

GALERIE BRIGITTE SCHENK

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Artist Nurtures a Creative Oasis in Conservative Saudi Arabia

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“I saw how people listened without thinking, like a flock of sheep.” ABDULNASSER GHAREM
Sergey Ponomarev for The New York Times

RIYADH, Saudi Arabia — Abdulnasser Gharem has exhibited his work in world-class museums and sold pieces at auction for hundreds of thousands of dollars, and is widely considered one of Saudi Arabia’s leading contemporary artists.

Albertusstrasse 26 D-50667 Köln Telefon +49.(0)221.925 09 01 Telefax +49.(0)221.925 09 02
art@galerieschenk.de www.galerieschenk.de

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You would never know that from his studio in the Saudi capital. Fifteen-foot walls ring the nondescript house, blocking views into the courtyard. There is no sign or name on the door, which is outfitted with a camera to prevent unwelcome visitors. “Even the neighbors don’t know what’s here,” he said with a laugh.

That mix of renown abroad and discretion at home is part of life for an artist and social critic in this intensely conservative country where government control reigns and many people see contemporary art as “haram,” or forbidden, under the kingdom’s austere interpretation of Islam.

But inside the walls, Mr. Gharem, 43, has created an oasis of sorts for a group of young Saudi artists to whom he serves as role model, mentor and sometime financier. This year, he will lead about 20 of the artists on a tour sponsored by a Saudi government cultural center to showcase the country’s art in the United States, with events in Houston, Los Angeles and other cities.

Mr. Gharem is in some ways a curious choice for such a job, having spent his career taking aim at what he sees as the stifling aspects of Saudi life: the byzantine bureaucracy, religious dogmatism and dependence on oil.

He is not a political dissident. His longtime day job, in fact, was in the Saudi Army, where he became a lieutenant colonel before retiring in 2014.

Still, he acknowledges the tenuousness of his status in a country where religious conservatives wield great power. He has tangled with government officials over the content of his works, and his only recent show in the kingdom was inside the American ambassador’s residence. Last year, a court sentenced one of his friends, the fellow artist Ashraf Fayadh, to death for apostasy, largely because of poems he published abroad. The sentence was later reduced to eight years in prison and 800 lashes.

Despite the limitations, Mr. Gharem remains in the kingdom, hoping his ideas will echo in society.

“That is your role as an artist, to bring out the option that the politician can’t say and that the religious man can’t say,” he said. “You bring out the solutions that people can’t say.”

Mr. Gharem charted his own path in a country where the term “art career” is an oxymoron.

Raised in the conservative town of Khamis Mushayt in southwestern Saudi Arabia, he liked to draw as a child, but even then he was criticized by those who believed that the ability to render living beings should be left to God alone.

“Why did you draw a portrait?” he said his teachers would ask. “It was like you were guilty, as if art was a sin you were committing.”

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That environment pushed others in shocking directions: Two of his high school classmates were among the Sept. 11 hijackers. But his father, who sold furniture and acquainted him with design, encouraged him to be creative.

After high school, Mr. Gharem applied to study art at a Saudi university but was not accepted. Instead, he joined the army, one of the only pathways to social standing for young men from the provinces. He graduated from a military academy and went to a post near the border with Yemen, where there was little to do.

The free time turned out to be a blessing, he said, because he had time to read and, after he gained Internet access, to learn about subjects not widely taught in the kingdom, like philosophy, comparative religion, music and art.

His first major work was inspired by a rural bridge where villagers had been told by a religious leader to seek refuge during a flash flood. But the water had made the bridge collapse, killing the villagers.

Mr. Gharem and some friends spray-painted the word “sirat,” or path, on the bridge, a commentary on what Mr. Gharem called “the culture of the herd.”

“I saw how people listened without thinking, like a flock of sheep,” he said.

Later, Mr. Gharem stumbled on a fisherman’s community that the government had scheduled for destruction by painting “to be removed” on its houses in red paint. Mr. Gharem painted “to be removed” on his shirt and had a friend take photographs of him walking among the residents and their homes.

In 2008, Mr. Gharem’s first exhibit abroad, at a gallery connected to the School of Oriental and African Studies in London, led to his first clash with Saudi officials. A Saudi royal who was among the show’s sponsors objected to showing photographs of the bridge, worried that they would offend religious conservatives, and made him remove a reference to Sept. 11 from another painting.

Mr. Gharem said he had little choice but to comply, but he was impressed that his work had such an effect.

“I knew I had to go back to Saudi in a week, and I had a job,” he said. “But I felt the power I had and the reaction that I could create.”

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Mr. Gharem's international breakthrough came with an installation called "Message/Messenger," a large, golden dome propped up like an animal trap with a white dove suspended underneath. He said it was a commentary on religion, which he believes is beautiful but can be used for ill.

In 2011, he put the piece up for auction in Dubai, in the United Arab Emirates, where an Iranian collector bought it for \$842,000, the highest price ever for the work of a living Arab artist at that time.

Mr. Gharem was not there to see it. He was at work on a Saudi military base and had no idea about the sale.

"All of a sudden my cellphones — I had two — lit on fire, and I didn't know what was going on," he said, recalling his friends calling and yelling, "Congratulations!"

"For what?" he said.

After recovering his production costs, such as selling his car to finance the project, Mr. Gharem put the money toward Edge of Arabia, an art collective he helped found, and started sending younger artists abroad to study, visit museums and culture themselves in ways not possible in Riyadh.

During a recent evening at the studio, a half-dozen young artists filtered into the living room. The walls were lined with bookshelves and framed artworks, and musical instruments were scattered about on stands.

While one young man watched a documentary about Simón Bolívar, the South American independence hero, others worked on projects on computers in the office.

In jeans, a faded blue T-shirt and gray wingtips with fluorescent green soles, Mr. Gharem floated among them, looking at their plans and commenting before ordering grilled chicken for everyone and slipping out to head home to his wife and two daughters.

Restrictions on their work remain, he said. Male and female artists can be harassed for meeting in cafes, so they hang out in his studio.

He has struggled to bring even Muslim artists into the country from abroad, so he tells those willing to visit to apply for pilgrimage visas. And he builds most of his projects outside the country for fear that Saudi customs agents will take offense and impound them.

Some of the snags he has encountered sound like practical jokes, like the time he tried to ship a female mannequin from abroad but was told it could not enter Saudi Arabia. In the end, he chopped it into pieces and had friends smuggle them back so he could reassemble the model in Riyadh.

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His recent works have a darker edge, like a video that shows a young man with a map of the Arab world on his back. His skin is sliced with a razor and suction cups are applied to his skin, filling up with blood.

As low oil prices have shaken the Saudi economy, he has started working with red and yellow oil drums, cutting out triangular quarters so their tops look like giant images of Pac-Man.

He calls the project “Prosperity Without Growth” and would like to show it in Vienna — near the headquarters of OPEC.