

# Saudi artists find a voice in Edge of Arabia's Jeddah exhibition

A provocative new exhibit in Jeddah indicates a growing push to develop the Saudi Arabian art scene.



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It is Thursday night in Jeddah, Saudi Arabia's relatively laid-back second city on its Red Sea coast. The streets and roundabouts are predictably gridlocked: cars pile in, seemingly aimless in their bumper-to-bumper odyssey. There is little cafe culture here, no cinemas and few public goings-on once the sun sets.

But last Thursday, the streets leading to Jeddah's corniche were packed for a very different reason: behind the floodlit facade of a half-built mall, a vast exhibition of contemporary art from the kingdom opened its doors.

In this raw, concrete setting, with exposed piping and scratched walls, Saudi high society converged before 40 artworks by 22 different artists. Under the provocative title of *We Need to Talk*, it attempts to navigate a past, present and imagined future in Saudi Arabia, narrated by an outspoken band of big-hitting artists and new

talent. Open to the public until February 18, it is an Edge of Arabia (EoA) production, an initiative launched in 2008 that aims to promote Saudi artistic output.

With art programmes absent from most curriculums, and with few galleries across the country, EoA has positioned itself as an educational resource and way to connect younger artists with more established figures in the country.

The Jeddah exhibition is the culmination of EoA's ambitious 2010-2011 world tour, taking its stable of talent to Istanbul, Berlin, Dubai and the Venice Biennale. EoA has produced heavyweight monographs in that time, and in December brought 10 young artists to Saudi on an educational expedition across the kingdom.

"I think the exhibition in Jeddah is the end of a chapter, and it feels as if the original vision has been fulfilled," says Stephen Stapleton, the initiative's founder. "We set out to create a bridge between Saudi artists and the art world. I think that was done to some extent via this tour."

Ahmed Mater, in particular, has watched demand for his work grow at an extraordinary pace since the group's first show in 2008. His 2010 piece, *Evolution of Man*, showing the metamorphosis of an electric blue symbol of a petrol pump into a human skeleton holding a loaded gun to its head, has become a grim but poignant ensign for Saudi art's international march. This new exhibition demonstrates a significant progression of his practice.

For *Cowboy Code II*, Mater has cut up thousands of rings of gunpowder caps, the sort found in toy guns, to spell out the system of morals advocated by the 1940s country singer Gene Autry to his scores of young listeners. Alongside that, again cut into the caps, he's spelt out examples from the Prophet Mohammed's Hadith, referring to statements and actions of the Prophet held as core ethical guidelines in Islam.

Stapleton says that aside from gaining recognition for EoA artists, the other side of the initiative aimed "to connect Saudi with itself".

On opening night, this manifests itself twofold in *We Need To Talk*. On one level, the exhibiting artists hail from a broad sweep of Saudi cities - Dammam, Riyadh, Jeddah, Aseer - but take also the groups of abaya-clad women reading messages hidden in layers of painted rubber stamps, which Abdunasser Gharem has carefully stacked to recreate an exact copy of the road signs found above Saudi's highways.

It is a long road towards the East and a short road to the West in the image, with a mysterious third exit pointing upwards to an unspecified yonder. The piece points to a sense of crossroads, gravitating around the uprisings in parts of the region, but it's the visual language with which this is said that resonates.

"These things wake people up because it's related to their daily life," says the artist. "They see a road sign in the street, but when they see it in a gallery it's different, it's changed."

Speaking directly to and involving those who know the country's nuances well is at the crux of this exhibition. Manal Al Dowayan's new work typifies this best. "There is a strange societal phobia associated with a woman's name," said the artist in a presentation after opening night, explaining that an awkwardness has arisen among young men about saying their mothers' names in public.

Dowayan ran a series of lectures and discussions for women in Jeddah and Riyadh, spreading word via Facebook, in which she asked the large assembly: "Do you want to be an object? If not, then teach your children to say your name."

This developed into workshops in the two cities in which 150 women wrote their names on to large wooden beads. These were then threaded together by Bedouin women using hand-woven silk and camel bag rope to create oversized replicas of prayers beads.

Dowayan hung these like a proud offering in the exhibition space, and several of the women - from divergent parts of Saudi society - attended opening night to try to find their names among the beads.

Participation has ignited Dowayan's recent practice, but this notion seems to be at the centre of how some see this EoA show can energise the local scene itself.

Mohammed Hafiz is the curator behind this exhibition and co-founded Jeddah's Athr Gallery with the artist Hamza Serafi in 2008, creating the country's most internationally active commercial gallery.

"This is not just about showing artwork," he says. "Saudis have been directly involved in all aspects of this exhibition, from the Saudi designers hired to create the products around it, to the Saudi patrons who supported us to the film crew documenting its development.

"It's about empowering creative industry in Saudi Arabia, and creating a cycle of employment for Saudis across all elements within that."

Athr has just opened a new show of folded stainless steel works by the EoA artist Ayman Yossri Daydban, a cerebral show that will challenge gallery-goers. It operates and inspires by example, hoping that new galleries spring up in their wake, and has helped a small, experimental space open elsewhere in the mall that they are housed in.

This vision is perhaps how EoA will have a wider effect in Saudi Arabia. There is talk of a permanent space for EoA in Jeddah, more of an arts education centre than a museum.

Elsewhere, Stapleton talks about a tour of midwestern America's major institutions in 2012, a pan-Arab show in London during the Olympics and overcoming the final hurdles in setting up a permanent space (Crossway Foundation) in the UK capital to foster cultural exchange with the Middle East.

A chapter may close with *We Need to Talk*, but the need and hunger for more was apparent on opening night. The well-fanned fire of international interest that followed this world tour has travelled back to Jeddah. It now needs some enterprising sort to pick that up and light some more torches on Saudi soil.

*We Need to Talk* continues at *Al Furusia Marina, Jeddah until February 18.*

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