

## Gulf commentary 5

## Young artists in the GCC

Sultan Al Qassemi

Over the past few years much has been said about the emerging assertiveness of Gulf citizens on social media, in journalism and on the political stage. However, an additional component of this emerging assertiveness has so far been overlooked. Young Khaleeji artists, with and without the support or knowledge of their respective governments, have over the past few years challenged the status quo and shattered stereotypes about what was previously perceived to be a passive populace.

Only a decade ago even the most seasoned Western art observers had barely heard of any Khaleeji artists. Today, however, artworks created by Gulf artists can be found in private collections and those of museums across Europe and North America.

Young Saudi artists such as Manal Al Dowayan, whose work is included in the Los Angeles County Museum of Art (LACMA) and the British Museum, have broached sensitive topics such as the role of women in Saudi society. In her series 'Suspended Together' Al Dowayan attaches copies of travel permits issued to Saudi women to a flock of ceramic doves in a symbolic move to free them from their male-imposed restrictions. Saudi artist Ahmed Mater broke one of the tenets of the Arab cultural boycott of Israel after one his artworks titled 'Evolution of Man' was exhibited in Jerusalem's Museum on the Seam in 2011 as part of a collective show. This made him the first Gulf artist to have work exhibited in Israel. Although the artwork, which depicts a Darwinian morphing of a petrol pump into a man holding a pistol to his head, was said to have been lent by a Western collector it did not stop widespread online condemnation of Mater.

For years Mater's compatriot Abdul Nasser Gharem divided his life between being a lieutenant colonel in the Saudi army and one of the Gulf's leading conceptual artists tackling issues such

as the 9/11 attacks and the Arab Spring. Gharem, whose work is in the Victoria & Albert Museum in London, is perhaps most famous for his video and lightbox artwork titled *The Path* (2007), which depicts an infamous 1982 incident of a collapsed bridge during severe flash floods in his native southern province where individuals who stayed on 'the straight path' – a reference to a core Quranic verse prayer calling on people not to stray from true Islam – ended up dead.

A recent phenomenon is the proliferation of the use of graffiti, which has recently emerged on the streets of Kuwait, Bahrain and Saudi Arabia, displaying messages that are not always agreeable to the governments. In 2012, following the imprisonment of a Saudi blogger called Hamza Kashgari for tweeting what were considered blasphemous comments about Prophet Mohammed, stencil graffiti with his image started appearing in the streets of Riyadh along with the message 'Free Hamza'. In addition to elaborate works, street graffiti have been used to convey anti-establishment messages regarding unpopular government initiatives and to criticize the broad powers given to the highly contentious Committee for the Promotion of Virtue and the Prevention of Vice (CPVPV), such as 'The CPVPV doesn't want love' graffiti documented by the Saudi Art Street website.

Today the Gulf states are in the midst of a building frenzy of what French scholar Alexandre Kazerouni calls 'Visibility Museums'. It is unclear if artworks that are politically sensitive will find their way onto the walls of these museums. What is certain, however, is that these works, although not popular with the Gulf establishment, reflect simmering sentiments under the Gulf's seemingly tranquil surface.

## Independent women

The dramatic expansion of education is changing women's expectations of their role. In a 2010 survey of 4,400 Saudi students, 88 per cent of the women surveyed agreed with the statement 'I want to have a great career',<sup>135</sup> something the researchers described as 'a small revolution'. In a 2010 Gallup survey in Bahrain, 94 per cent of women said they should have the same legal rights as men – and 87 per cent of men agreed.<sup>136</sup>

Women are still a minority of the workforce in all the Gulf states, and are particularly likely to be employed in sectors seen as traditionally female-friendly, such as health care and education. They are also mainly employed in the public sector, where flexible working hours are better suited to raising families. Even in Saudi Arabia, the most conservative country regarding female employment, women make up a third of the public-sector workforce. Their range of roles is expanding. In addition, private-sector employers are

<sup>135</sup> Edit Schlaffer, Ulrich Kropiunigg, Fawziah al-Bakr, *Bridging the Gap – But How? Young Voices from the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia*, Women Without Borders, 2010, [http://www.women-without-borders.org/files/downloads/Bridging\\_the\\_Gap\\_Saudi\\_2010.pdf](http://www.women-without-borders.org/files/downloads/Bridging_the_Gap_Saudi_2010.pdf).

<sup>136</sup> Gallup Centre for Muslim Studies, *After the Arab Uprisings: Women on Rights, Religion, and Rebuilding*, Summer 2012, <http://www.gallup.com/poll/155306/arab-uprisings-women-rights-religionrebuilding.aspx>.