

The Washington Post
January 10, 2018

The Washington Post

As Saudi Arabia relaxes its controls on culture and entertainment, artists dream — and worry

January 10, 2018, by KAREEM FAHIM



Filmmaker Khaled Nadershah on the set of his new feature film, with cast and crew in the background, in Jiddah, Saudi Arabia on Dec. 15. (Iman Al-Dabbagh/For The Washington Post)

The government of this ultraconservative kingdom has lately become a tireless patron of the arts, sponsoring concerts by Western performers such as New Age artist Yanni and promoting comic festivals and book fairs. Cinemas, banned for decades, are set to open soon.

The thaw is part of a push by Saudi Arabia's 32-year-old crown prince, Mohammed bin Salman, to ease some social restrictions, and the flurry of official announcements has thrilled a generation of young Saudis for whom a night of music or movies most often meant trips abroad.

GALERIE BRIGITTE SCHENK

But the plans have raised concerns, too, about the kind of cultural scene that emerges in a place governed by an austere religious creed and where the benefactor is an absolute monarchy that takes a dim view of unfettered speech. The undertaking has raised questions here about the role of independent artists who had toiled in the kingdom for years, navigating bureaucratic hurdles and rigid social boundaries to win international recognition for the Saudi arts.

Would the government's plans give a boost to independent curators, underground musicians and first-time filmmakers? Or would it lash art to the whims of government ministries and privilege only those artists favored by the state?



Artists Dalal, left, and Zahra fixing their installation piece at Athr gallery, Jiddah.

"Art should be away from any agendas. That is what makes us concerned," said Abdulnasser Gharem, co-founder of a pioneering Saudi arts collective called Edge of Arabia. His own work, including paintings and installations, often is shown abroad.

The debate over culture gets at the nature of the sweeping changes underway in Saudi Arabia under Mohammed. A focus on entertainment and culture is central to a plan to diversify the country's oil-dependent economy while expanding some social freedoms. Saudi officials and the crown prince's supporters say the changes — including allowing women to drive (a concession promised by the late King Abdullah) and curbing the authority of the "religious police" — represent a long-delayed effort to drag the kingdom

GALERIE BRIGITTE SCHENK

into the modern era. Some initiatives, such as the opening of cinemas, have also promised a vast economic opportunity.

But critics warn that it will take years to determine whether highly touted government reforms — for example, to stamp out corruption and curb extremist discourse — were meant to change an ossified system or simply repackage it.

In embracing the arts, the Saudi leadership drew a lesson in image-making from its ally and neighbor, the United Arab Emirates, which long ago recognized that its homegrown cultural scene was also a "powerful tool of soft power and diplomacy," said Beth Derderian, a doctoral candidate in anthropology at Northwestern University who studies the development of arts and culture in the UAE.



Filmmaker Khaled Nadershah with cast and crew on set, Jiddah, Saudi Arabia.

Other moves by the Saudi leadership have stirred confusion about its priorities, including the recent purchase by a Saudi prince of a painting by Leonardo da Vinci for \$450 million — a vast sum, given the government's stated commitment to anti-corruption and austerity measures. After media reports indicated that the real buyer had been Mohammed, Saudi officials said the painting had been acquired for the new Louvre Museum in Abu Dhabi, the capital of the UAE.

From his bustling studio in a villa in the capital, Gharem launched a residency program six years ago to nurture young Saudi artists. In a country where many view contemporary art

GALERIE BRIGITTE SCHENK

with suspicion, the studio was a rare incubator of creativity. It reflected a small Saudi scene that flourished over the past decade — despite occasional clashes with religious figures and the government.

"We were under pressure for years. It made the scene organic," Gharem said on a recent evening in his studio.

But artists also faced peril. One, Ashraf Fayadh, a Palestinian poet, curator and artist, was convicted on apostasy charges in 2015 and sentenced by a Saudi court to death by beheading. The accusations, which Fayadh's lawyers said stemmed from a personal dispute, included charges that his poetry had promoted atheism.

After an international outcry, the sentence was reduced to eight years in prison, along with 800 lashes.

Efforts to foster culture are coming as artists are feeling increased pressure because of tensions in the wider Persian Gulf. A feud has divided the gulf monarchies, pitting Qatar against Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, the UAE and Egypt. In addition, surging hostilities between Shiite Iran and the Sunni gulf states have fueled an increasingly vicious sectarian enmity. The resulting atmosphere of often-strident nationalism has largely quieted dissenting voices in the media, on social networks and in the arts.

The tensions have been apparent in the past few years in the UAE, long considered a cosmopolitan hub for artists across the region, including immigrants who grew up in that country. But in recent years, it has become more difficult for some artists, especially those who are Shiite Muslims or originally from Iran, either to travel to the UAE or renew their visas for access to the country, Derderian said.

GALERIE BRIGITTE SCHENK



Artist Abdunasser Gharem fixing his hattah (a Saudi head piece) at Gharem Studio in Jiddah.

At a recent exhibition in Abu Dhabi, a painting by Gharem was removed, he said, after an official complained. The painting, called "Prosperity Without Growth," depicted a figure wearing clothes that suggested he was both a Sunni and Shiite Muslim — a message about unity that apparently was too toxic for the moment.

"It's not the time to tell the truth," Gharem said.

Other Saudi artists were more optimistic.

"We say, 'In movement, there is a blessing,'" said Mohammed Hafiz, co-founder of Athr, a contemporary gallery that opened in 2009, who has advised the government on its foray into culture.

Hafiz said officials are approaching the arts as a "holistic ecosystem" of theaters, museums, auction houses and other venues that would bolster arts education and nurture an embrace of art in society at large. One of the most ambitious projects, the King Abdulaziz Center for World Culture, features a library and museum, and it recently launched a competition to promote contemporary Saudi artists.

And critically, Hafiz said, the government is consulting local artists as it moves forward — among them Ahmed Mater, one of Saudi Arabia's best-known contemporary artists,

GALERIE BRIGITTE SCHENK

whose work, including large-scale photographs, videos and installations, is being shown at the Brooklyn Museum.

There was bound to be a period of "trial and error," Hafiz acknowledged. But, he said, "you stay still and nothing happens. ... The whole society is moving much faster than it was before."

Among young artists, a sense of possibility has taken hold.

Nada AlMojadedi, a filmmaker, said it would take time take for Saudi audiences to embrace local content. They "haven't been accustomed to watching stories about themselves," she said. But the government's encouragement — or at least its endorsement of cultural events — has been a boon, she added.

Her short film, called "Zaina's Cake," was screened at a film festival sponsored by the Saudi oil company Aramco last spring that was attended by filmmakers from across the country, she said. During one recent week, it played at film nights in Riyadh and the eastern city of Dammam.

Khaled Nadershah, a 26-year-old filmmaker shooting his first feature in Saudi Arabia, praised the plans to open cinemas and support filmmakers as encouraging first steps.

"People need to see that there is such a thing as Saudi movies and that the industry is real," he said. Already there is evidence that attitudes toward artists are changing as bureaucratic barriers have tumbled: His permits to film on the streets of the city of Jiddah had taken only a week to come through, Nadershah said.

His ambition is broad — to tell "all the untold stories about my culture and society," he said. His is a small, self-financed film called "Exit 5," about a divorced woman struggling to get her parents' approval to study abroad. "A very common problem," he added.

He is less concerned with negotiating social taboos than with the challenge of finding a platform for an independent film. New cinemas are opening, but the Saudi audience that will fill the seats is largely obsessed with U.S. mainstream entertainment, he said.

"There is a new wave of artists trying to find a Saudi popular culture," he said. "It's so inspiring. But I can't say we are quite there yet."

Ahmed Mater said he had agreed to head a government-sponsored art institute in part to represent his generation of independent artists. "They will have a voice and a say in the

GALERIE BRIGITTE SCHENK

purpose and direction of the institute," he said in a text message, referring to a project by the Misk Foundation, sponsored by the crown prince.

Mater, whose work has been confrontational at times — for instance, documenting the ravages of development in Mecca, Islam's holiest city — said he did not think the government's embrace would stifle Saudi artists.

"On the contrary, it provides windows through which new opportunities can spring," he said. "The art scene will continue as it is; I think the nature of conversation, creativity, connections assures that."

https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/as-saudi-arabia-eases-controls-on-culture-and-entertainment-artists-dream--and-worry/2018/01/10/d480874c-e42c-11e7-a65d-1ac0fd7f097e_story.html?utm_term=.8a6461be83fc