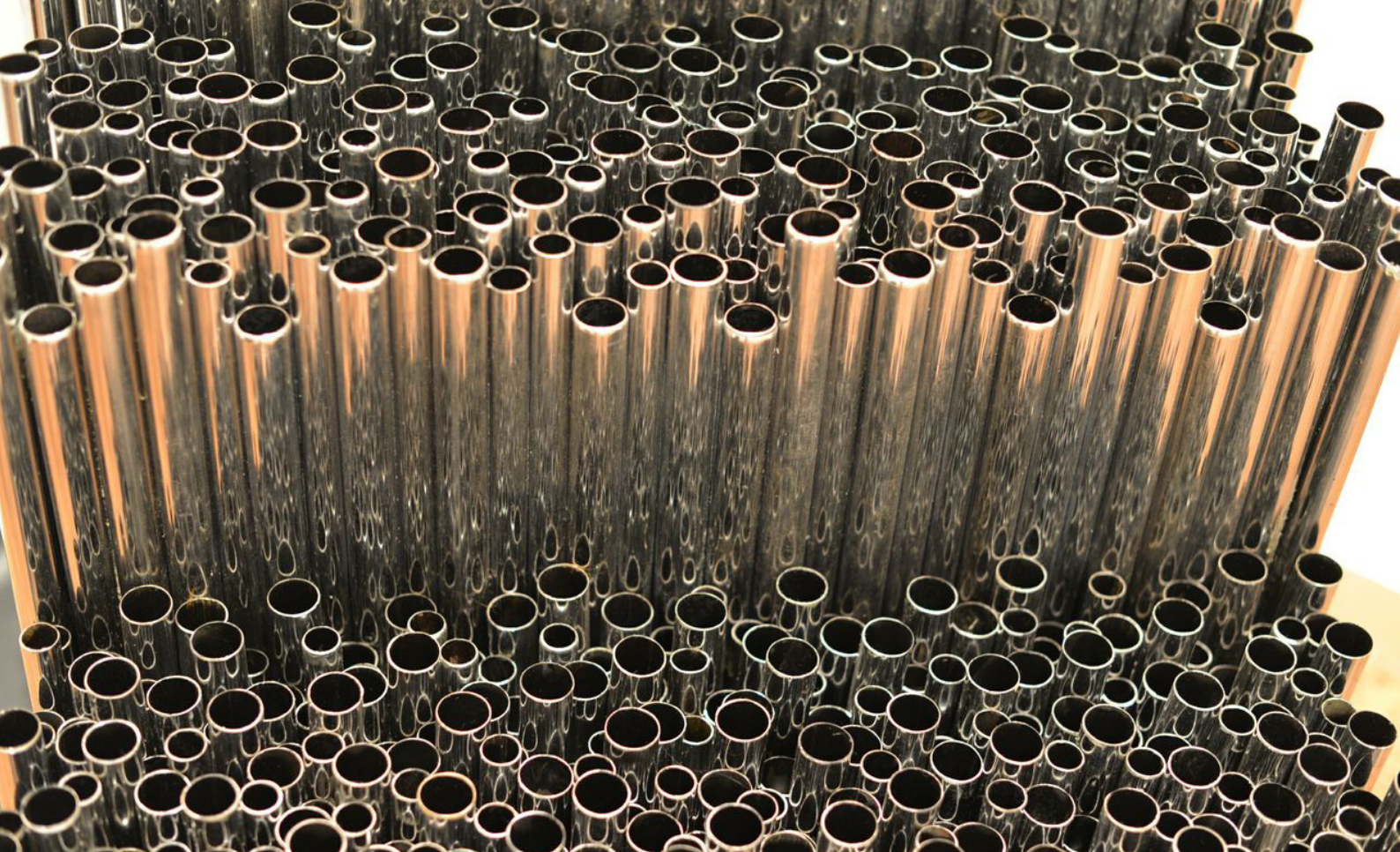
Arabian Wings

opened in 2006 and, more recently, they

were adopted by the ALJCI in recognition of the important role the emerging art scene is offering, both in terms of discovering creativity and supporting art education and appreciation. Notably, the gallery had launched the very first Saudi Sculpture competition in the Kingdom. It was not too long ago when the idea of figurative painting and sculpting was considered taboo. Chosen media included bronze casting, stone carving and installations made of manipulated commercial products and found objects. There was also local media coverage of the event. For a country where art education hardly exists – arts and crafts are taught under home economics, together with cooking and sowing—there was no shortage of talent and clearly an eagerness for art appreciation.

“Not for Sale” is the title of one of the art pieces, a hanging chain-link mesh in the shape of the Saudi kingdom. The artist, also the creative director of the gallery, Khalid Bin Afif, explains that the chain link symbolizes the unity of the kingdom, that the Saudi identity is pervasive across the country and cannot be broken apart or bought.





"Steps" (2013) by Khuloud Muaz, Arabian Wings gallery.



"I See You" (2012) by Raed Al-Layhani, Arabian Wings gallery.



"The Workers" (2012) by Mohammad Haidar, Arabian Wings gallery.



"Detail from 'Freedom' triptych" (2012) by Abd Al-Rahman Al-Dukhaini, Arabian Wings gallery.



Discussions at the Arabian Wings office with Oussama Rifahi, Khalid bin Afif and ALJCI's Mohammed Hakami.



لان البحر صحراء الم دائم
للراجلين الى النور
بحثا عن حب
يضيء لهم حياة اخرى



A hunger for learning and developing human resources in the artistic and cultural fields is paramount. It is the largest Arab state in Western Asia, second only to Algeria in terms of geographic size, and with a population estimated at 28 million, of which 17 million are citizens with a majority below the age of 25. Saudi Arabia is a country with a lot of energy and an abundance of resources. The true desire is to create and to

Conclusion

engage with the rest of the world in a way that is

fresh and new while connected to Saudi identity. The hunger for learning is probably something that needs to be addressed step by step, with a long term vision.

In the meantime, Saudi artists should not be shy in applying to AFAC's programs and competing with their counterparts from across the region. Saudi creativity is undeniable and the Saudi art scene is striking, diverse and savvy despite all its limitations. AFAC's regional programs can play a rare opportunity to support Saudi artists and connect them to the creative circles in the rest of the Arab region and internationally.

Regarding the YouTubers, the channels for online distribution are uniquely voluminous in the kingdom and there is a robust industry in place for commercial work. The same channels can be developed to serve a more serious art scene. This would need a virtual forum for creative works that are not profit oriented. More importantly, it would need creative capacity building workshops for the artists themselves. AFAC intends to design specific programs that can offer training for Saudi artists and filmmakers and stir up their emergent talent.

We have also discovered during this visit a breed of true philanthropists in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. Individuals and corporations alike believe in channeling support to creative production and works of art as a means to promote a more positive image and to overcome the flat stereotypes and misconceptions about the Kingdom. Many of Saudi's philanthropists are well connected with Western academic and philanthropic institutions and seek to improve cultural and diplomatic connections through shared artistic projects. There seems to be a cultural renaissance in the making and AFAC intends to explore and accompany this movement in collaboration with local Saudi artists and art patrons.



"New Year" (2010) by Jowhara Al Saud, Athr Gallery.