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## **HYPERALLERGIC**

### **A Saudi Artist Pauses in the Face of Politics**

**Abdulnasser Gharem's works question initial perceptions and reveal inherent contradictions about Islamic and Arabian art and culture.**

July 15, 2017, EMILY ELIZABETH GOODMAN



Abdulnasser Gharem, "The Path (Siraat)" (2012) (© Gharem Studio, photo courtesy the artist and Edge of Arabia)

Los Angeles — In his first solo exhibition in the United States, *Pause* at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art, Saudi Arabian artist Abdulnasser Gharem uses the pristine conditions of the gallery to captivate the attention of his viewers and draw them into the multiple facets at play in each piece.

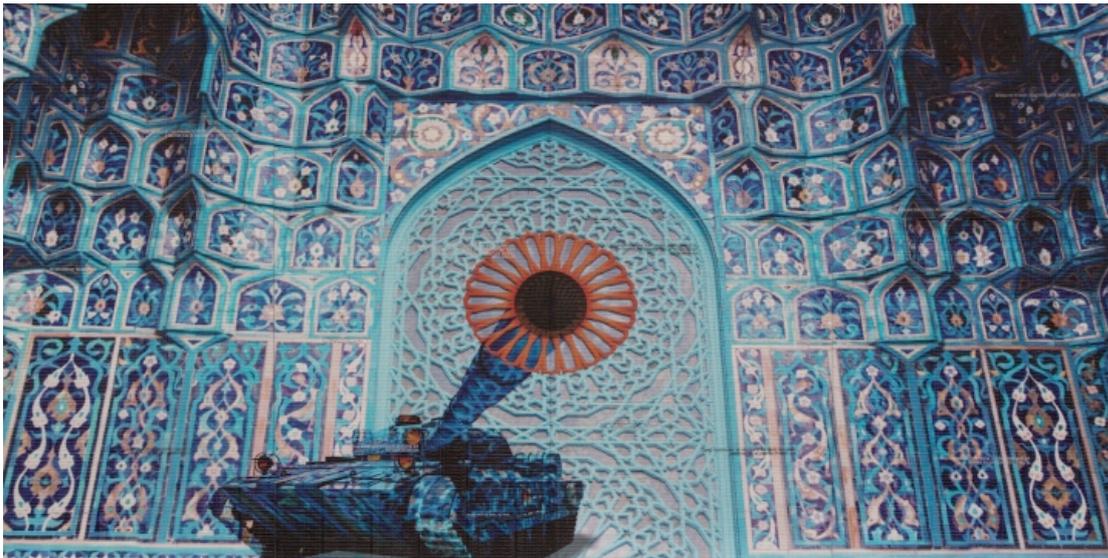
A self-taught artist and lieutenant colonel in the Saudi Arabian Army, Gharem's works are designed to challenge initial perceptions and reveal inherent contradictions about Islamic and Arabian art and culture, but those impressions are dependent on the perspective of the

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viewer. Imbued with words and images derived from both the Muslim and non-Muslim worlds, the meaning of his works shifts dramatically with their context — both the space of the gallery and the larger geopolitical climate in which they appear.

Yet, the inclusion of referents from both cultures functions as a bridge between them, one that is deeply necessary as extremism in both parts of the world further widens the rift that divides the US-led West and the Arab world in particular. Using his work to confront stereotypes and misapprehensions that separate these cultures, Gharem asks us to “pause” — literally and figuratively — in order to fully comprehend what we are seeing.

One of his primary modes of working is in the creation of “stamp paintings,” digital prints of vibrant images on the surface of rubber stamps. Letters in Arabic and in English are occasionally offset with a different color, making certain phrases legible from a close distance, but barely perceptible from afar.



Abdunnasser Gharem, “Camouflage” (2017) (© Gharem Studio, photo courtesy Gharem Studio)

This confrontation of assumptions about Islam begins the moment you step off the elevator and into the show. Placed in the lobby outside the exhibition, “Camouflage” (2017) portrays a tank parked in front of the patterned wall of an Iranian mosque, almost disappearing into the structure. Inside the gallery, “Road to Makkah” (2014), a blue highway sign printed primarily on stamps of the English alphabet, indicates routes that one may take into the Muslim holy city of Mecca. In both Arabic and English, the sign delineates the distinct paths that Muslims and non-Muslims may take in traveling around the area; from the outset, we are presented with signifiers that demarcate a divide between Muslims and non-Muslims.

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However, Gharem bridges this divide with phrases in English, littered throughout the sign and highlighted in white, several of which serve to combat the misperception that many Westerners have about Islam as a religion and Mecca as a holy space. Near the middle section of the painting, he states that “in the hole [sic] city of Mecca, violence of any kind was prohibited.” Similarly, at the bottom of the same section, the text reads: “It is the only spot on the earth where Muslims when adoring the Eternal can meet face to face.”

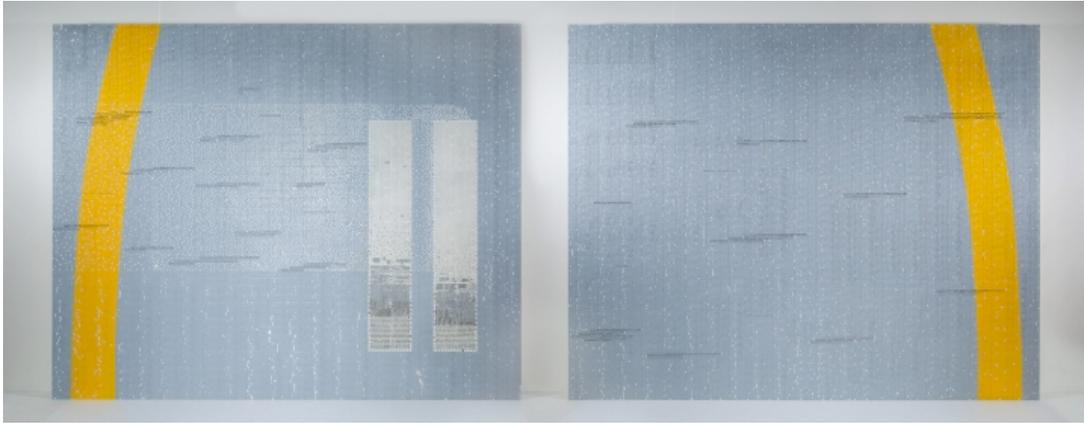


Abdulnasser Gharem, “Road to Makkah” (2014) (© Gharem Studio, photo courtesy Mrs. Georges Marci)

While many of his stamp paintings, including “Road to Makkah” and “Camouflage,” are highly referential, Gharem employs the same techniques to more abstract ends: in the exhibition’s titular painting “Pause,” (2016). A diptych, each panel features a gray vertical bar. Spots of black pigment on the bars appear random at first, but eventually coalesce into a clear pattern. On the outer edge of each panel, Gharem includes two traffic-line-yellow broken arcs, as if to suggest that the bars are circumscribed even in the space beyond the panels.

Although the work is largely abstract, the two bars and the arcs surrounding them are meant, as per the title, to suggest a pause button. At the same time, the elongated size of the rectangles and their close spacing evokes something different and less innocuous than the act of freezing a film. Curator Linda Komaroff notes that Gharem “has used the digital symbol for pause — a pair of solid rectangles — as a visual metaphor for the Twin Towers.” This transformation is further underscored by the patch of light grey that extends from the top of the right rectangle to the far left of the painting, creating a haze overtop reminiscent of the pillars of smoke that fumed from the World Trade Center on September 11, 2001; as Komaroff points out, “seeing the World Trade Center destroyed on television was one of those terrible moments that seems to make the world stand still or pause.”

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Abdulnasser, "Pause" (2016), from the series "Restored Behaviour" (© Gharem Studio, photo courtesy Gharem Studio)

The connection to 9/11 is further illustrated through the use of text within the composition. Against a background of Arabic lettering, messages are conveyed in English and Arabic. The English phrases are American responses to the tragedy, including lines from a speech by Sandy Dahl, widow of the Pilot of United 93 from the Flight 93 Memorial Service in 2002 ("If we have learned nothing else from this tragedy, we learn that life is short and there is no time for hate"), from President George W. Bush's speech to the Army War College in 2004 ("History is moving and it will tend toward hope or tend toward tragedy"), and from President Barack Obama's Remarks at the Pentagon Memorial on September 11, 2010 ("It was not a religion that attacked us that September day. It was Al Qaeda. We will not sacrifice the liberties we cherish or hunker down behind walls of suspicion and mistrust").

The parallel forms that comprise "Pause" — the rectangles in the composition and the two panels that create the work — reflect Gharem's struggle to comprehend this tragedy as a soldier in Saudi Arabia with a personal connection to the hijackers. Following the attacks on 9/11, he learned that two of the attackers were his former classmates, whose once-parallel experiences had diverged drastically from his own. However, the concept of duality permeates Gharem's visual and symbolic world. In his sculpture "Hemisphere" (2017), a large pointed dome propped on one side is peaked with a crescent moon and divided down the middle, with one side in green, oxygenated copper decorated by low relief arches and coffers to resemble the dome of a mosque. The other side, polished to a high sheen and covered in Arabic inscriptions, resembles the turban helmets that were commonly found among the ranks of Ottoman or Mamluk soldiers during the 15th and 16th centuries.

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Abdulnasser Gharem, "Hemisphere" (2017) (© Gharem Studio, photo courtesy Oak Taylor-Smith, Factum Arte)

In this work, Gharem uses familiar Islamic imagery to comment on how the religion and cultures of the Muslim world are often misapprehended around the world, and, particularly within the arts and art history. By enlarging the scale and combining these traditional forms, Gharem challenges the way that Western viewers approach Islamic art in general. He shifts the way we, as a Western audience, see such an object and undermines the perception of Islam only through artifacts, through a Western colonial lens that treats the Muslim world as something singular and "backwards."

For an American audience, Gharem provides viewers the opportunity to move beyond first impressions and to more fully consider the complexities of experiences of Muslims in the Arab world, highlighting the commonalities between many Saudis and Americans, while illustrating how we treat each other as foreign others and, potentially,

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threatsDespite differences, Gharem's work offers a meaningful experience to Muslim and non-Muslim, American and non-American audiences.

Abdulnasser Gharem: Pause continues at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art (5905 Wilshire Boulevard, Los Angeles, California) through July 16.

<https://hyperallergic.com/390445/abdulnasser-gharem-pause-los-angeles-county-museum-of-art-2017/>