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On Nostalgia and Material Culture in the Hijaz: An Interview with Sarah Al Abdali

Rosie Bsheer, Tuesday 12 Nov 2013

Sarah Mohanna Al Abdali is part of a generation of contemporary Saudi artists currently experimenting with public art



Born in Jeddah, Sarah Mohanna Al Abdali hails from a family with a rich Hijazi history and has grown up with a deep appreciation of the land, architecture, and heritage of the coastal region of Saudi Arabia, which is a recurring theme in her work. With the ever-changing physical landscape, Al Abdali feels alienated from the contemporary Hijazi city and seeks to share her imagined vision of a place that no longer exists, largely through public art. In this interview, Al Abdali contextualizes her artistic and political commitments and interventions in a fledgling popular art scene in Saudi Arabia.

Rosie Bsheer (RB): Can you tell us about your background and how you entered the world of street art in Saudi Arabia? What artistic and cultural forms have most influenced your style and work?

Sarah Mohanna Al Abdali (SMA): I come from a graphic design background, having studied and worked as a graphic designer for about two years. The work I have thus far produced reflects my longtime interest in both history and politics and seeks to spread awareness of issues that play a central role in shaping everyday social life. These range from encouraging reading as a habit amongst the youth and visualizing the politics of heritage construction to spreading knowledge about the Palestinian struggle through online magazines.

Free artistic expression is a challenge in some parts of the world, and in Saudi Arabia, both the

authorities and certain sectors of the population work, together and separately, to limit and control cultural production. They attempt to censor work that addresses issues they consider to be taboo, such as religion. Many continue to avoid such critical work out of fear of the attendant legal repercussions. However, I have been able to take advantage of my design background—with the discipline being inherently solution-driven—in order to overcome the host of socio-political challenges and experiment with various channels of expressions and communication.

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I was eager to express my thoughts on and critiques of the politics of development, architectural landscapes, modern aesthetics, historical amnesia, and socio-political inequalities, among others. This sense of loss, coupled with a desire for a different future, compelled me to share these ideas with the wider public on the walls of my city, Jeddah. I was therefore inspired by critique first and foremost, and the artform consequently followed. Informed and inspired by the Hijazi culture and aesthetics, I have since experimented with various genres, artistic traditions, and mediums, including oil painting, film, photography, and illustration.

RB: There is a great sense of nostalgia in your work, particularly of Hijazi material culture and lost pasts. You also use humor/satire to critique current social, political, and cultural practices, including gender inequalities and capitalist development. Can you elaborate on your understanding of these processes and contextualize the ways in which they have shaped you as an artist?

SMA: As already mentioned, the Hijazi element has a strong presence in all my work and increasingly shapes my artistic and political thinking, especially as the already slight Hijazi material culture is actively destroyed and marginalized. When I was invited to participate in Edge Of Arabia's #cometogether and create a piece for one of the streets in Bricklane, I happened to be going over my father's archive of old photographs. I dwelled on the images of neighbors, brothers, sisters, and even tourists, posing in front of the long-lost houses of Hijazis who had hosted them, given the absence of hotel accommodations.

Some photographs were taken in Harat al-Sham in old Jeddah where my father's family lived, and where I actually installed the art piece, Fain Majlisi. Others were taken in the homes of relatives. I tried to imagine what the characters in the photographs would say if they woke up and found themselves in Bricklane! The intention behind choosing and experimenting with old photographs in particular aims to resurrect lost worlds, built environments, and senses of belonging that are continuously being replaced and silenced by the hegemonic culture, and esthetics, of the modern state. These images thus capture everyday life before the wave of materialism, consumerism, and high-rise buildings took over the Saudi landscape in the 1960s, permanently altering the socio-cultural landscape of the Hijaz.

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My ideas are mostly inspired from al-Balad, the once-walled in historic town in Jeddah whose residents and land owners abandoned in the mid-to-late nineteenth century for modern housing and accommodations outside the city walls. The unique style of Hijazi architecture there continues to be neglected despite alleged efforts at preserving its historical architecture and importance. Most of al-Balad's buildings continue to suffer from environmental and human degradation, with some even burning down in recent years. The town today hosts markets for textiles, spices, and other basic goods and is dotted with migrants living and working in these unenviable conditions.

While al-Balad does not have the necessary infrastructure of a modern-day tourist destination, local

and foreign visitors go there for its cultural, architectural, and historic value. For people like me, nostalgic for a past they have never lived but grew up hearing about, al-Balad is the ideal location, where the past, present, and hopefully the future, can meet. After all, despite the nation-state building project, many Hijazis continue to identify as such and feel a strong sense of affinity and belonging with the Hijazi past.

Fain Majlisi, in which I show my great grandfather sitting in a majlis [council] in al-Balad, attempts to capture this sense of loss. The majlis is a social and political meeting place that was once an important element in the Hijazi tradition of bringing people together to discuss, debate, and even play games such as Carrom (a board game of Asian origin) and card games such as Baloot. I try to put myself in my grandfather's shoes and wonder what he would say upon seeing the current state of al-Balad, where he had lived. The speech bubble translates into: "Where's my majlis?" questioning the reason behind the loss of that important social space which was once an essential element in Hijazi life and society.

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I am also inspired by everyday social life and struggles in Saudi Arabia, and my work is often based on my experiences and those of people I encounter on a daily basis. While I am interested in women's issues and struggles, I never planned to tackle gender politics and inequalities per se. I was, however, compelled to address the latter because of the seeming obsession with overprotecting "girls" and "girls' honor" and the forms of control that are exercised over women in Saudi Arabia. When highlighting social norms and contradictions therein, I do so sarcastically because of the subversive power of humor. One example is my Saudi rendition of Asmahan's Gharam Wa Intiqam (Love and Revenge), a 1944, black-and-white Egyptian classic film. In this adaptation, a Saudi girl begs her father to let her travel and live abroad. The father, in an ironic patriarchal and masochistic tone, warns her of the "dangers" of such dreams.

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RB: What are the major events and processes that shaped your artistic trajectory and its politicization?

SMA: The ongoing destruction and construction schemes in Mecca have intensified my sense of political and cultural marginalization. In Mecca, Masjid al-Haram [Grand Mosque], the holiest site in Islam, is a place where all Muslims are supposed to be equal, a fact that is highlighted during the hajj season. Yet, the upscale King AbdulAziz Endowment Project (Abraj al-Bait Towers) overshadows the mosque on one side, while the Jabal Omar Development overshadows it on the other side. Other five- and seven-star megaprojects consisting of more skyscrapers, apartment buildings, and hotels geared for the comfort of the upper classes, are sure to ring in the mosque in the years to come.

In order to construct Mecca based on this new, "modernizing" vision and under the excuse of accommodating the ever-increasing number of pilgrims, old sites, some dating back to the time of the prophet, have been demolished. What little is left of the Meccan/Hijazi identity and its material culture is being completely destroyed. What once was a cultural and economic entrepôt that prided itself on the diversity of its cultural and social traditions is today no different than any other commercial metropolitan city.

RB: What do you hope to achieve through your work, and who is your target audience? Generally, how has your work been received?

SMA: I see every artwork as a learning process that reveals great meaning and self-understanding. I attempt to practice Islamic traditional arts as a way of connecting to the surroundings within which I live. As an admirer of the architecture of the Hijaz, I aspire to understand and experiment with some of the crafts that undergird the old landscape. I am currently completing my Master's degree in Islamic Arts, which I view as a transitional phase yet one that has immensely influenced my work and thinking in general. I plan to work with different mediums and styles used traditionally throughout the Hijaz and the Muslim world. I believe there is space for innovation in the traditional crafts. Among these, I have developed an interest in tile making, wood carving, and gypsum sculpting as well as miniature painting.

A part of reviving the neglected old city relies on bringing such crafts to life. I am currently trying to find the few remaining craftsmen in the Hijaz in order to learn from them through conversation as well as their actual crafts, given they have mostly given up their trade due to old age. The reviving of old crafts in the Hijaz is an arduous and long project as many of the crafts are difficult to master and the trade is on the verge of becoming extinct. Because of the lack of skilled carpenters and wood carvers, for example, the roshan—a traditional window in Hijazi architecture, similar to the mashrabiya in Cairo—has become a rare sight. Some of the already few renovation projects in al-Balad have poorly produced the roshan because of the lack of skilled labor. I am hoping to work collaboratively with craftsmen and learn from them how to revive such traditions. I also plan to travel regularly to meet local craftsmen in Egypt and Turkey where they still practice and produce traditional crafts.

I hope to avoid the general commercial direction that Saudi art is largely taking. Various independent art galleries have emerged in the Saudi market lately, but these have turned many artists into business people first and foremost, with art pieces becoming projects that audiences invest in rather than appreciate. I care to produce public art that touches the reality of ordinary people who interact with it. I find traditional arts as a productive venue through which to do so, one that also challenges the predominant capitalist consumerist trend, both in the Saudi art world and in the built landscape. I appreciate that while there's a master for each craft, a craft can actually be taught and practiced until mastered: it is a learned skill. Collaboration is also an essential trait in most of the traditionally practiced crafts, whereby the craftsman's workshop becomes a social space that brings together students, master craftsmen, and others interested in learning more about the craft.

As to reception, my work has received mixed reviews from the Saudi public, based more on the subject matter rather than the actual "piece," which really motivates me to carry on. "Makkah street sign," for example, has created an interesting and much-needed discussion concerning the real estate developments in Mecca. Surprisingly, Fain majlisi was removed a week after its installation in al-Balad. I personally do not know who removed it, but I found it interesting that efforts were invested to remove artwork and yet the random names and phone numbers that pepper the walls remain at large.

RB: What is, and has been, the influence of art and cultural expression on everyday life in Saudi Arabia?

SMA: Cultural expression in its varied forms has shaped the ongoing struggle to define both individual and group identity in Saudi Arabia, which is a collage of different cultural, social, religious, and political formations. The once diverse lifeworlds of the past—Hijazi or otherwise—have been erased by the homogenizing imperatives of the modern state and its powerful institutions. Non-official modes of expression, identity, and belonging are no longer tolerated or accommodated. If anything, they are easily dismissed as subversive and as such, a target of state disciplining and punishment. Given the lack of spaces of expression, social media has emerged in the last few years as a conduit of social, cultural, and political articulation—what many describe as a "parallel reality"—with great consequence

to popular culture.

This level of exposure, interaction, and debate has made visible an existing group of artists, comedians, musicians, etc. and led to a new generation of popular cultural producers. Comics and illustrations have become a regular daily occurrence and go viral on the Internet as a response to certain political and social events. A new wave of YouTube shows and films that represent the youth and the struggles they face on a daily basis have become equally popular. 3al6ayer (On The Fly), the most widely viewed of them, regularly and openly critiques the destruction of Mecca, gender disparities, state and private institutional corruption, and other political, social, and cultural issues that are labeled as “sensitive.” 3al6ayer’s Omar Hussein has set a trend in popular online satirical and stand-up comedy shows, with numerous other similar YouTube shows popping up in the Saudi digital world.

On the one hand, there is an interesting response taking place among the creative audience to what goes on in the political scene. On the other hand, art is becoming a popular trend and easier world to access and participate in, with many artists embodying the motto: “Art is for art's sake”. There are a plethora of Saudi artists today trying to carve a space for Saudi popular art. There are many talents, and the art scene is taking different and diverse directions.

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