

## SULTAN SOOUD AL QASSEMI

Throughout the twentieth century in the Middle East, the artist studio played a major role as a site of both production and knowledge exchange—a site that also defined the identities of artists themselves. Egypt’s Mahmoud Mokhtar (1891–1934), for instance, famously kept two studios, each in a different city. His Cairo studio had its first location at 14 Antique Khana Street (later renamed Mahmoud Bek Basyouny) but then moved to Ramses Station (also known as Bab al-Hadid or Cairo Station), chosen for its proximity to the proposed site of the

*Egypt’s Renaissance* sculpture. In Paris, Mokhtar kept a studio on rue de Vaugirard and before that on rue Francois Guilbert, which he famously decorated in a 1912 photo with textiles bearing Islamic phrases while displaying nude sculptures. ‘This is not a casual snapshot,’ writes Alexandra Dika Seggerman. ‘The artist,’ she continues, ‘consciously positioned himself and his studio to represent his grounding in both Arabo-Islamic culture and European fine arts.’<sup>1</sup> The message was intentional: here was a man who was both modern and rooted in tradition. Mokhtar’s Paris studio would host leading intellectuals such as the historian of Egypt’s independence movement

Mohamed Sabri (1894–1978) and diplomat Hafez Afifi Pasha (1886–1961), according to Egyptian researcher Dr. Emad Abu Ghazi. While in Cairo, Mokhtar’s studio was frequented by Egyptian statesman Saad Zaghloul, architect Ramses Wissa Wassef, and journalist Mohammed Hussein Heikal. In this case and others, the artist’s workplace was not only a site of creativity but also a destination in and of itself.

Other Arab cities witnessed a similar phenomenon. In 1941, Damascus saw the creation of a joint atelier named Studio Veronese established by artists Mahmoud Hammad (1923–1988), Nassir Choura (1920–1992), and Michael Kurche (1900–1973). It attracted leading artists from across Syria, including Nazem al-Jaafari (1918–2015), and from Eastern Europe who had fled the Second World War. Iraqi artist Hafidh al-Droubi (1914–1991) established his studio in 1942 as the country’s first “Free Atelier.” According to artist Abdul Amir al-Kazzaz (1932–2014), it was a sanctuary for students



↑ MAHMOUD MOKHTAR IN HIS STUDIO IN PARIS, WHICH HE DECORATED WITH ISLAMIC TEXTILES AND SCULPTURES

COURTESY OF THE ARTIST’S FAMILY

→ MAHMOUD HAMMAD AND ADNAN JABASSINI AT ATELIER VERONESE. ESTABLISHED IN 1941, AND NAMED AFTER THE RENOWNED ITALIAN PAINTER PAOLO VERONESE, THIS STUDIO WAS THE FIRST ACTIVE HUB FOR VISUAL ARTISTS IN DAMASCUS

from Baghdad University's College of Arts and Sciences who eventually became known as the "Atelier Group."<sup>2</sup> The Droubi Studio hosted lectures by the likes of Palestinian scholar Jabra Ibrahim Jabra as well as visits by poet Abd al-Wahhab al-Bayati (1926–1999). The studio was also a site of collaboration and knowledge exchange. For example, prominent archaeologist Mohammed Ali Mustafa (1910–1997) supplied Droubi with archaeological and historical facts, including information about warrior weapons and clothes, that assisted the artist in creating a mural artwork titled *The Babylonian Procession*. For intellectuals working in challenging circumstances, like Palestinian artist Abed Abdi (b. 1942), studios were also sites of sanctuary. Abdi established his studio in the 1980s in Haifa and welcomed visitors far and wide, including the general public as well as leading intellectuals such as Emile Habibi (1922–1996), Samih Al Qasim (1939–2014), Salman Natour (1949–2016), and Bashir Shalash (b. 1978).



Artist studios do not exist in a vacuum and often reflect their time and circumstances. For example, Mokhtar and his studios benefited from the opportunity created by the 1908 establishment of the School of Fine Arts in Cairo by Prince Youssef Kamal. Scholarship programs provided by Arab governments and those in countries like the Soviet Union were instrumental in the formation of the modern art movement in the mid-twentieth century in countries like Iraq, Syria, and Yemen. Similarly, artists practising today in the Arab world—and especially in the Gulf states—benefit from the opportunities created by their environment, including the establishment of major collecting institutions in Lebanon, Qatar, and the United Arab Emirates. However, no country has witnessed such rapid development in the field of culture over the past few years as Saudi Arabia. The recent flurry of activity, though, is not without precedent. The period between the 1980s and the 2000s witnessed a number of cultural initiatives, including the inauguration of the National Museum of Saudi Arabia in Riyadh in 1999 and of the King Abdulaziz Center for World Culture – Ithra in 2016. More recently, the Kingdom's Vision 2030 has elevated culture from the periphery to a strategic and "indispensable" sector that must see an increase in terms of "quality and quantity."<sup>3</sup> Within a few years,

numerous artistic initiatives were announced, including the Islamic Arts Biennale in Jeddah, a contemporary art biennale in Diriyah, and museum projects in Riyadh and AIUla that have reinvigorated the art scene in the Kingdom and beyond.

In some ways, the artistic career of Ahmed Mater mirrors that of the development of the art scene in the Kingdom. A trained physician, Mater was given an opportunity to practise art at the turn of the century thanks to the establishment of Al-Meftaha Arts Village by HRH Prince Khalid Al Faisal. There, Mater ran a small studio in his home region of Abha. The changes that the Kingdom witnessed, as part of a modest opening up, were like a rising tide that lifted all boats. Artist residencies and studios proliferated, and there were more opportunities for young artists than at any time in the past four decades. In the first fifteen years of this century, Mater's work has attained more recognition, appearing at auctions and galleries across the region. Perhaps due to his understanding of contemporary art practices and soft-spoken personality. In 2017, Mater was appointed as the Director of Misk Art Institute, which is part of the Prince Mohammed bin Salman Foundation, Misk. Mater served in that role until 2019 before dedicating his time fully to his artistic passion. He acquired a large atelier in a repurposed warehouse in the JAX District of Diriyah and transformed it into what is known today as the Ahmed Mater Studio.

It is no easy feat to create a place that inspires wonder and fascination for those living near and far. However, that is precisely what Mater has achieved with his three studios, the first of which was his studio in Abha, also known as studio number seven in Al-Meftaha, which operated between 2001 and 2009. Ahmed Mater then moved to the Jeddah studio, better known as Pharan Studio, where he worked between 2010 and 2016. The next year, he moved to the capital Riyadh, where he set up a workspace in Al Yarmouk District. His final move was to JAX Studio in 2020, where he pursues the artistic practice of Ahmed Mater Studio.

Mater is at once a conceptual artist, an archivist, and a thinker who is performing the role of an institution, one that he has

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AHMED MATER AT AN EXHIBITION OPENING AT  
AL-MEFTAHA WITH HRH PRINCE KHALID AL  
FAISAL AND THE SAUDI ARTIST ABDULHALIM  
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COURTESY OF THE ARTIST

created and cemented in contemporary Saudi Arabian history. Furthermore, at a moment in which the Arab Gulf states are signing agreements with major cultural institutions from the West with announcements heralding yet another multimillion dollar deal, Ahmed Mater Studio stands out for its simplicity and modesty. There is no brand name here other than the one he built for himself, and there is no army of Western art experts. For all these reasons and more, Ahmed Mater Studio has become a site of pilgrimage for anyone visiting Riyadh and interested in culture. More than any non-government official and tourist site, a visit to his studio has become a necessary stop on itineraries.

Ever since its establishment in 2020, Ahmed Mater Studio has attracted a wide array of art enthusiasts—from patrons to students, scholars to officials—and there doesn't seem to be a day without some group of visitors. They are attracted by the art on display, including some of Mater's early and upcoming experimental works. They are absorbed by his library, a world unto its own, with rare books and manuscripts. However, they are most of all drawn to the energy and aura of the artist himself. Ahmed Mater's personality has elicited a great deal of interest. He has been the subject of features in publications, including *The Economist*, invited to speak at prestigious institutions such as the Brooklyn Museum, and

presented solo exhibitions at the likes of the Smithsonian Institution in 2016.<sup>4</sup> Visitors are likely intrigued by his role in the transformation of the kingdom as a practising artist. He is, furthermore, a scholar and publisher of *Desert of Pharan: The Unofficial Histories behind the Mass Expansion of Mecca*, which documents the fast changes in the holy city. Visitors are equally captivated by his reputation as someone who has operated in the corridors of power.







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AHMED MATER IN HIS STUDIO AT AL-MEFTAHA  
COURTESY OF THE ARTIST

They are fascinated, as well, by his lifelong pursuit and his capture of mirages, a noble and perhaps chimerical goal.



Since its establishment, Ahmed Mater Studio has attracted ambassadors, royalty, celebrities, students (including my own), and investors. It has hosted tours, discussions, and even feasts. Amongst the leading Saudi intellectuals, Ahmed Mater Studio has also welcomed the scholar Dr. Abdullah al-Ghathami, the novelists Badryah el-Bishr and Mohammed Hasan Alwan, the musician Dr. Abdulrab Idrees, and the cartoonist Abdullah Jaber. Other prominent visitors have included the collector Dr. Basel Dalloul, the architect Bjarke Ingels, the curator Hans Ulrich Obrist, and the historian Chris Dercon. The studio is also a space for the exchange of ideas, hosting in 2020 a lecture titled “The Brain Response to Beauty” by leading neurobiologist Semir Zeki, as well as a workshop by Kanye West that was attended by a group of architects and designers. The studio also served as a space for collaborations, including one with Jorge Otero-Pailo (Director and Professor of Historic Preservation at Columbia University’s Graduate School of Architecture, Planning, and Preservation) that featured in the Diriyah Contemporary Art Biennale 2024. Another collaboration prompted Wallpaper magazine journalist Harriet Quick to write:

*“What strikes one first is how Saudi Arabian artists’ practices are closely connected to science, research, education, and technology. In a striking exhibit, Saudi Futurism, by Italian photographer and filmmaker Armin Linke and Saudi Arabian multidisciplinary artist Ahmed Mater, the changing infrastructure is explored through a series of photographic panels that document scientific, archaeological, and architectural sites, from dairy farms, to the architecture of institutional buildings and the big vision of mega-city Neom that is now in the making.”<sup>5</sup>*

Few ateliers have achieved such a notable status in record time with a constant stream of visitors. Nevertheless, Mater has so far been able to maintain a strong sense of discipline despite such distractions, continuing to produce art, work on publications, and create site-specific public installations. The studio has also created a liminal space that exists between large, government-backed institutions and museums on one hand, and traditional artist studios not accessible to the wider public, on the other. This helps promote the exchange and

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THE ENTRANCE TO PHARAN STUDIO IN JEDDAH

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STUDENTS VISITING AHMED MATER’S STUDIO IN JEDDAH

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(FOLLOWING PAGE)  
IMAGES OF AHMED MATER’S STUDIO IN JAX DISTRICT, RIYADH

ALL COURTESY OF ARTIST

sharing of artistic and cultural ideas as well as collaborations. Indeed, Ahmed Mater Studio has become a Saudi Arabian institution in its own right. Its success is a lesson in institution-building for all countries of the region.

As much as the thriving initiatives of studio spaces are innovative in their own contemporary Saudi locale, they are rooted in a rich regional history of artist studios of the past century. Both Ahmed Mater and Mokhtar's choices of studio location reflect an acute awareness of their respective milieus and an attempt to situate themselves within an ever-changing patronage environment as pioneers on the frontier of nation-building efforts. Almost a hundred years later, the quintessential feature of the artist's studio in the Arab context is crystalized in its function to bring intellectuals together from across the region and mediate dialogue on a regional and global scale.



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