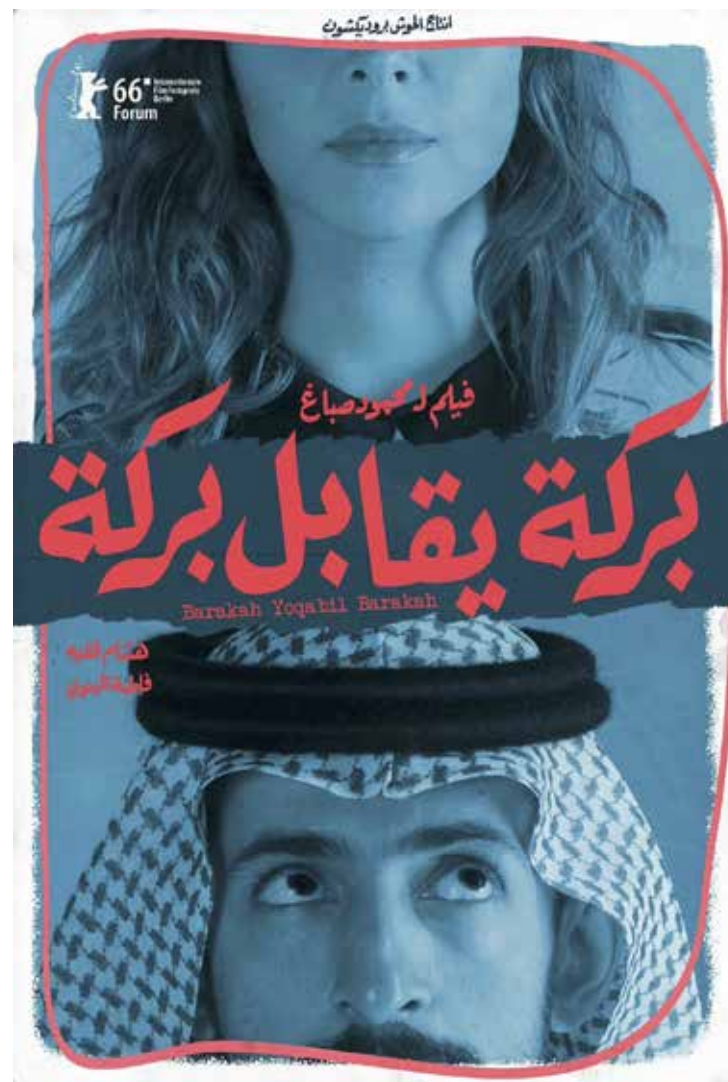


INSPIRED BY THE SAUDI SUN

BY SULTAN SOUD AL QASSEMI

EDUCATOR, ART COLLECTOR, SCHOLAR
AND COLUMNIST



Barakah Meets Barakah. Movie poster. 2016. Image courtesy of [ATHR](#)

In 2016 Jeddah-based movie director Mahmoud Sabbagh released his highly anticipated movie *Barakah Meets Barakah* to much acclaim. I vividly recall watching the movie with great interest, as I had known the team behind it for a number of years. What caught my eye then wasn't the excellent portrayal of the life of a couple of young Saudi protagonists or the drama unfolding onscreen, but something altogether unexpected.

In the film's opening scenes, Barakah (played by Hisham Fageeh) and Bibi (Fatima AlBanawi) meet in an art gallery at an exhibition opening to which they have both been invited. While there, they are both drawn to an installation by Ayman Yossri Daydban called *Maharem*. Barakah is then invited to visit the beach house of his romantic interest to meet her mother and where the couple encounter one of Ahmed Mater's *X-Ray* artworks. The host tells her visitor, who seems critical of the piece, that "This artwork is priceless".

As someone who had followed Saudi art for more than a decade, seeing such artworks on screen was a moment of reckoning for me. The art on display in *Barakah Meets Barakah* reflects the notion that this is a Saudi home, a modern home, and one in tune with its contemporary surroundings and current events. For this generation of Saudis, art is different. Filmmakers and actors, singers and performers, all appreciate each other's work. It is made by them and for each other. It is a reflection of their national identity and pride in local industry and talent.

In the second decade of the 21st century a wider embrace of the Saudi art scene emerged, and not only from young collectors or the general public. Saudi art became a tool to promote diplomacy. For instance, on state visits the Kingdom's leaders started to replace traditional Gulf royal gifts of a golden sword or a wooden dhow with contemporary Saudi artworks, such as during a visit in September 2016 to Beijing, when His Royal Highness Prince Mohammed Bin Salman Bin Abdulaziz Al Saud presented the Chinese leader Xi Jinping with an artwork by Ahmed Mater representing the journey of the 15th-century Muslim Chinese sailor Zheng He to Makkah. In the summer of 2022, when the Saudi leadership hosted the leaders of the Gulf, as well as those of Jordan, Iraq and Egypt along with US President Joe Biden, Saudi artist Lulwah Al Homoud was commissioned to create a wooden table whose outwards-rotating triangles were designed "to reflect the changes taking place in Saudi Arabia".

It is important to emphasize that this overdue recognition of contemporary Saudi art is rooted in decades of creativity, activism, scholarship and network building, both by Saudi artists and their peers across the region. Scholar Maha al-Senan has documented a large part of the Kingdom's modern art movement and notes that 1958 saw the first public art exhibition in Saudi Arabia. Notable interactions with other Arab creatives followed in the 1960s, when Iraqi artists Saadi Al Kaabi and Amer al-Obaidi moved to Riyadh and Taif respectively to teach art, while Egyptian pioneer female artist Nazek Hamdy (1926–2019) taught for five years at the King Abdulaziz University in Jeddah. Artists from the Kingdom also started to travel overseas to expand their education and horizons, including Abdullah Al-Shaikh to Iraq and Safeya Binzagr, Mohammed Al Saleem and pioneering female artist Mounira Mosly to Egypt. The arrival of oil wealth enabled the Saudi government to fund bursaries for the country's art students at centers of excellence further afield, with the beneficiaries including Abdulhalim Radwi at the Accademia di Belle Arti in Rome and Dr Mona Al Munajjed at the American University of Beirut.

Even when the geopolitical situation deteriorated from 1979 onwards, Saudi artists continued to prosper. It was that very year, in Riyadh, that Mohammed Al Saleem founded Dar Al Funoon Al Sa'udiyyah (The Saudi

Art House), which became an important venue where artists could meet and exchange ideas. A few years earlier, in 1976, the artist had proclaimed, “I shall attach myself to the right path enlightened and inspired by the Saudi sun towards the approach of an authentic Saudi art.”¹

The concept of “an authentic Saudi art” that is “inspired by the Saudi sun” is what has guided generations of the Kingdom’s artists as they search within their own cultures for inspiration. Much like Kuwaiti Khalifa Alqattan’s Circlism, Iraqi Shakir Hassan Al Said’s One Dimension, Sudanese Kamala Ibrahim Ishag’s Crystalist Group, Algeria’s Aouchem (tattoo) movement and Iraqi Madiha Umar’s Hurufism did within their respective countries, Saudi’s Mohammed Al Saleem’s Horizonism (*Al Afakyiah*), in which calligraphic motifs replace desert elements in landscapes, has drawn from the Kingdom’s rich heritage and traditions. These span the whole gamut of cultural references, from architecture and vernacular design through to textiles, ceramics and woodwork, a national stylistic compendium brought into potentially sharper focus and assessments of cultural value by the rapid pace of modernization and infrastructural development that has transformed the Kingdom in recent decades and which continues to have impact. But what makes art “Saudi”? How does one go about creating art that is locally rooted, contextually relevant and expressive of a distinct national identity? This is a question that cultural practitioners across different sectors and disciplines continue to address.

As a part of Vision 2030, the Kingdom’s economic and social blueprint for the coming years, the Saudi government recognises the value of art as a source of economic development, especially in terms of complementing the burgeoning tourism industry. There are numerous museums planned, some already under development and others being considered (see pXX), in various parts of the Kingdom. These facilities will attract not only internal Saudi visitors, a particular focus of the government, but also regional and global tourists seeking a different type of experience from that offered by other potential destinations. The exposure these new museums will give to the Kingdom’s art and culture will almost certainly have a bearing on the appreciation – and value – attributed to Saudi contemporary artworks in particular by the international art market.

Saudi art has been garnering attention at auctions and gallery sales for several years already. Back in 2011 Abdunasser Gharem’s golden dome installation *Message/Messenger* sold to much applause at a Christie’s auction in Dubai for a record-breaking USD 842,500, at the time the highest price yet attained for a work by a living Arab artist. The market in Saudi works continues to be strong but, according to Qaswra Hafez, founder of Hafez Gallery, this is just the beginning. “Today’s prices are a fraction of what we estimate they will be in 10 years’ time,” he says, “simply because the prices today, which some consider expensive, are a reflection of an emerging market.” The scarcity of works by artists whom many consider to be the pioneering masters is a particular factor. “I don’t think anyone realizes just how rare these works are,” Hafez told me. “Most, if not all, the practitioners from the modern period had other jobs. So what’s out there is very little to begin with.”

How contemporary Saudi artworks perform in the market over the longer term remains to be seen, but there are other, arguably more important, developments taking place. One change centers around the increased accessibility and visibility of art to everyday Saudis and its role in fortifying Saudi national identity. In 2005, under the reign of former King Abdullah, Saudi Arabia started celebrating its first secular holiday with the announcement of 23 September as National Day. It’s a day when Saudi citizens can be seen out in force in the streets, proudly waving their flags and even painting their faces green. Creating cultural symbols that all Saudis can identify with, no matter which region they hail from, is an essential part of strengthening the common



His Royal Highness Prince Mohammed Bin Salman Bin Abdulaziz Al Saud hosts leaders of 10 nations at Al-Salam Palace in Jeddah, 15 July 2022
Table art designed by Lulwah Al Homoud. Image courtesy of the artist

bonds between the various parts of the country and of reinforcing the concept of Saudi nationhood – and art can be an important part of the mix.

More internationally, Saudi art is a tool of soft power that may help dispel myths about the country and contribute to building an image of a progressive and open society, something that the Saudi leadership is keen to project. The Kingdom’s economic and financial muscle as a member of the G20 group of nations and one of the world’s largest sovereign wealth funds and oil reserves, its political clout as a founding member of both the United Nations and the Arab League, as well as the host of the Gulf Cooperation Council General Secretariat, and its Islamic weight as the land of Makkah and Madinah, mean that any movement in the Saudi cultural sphere will undoubtedly impact the wider region. Saudi Arabia is also benefiting from a large number of talented and educated people who are becoming ever more well versed in the arts, thanks to the Internet and the numerous activities taking place in the country over the past two decades, among them large-scale public art events such as Noor Riyadh and the Diriyah Contemporary Art Biennale. The arts are rightly seen as providing a range of opportunities, not just economic and professional but also in terms of personal development, fulfillment and well-being, and I now see the Saudi art scene as the region’s rising tide that can lift all boats.

¹ SADEQ, G., 2020. The Saudi Artists Who Paved the Way, *Ithraeyat Magazine* [online], 6. Available from: <https://www.ithra.com/en/news/saudi-artists-who-paved-way/> [Accessed 2022].