

Faisal Samra (Saudi Arabia, b. 1956)

Long considered one of the Arab Gulf's foremost artists and a pioneer of conceptual art in the Middle East, Bahraini-born, Saudi national Faisal Samra incorporates digital photography, painting, sculpture, video, and performance in a creative repertoire that explores existentialist themes with the figure at its center. Since the mid-1970s, Samra has tested the conventional functions of media through meticulously structured works with experimentation and research as the guiding principles of his artistic practice. As his oeuvre has progressed and defied traditional modes of representation, he has rebelled against his own understanding of art, transitioning into new works that maintain three essential concepts: spontaneity, dynamism, and secrecy.

In 1974, Samra emigrated from Saudi Arabia to France to attend the École Nationale Supérieure des Beaux-Arts (ENSBA), Paris. While studying at the esteemed institution, he immersed himself in the work of modern and contemporary European artists. This initial period of Samra's development was distinguished by expressionist drawings and paintings that investigate the body in motion or at rest, establishing a conceptual basis for later videos, photographs, and installations, while also demonstrating his initial rejection of the prescribed forms of figuration.

Upon graduating from the ENSBA in 1980, Samra settled in Saudi Arabia and continued to exhibit abroad. In the late 1980s, he returned to France, where he spent four years as an art consultant at the Institute du Monde Arabe. After nearly a decade of contributing to collective exhibitions across Europe, he held his first solo show at Etienne Dinet Gallery in Paris (1989). This milestone was followed by *Le Pli* (1991), a critically acclaimed exhibition at the Institute du Monde Arabe that established Samra as a leading artist from the Arab world. This period of his career was distinguished by early investigations of emotive and sensory approaches to art.

In the 1990s, Samra's *Heads and Other Body* series introduced hanging art objects that blur the lines between painting and sculpture by liberating the treated canvas from the stretcher or frame and incorporating materials such as wire mesh, which create an armature for three-dimensional forms. This enabled Samra to explore the dynamics of an artwork as it is experienced in a particular setting while presenting constructive materials as its form and content. These formal and conceptual breakthroughs led to influential installation, video, and multimedia works that continued his career-long investigation of life, the space between birth and death, and how time can be reflected through the visual devices of art.

The artist's selected solo exhibitions include Ayyam Gallery Al Quoz, Dubai (2019, 2014); the Ministry of Culture in Bahrain (2016); Bin Matter House, Bahrain (2015); Ayyam Gallery London (2014); Ayyam Gallery Jeddah (2013); HD Galerie, Casablanca (2012); Traffic Gallery, Dubai (2011); Albareh Gallery, Bahrain (2010); Galerie Nathalie Obadia, Paris (2009); XVA Gallery, Dubai (2007).

Recently, Samra has participated in collective exhibitions at the Bienal sur, Argentina (2019); OFF Biennale Cairo (2018, 2015); Musée Labinet, France (2017); Low Gallery, San Diego, USA (2016); Abu Dhabi Festival, UAE (2015); Busan Museum, South Korea; FotoFest, Houston (2014), Edge of Arabia, London (2012); Mori Art Museum, Tokyo (2012); Maraya Art Center, Sharjah (2010).

Samra's works are housed in the collections of The British Museum, London; BuchDruckKunst e.V Art Book Museum, Hamburg; the National Museum, Mexico City; the Modern Art Museum, Cairo; Almansouria Foundation, Jeddah; Jameel Art Foundation, Jeddah; Jordan National Gallery of Fine Arts, Amman; Mathaf: Arab Museum of Modern Art, Doha; and Bahrain National Museum, Manama, among others. He has participated in biennials in Singapore and Cairo (2008) and is a jury member for the Alexandria Biennale, Egypt.

In 2012, Skira Editore published an eponymous monograph on the artist.