

As the country with largest number of active contemporary artists in the Gulf, and the longest history of sending its artists overseas to study, Saudi Arabia's contemporary art scene has been slowly blossoming over the last few years. The reason, according to art writer Myrna Ayad, is simple: it's good.

"The art is very impressive. It's provocative, there's intellectual engagement, thought, craft," she says. As editor of *Contemporary Kingdom: The Saudi Art Scene Now*, a 360-page book published last year that surveys visual arts practices from the Kingdom, Ayad says she "knew in five years we'd have to do a second volume. That's how progressive the Saudi artists are."

Art in the Kingdom, she continues, is supported by an army of cultural protagonists who believe in it. "What's amazing is this community

effort – everyone has each other's back, they all want to support Saudi Arabian art," she says.

And this army isn't just Saudi, says artist and curator Lulwah Al Homoud. For the Shanghai World Expo in 2010, Homoud co-curated *Nabatt: A Sense of Being*, featuring over 23 Saudi artists and 130 contemporary works from the Kingdom, at the Shanghai Duolun Museum of Modern Art.

"The museum said if the works were not up to museum standard, they would not accept them," Homoud recalls. "They did not refuse one piece – they thought they were all of international level. And the Chinese were amazed by the Saudi art because we had conceptual and different mediums. It created a lot of interest."

Homoud is one of five female Saudi partners of Cube Arts gallery in Dubai, which focuses on art from the Kingdom and the wider Gulf region. "Creativity is really high in Saudi Arabia and the art is very diverse,"

she says. "If you look at the south [of the country], it's completely different to the north. In the gallery, for example, we have artwork from the south that uses really bold colours, while in the desert area [artists] use more sandy colours. You wouldn't think the pieces were from the same country sometimes."

The gallery has experienced keen interest from both regional and international collectors, buoyed by initiatives such as Art Dubai that bring art audiences to the city. "Saudi art has been in the market, especially during the last five years," Homoud says. "What we're trying to bring now is [the understanding] that Saudi art did not pop up suddenly. There has been a long movement and that's why we show artists like Mohammad Siam and Mohammad Al A'ajam. They are like the old masters of Saudi art, so it's not just contemporary."

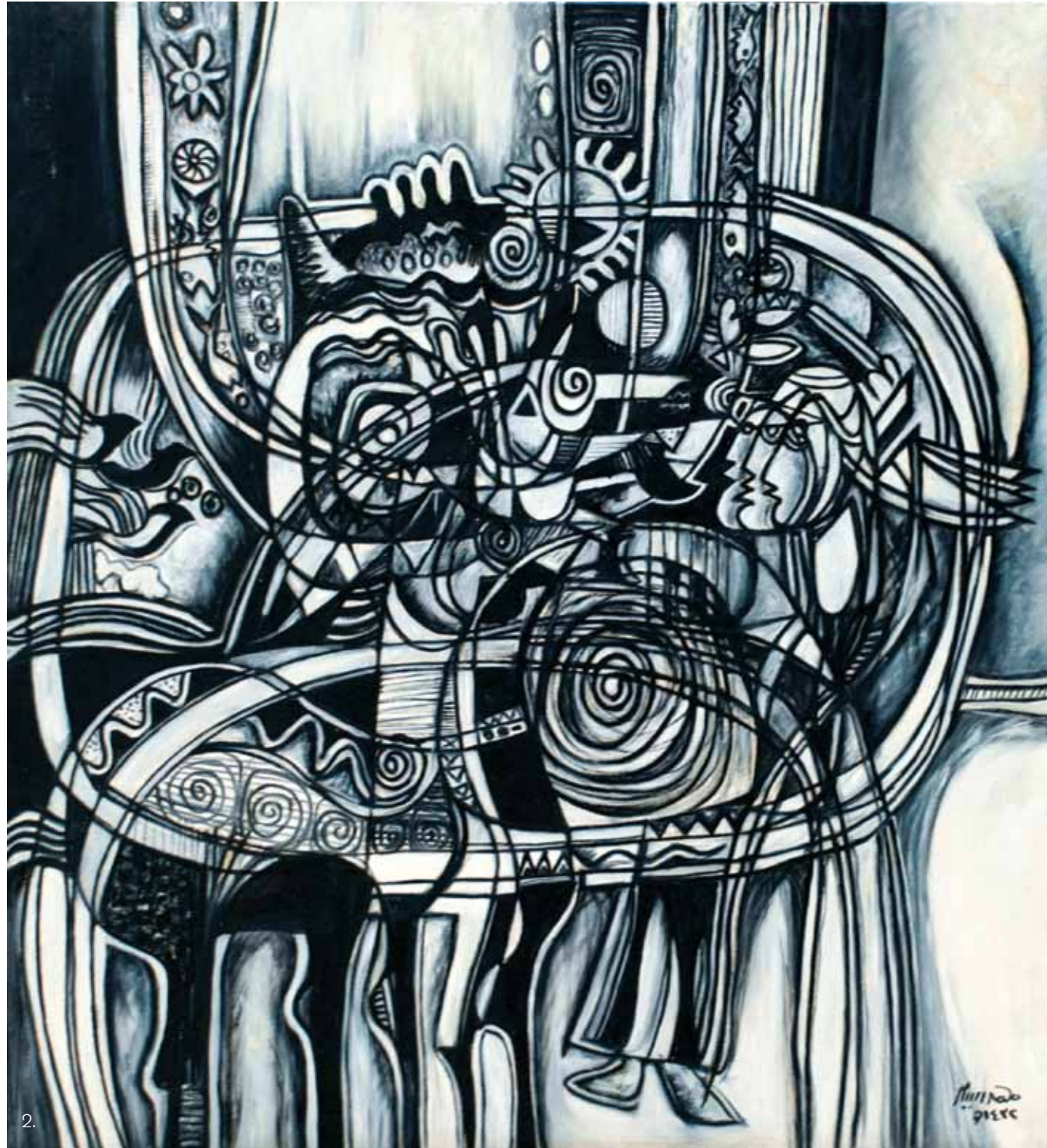
The misconception that Saudi contemporary art emerged from a vacuum only in the past few years

CREATIVE KINGDOM

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Saudi Arabia's contemporary art scene is on the rise. AIR looks at its emergence and the challenges it faces





1. Abdulrahman Al Nughaimshi
Spirit, 2014
Acrylic on canvas
70 x 100 cm

2. Mohammad Siam
Siamism 5, 2009
Acrylic on canvas
100 x 120 cm

3. Mohammad Al Ajlan
Untitled, 2012
Acrylic on canvas, newspaper and
glue
100 x 100 cm

All images courtesy of Cube Arts and the artists.

was also the theme of a recent exhibition in Jeddah. Fast Forward, curated by Bashar Al Shroogi as part of the second edition of the 21,39' Jeddah Arts festival, featured works from pioneering artists such as Abdulhalim Radwi, Abdunasser Gharem and Ahmed Mater.

“Why did we call it Fast Forward?” asks Shroogi. “When we talk about the story of art in Saudi Arabia, you might think that we mean the art movement since 2008. What we tried to accomplish [with the exhibition] was to say that there were several achievements and expressions before this date that laid the foundations of the contemporary movement.”

Some of these pivotal moments included Jeddah mayor Mohammed Said Farsi's efforts in the 1970s to bring art to the city's public spaces with sculptures by local and international artists such as Henry Moore and Joan Miró, which are still in place today. Gharem and Mater, meanwhile, were among a handful of Saudi artists who emerged from the influential Al Miftaha Artists' Village in Abha in the 1990s. The pair went on to co-found the Edge of Arabia collective in 2003 with British artist Stephen Stapleton, which has exhibited in Europe and the Middle East and is currently touring the US.

The internet also played a key role. “Artists had more access to information, more access to other art and artists,” says Ayad. “At the same time, the Middle Eastern art industry was booming so all of this planted the seed for where we are today.”

While new initiatives such as 21,39' Jeddah Arts have been embraced by the art community, more government support is needed. “Government support is very minimal,” says Ayad, “so a lot of the responsibility falls on the patrons and galleries like Athr in Jeddah, who I think is a pioneer because it doesn't just serve as a commercial space, it offers workshops and training programmes.”



Homoud agrees that galleries are leading the way. “I think we're doing some kind of role that the government needs to do, which is bringing the cultural face of the country to the outside [world].”

The lack of critical thinking is also a key challenge, she believes. “We have a lot happening, but most of the time art exhibitions are covered in the [Saudi] media as events. We really need serious

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art critics in Saudi because only when there is serious criticism can you differentiate between good and bad. We don't want [contemporary art] to be a bubble, we want the development to be steady.”

Both women believe Western stereotypes mean Saudi Arabia is often misunderstood internationally. “The media doesn't give justice to the country,” says Homoud. “There's a lot happening, but [the rest of the world] doesn't see the positive

aspects, they only see the negative aspects. And this is what we try to bring – it's not propaganda, but we want people to see [Saudi art] and make up their own mind.”

And while contemporary art is often used to express political views or make social statements, Western audiences must bear in mind that the Kingdom's art scene is part of a society that is the centre of the Islamic world and reflects long-held values and traditions. “Nudity, for example, has never been in our culture as Muslims,” says Homoud. “The concept Muslims work on is very universal – it's about God, it's about creation, so it has nothing to do with people or nudes.”

Ultimately, though, Homoud hopes art will help bridge gaps between Saudi and Western cultures. “I believe 100 per cent that art brings people together and politics divides them,” she says. “Culturally, if we look at the Islamic civilisation they adopted so many different cultures and built upon them. For example, if you look at the most beautiful mosques they were originally Byzantine churches. I think merging cultures is a good thing.”