

By continuing to use this site you consent to the use of cookies on your device as described in our [cookie policy](#) unless you have disabled them. You can change your [cookie settings](#) at any time but parts of our site will not function correctly without them.

FINANCIAL TIMES

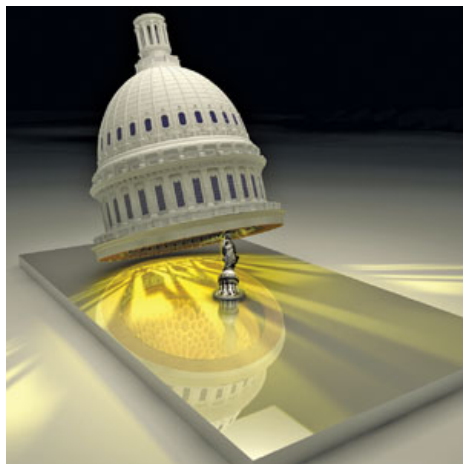
ft.com > life&arts > arts >

October 19, 2012 7:16 pm

Back stories

By Catherine Milner

An exhibition of the lesser known side of Middle East art comes to London's East End



'Capitol Dome' (2012)

A mosque that seems to float on a lake of black oil forms the centrepiece of *Come Together*, an exhibition of contemporary art from the Middle East currently to be seen on London's Brick Lane. Spangled and shimmering, the inside of its cupola is modelled on that of the Dome of the Rock; its exterior on the Capitol in Washington, propped up by the figure of Freedom, who, far from standing in her usual position on the pinnacle of the dome, looks in danger of being squashed by it.

"I come from a background of bureaucracy, not democracy," says Abdulnasser Gharem, the 39-year-old Saudi artist behind the work. "But democracy is in the front of our minds."

This is an exhibition about politics as much as aesthetics. If it's lavish brushwork you are after, you might find it a tad spare, but it is the back stories to the works and the context in which they have been made that make them so arresting.

Who knew, for instance, that one of the chief pastimes of men in Saudi Arabia, where music, cinemas and nightclubs are banned, is spinning their cars in ever decreasing circles in vacant parking lots?

Sama Alshaibi, a Palestinian who has spent many years living in Saudi Arabia, juxtaposes a film of some of this "donutting" with that of a woman hanging from a beam in a sheath of black silk in which she envelops herself in ever-more-tortuous positions. The work is intended to show, she says, that men are just as trapped as women are by the strictures of life in a profoundly Islamic state.

By way of contrast, Ahmed Mater, one of the leading lights of the Saudi art scene, chronicles the destruction of Mecca. Wahhabism, the dominant form of Islam in Saudi Arabia, is hostile to any reverence of places of historical or religious significance, for fear that this may give rise to idolatry. The Washington-based Gulf Institute estimates that since 1985 about 95 per cent of Mecca's historic buildings, most more than 1,000 years old, have been demolished. This includes the house of Muhammad's wife Khadijah, which was demolished to make way for public lavatories, and the house of Abu Bakr, Muhammad's companion, which is now the site of a Hilton hotel.

Mater has documented the transformation of the holy city from a place where the Kaaba dwarfed all around it into a forest of cranes, skyscrapers and electric lights. As one of his pictures shows, a massive new vertical shopping mall cum clock tower now dominates the horizon.

Intriguing in a different way is the work of Manal Al Dowayan, who has investigated the career trajectories of some of the chief players in the Saudi oil industry in a series of annotated portrait photographs. Typical is the tale of a man who grew up in a desert-dwelling family that depended for its survival on the income generated by a single rented date palm tree. As a boy he learnt to count and, at the age of nine, hitched a ride to Dhahran in the east of Saudi Arabia, soon after oil had been discovered there. He later became chief accountant of Saudi Aramco, one of the world's biggest oil companies.

As the exhibition title suggests, *Edge of Arabia*, the organiser of this show, wants Muslims living in the East End of London to "come together" with those from miles away both physically and psychologically.

Art, it is hoped, will unite east and west, against a rising tide of xenophobia on both sides. Judging by the crowds who attended the exhibition's opening night – a mixture of wealthy Saudis, Tower Hamlets hoodies, collectors and curators from Germany to America – and with a price range from £9,000 to £350,000, such ideals may yield some interesting results if not a new art market.

'Come Together', 81 Brick Lane, London, edgeofarabia.com

Most Popular on Social Networks

Stocks ease back after volatile week

Tim Cook: Apple's quiet leader

Martin Amis

Wall Street shrugs off Nikkei slide

Many investors may not be living in the real world

UK gas supply six hours from running out in March

Why George Osborne should not be so complacent

EU rushes out corporate tax transparency law

Small investors lead Japan share exodus

Ford exits Australia amid mounting losses

Bernanke says bond buying could slow

IMF calls on Osborne to spend on infrastructure

IMF studies changes to bond restructurings

iDodge: Apple's new killer product

How we can make global companies pay their fair share of tax

Stockholm riots raise questions about immigration policy

London hedge funds 'mapped' by G8 protesters

Ireland pledges co-operation on global tax evasion plan

Australia outlines impact of resources pullback

Sony board discusses proposal from Daniel Loeb

Printed from:

<http://www.ft.com/cms/s/2/e7318a5c-16ce-11e2-b1df-00144feabdc0.html>

Print a single copy of this article for personal use. Contact us if you wish to print more to distribute to others.

© THE FINANCIAL TIMES LTD 2013 FT and 'Financial Times' are trademarks of The Financial Times Ltd.