Reviews


In recent years contemporary Saudi art has gained unprecedented attention from both Arab and Western audiences. Artistic work including paintings, photographs, and sculptures has been exhibited in a number of international venues including larger exhibitions on Middle Eastern or Gulf art, such as *The Language of the Desert* held in Bonn, Paris, and Abu Dhabi between 2005 and 2007, and smaller exhibitions on Saudi art only, e.g. *Zeitgenössische Malerei aus dem Königreich Saudi-Arabien* in Vienna in 2007. A number of Saudi painters and photographers have also had solo exhibitions in other Gulf countries and in Europe.

Now, a larger exhibition solely on contemporary art from Saudi Arabia has been created and was shown at the School of Oriental and African Studies in London. This exhibition, entitled *Edge of Arabia*, presented the works of 17 contemporary artists from various cities in Saudi Arabia. It was organized by the Offscreen Education Programme and curated by Stephen Stapleton from Britain and Lulwah Al-Homoud and Ahmed Mater Aseeri from Saudi Arabia. A book on the exhibition has been produced and a website (http://www.edgeofarabia.com/) designed, which give much information on the exhibition itself, the artists, and their works.

What was exceptional about the exhibition was the sheer amount of artwork on display. Not only one piece of art per artist was presented (as in the 2006 exhibition by the British Museum, *Word into Art: Artists of the Modern Middle East*) but two, three, four, or more pieces. Compared with the 2007 exhibition in Vienna, which only focused on paintings, *Edge of Arabia* showed a diversity of materials in Saudi art. Apart from paintings on canvas, there were portrait photographs, sculptures, and a video installation. Two further works were especially interesting for their combination of materials: first, the performance art in the photos of Abdulnasser Gharem, who wrapped himself and a *Cornocarpus Erectus* tree imported from Australia in plastic in a Saudi street (Fig. 1), and second, a combination of medical x-ray images with
drawings of the talisman of Fatimah and words from religious texts by Ahmed Mater Aseeri (Fig. 2).

The exhibition also explored a great variety of motives and topics in contemporary Saudi art. There were religious and spiritual motifs, the topic of ‘distorted reality’ inspired by media coverage of the ‘war on terror’, the motif of tradition and modernity, and the topic of Arab popular culture. Of special interest were portraits of Saudi women by Manal Al-Dowayan as they gave an insight into an important debate in Saudi society. The women were shown in the paraphernalia of professions, such as that of a petroleum engineer and an architect (Fig. 3), meaning that women can have a Saudi identity and have professions.

The exhibition also shed light on the artists’ diverse backgrounds and showed that most of them have another profession besides their artistic work, e.g. as an army officer or a GP. Faisal Samra said during the ‘education day’ of the exhibition (on October 18, 2008, in London) that ‘artist’ is not a recognized profession in Saudi Arabia and cannot be stated as such on an ID card or passport. Only a few institutions in the kingdom, like the Al Mansouria Foundation, which owns some of the artworks presented in the exhibition, give material support to artists in non-traditional genres.