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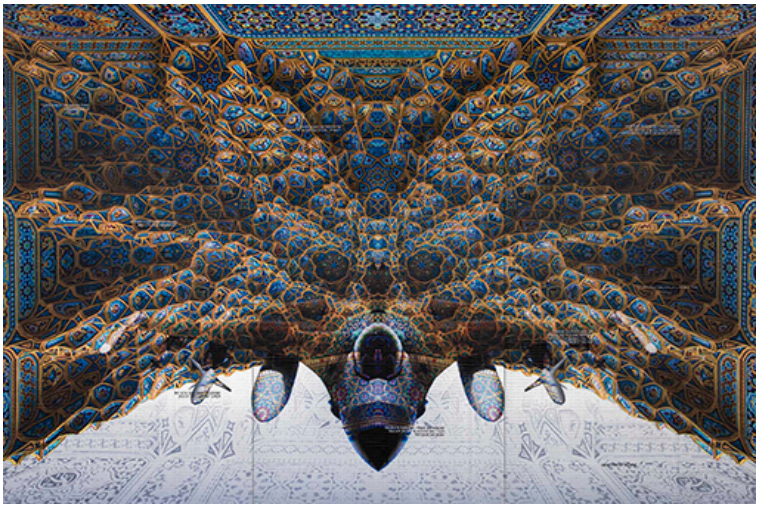
Can art stop jihad?

He was at school with two of the 9/11 hijackers. Now artist Abdulnasser Gharem is on a mission to divert bored young Saudis from jihad

September 28, 2015 by Catherine Millet



‘Usually people look skywards for inspiration; now they look up and see a bomber’ … an image from Abdulnasser Gharem’s exhibition Ricochet. Photograph: Todd-White Art Photography, courtesy of the artist

“We need to invest in these young people before Isis does,” says Abdulnasser Gharem, a former lieutenant colonel in the Saudi Arabian army, sipping a glass of water in the Tate during a flying visit to London. “They have energy and have little to do in their own country – so what would you expect them to do?”

Gharem, who was in the same class at school as two of the 9/11 hijackers, is one of the Middle East’s biggest-selling artists. At Christie’s in 2011, he sold Message, Messenger – a sculpture symbolising the Dome of the Rock in Jerusalem – for more than $800,000, a record-breaking price for contemporary Middle Eastern art at the time.

He's now on a mission to lure the young away from terrorism – by encouraging them to become artists instead. With his younger brother Aljan, he has set up a foundation at his studio in Riyadh to mentor people accordingly. So far, the studio has 11 students, aged 18 to 22, whose works will be on display in London next month. He refuses to identify the jihadists he knew as a teenager, but says the only way to conquer the wave of terrorism sweeping the Middle East – and with it the world – is to encourage people to think "individually".

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At school, he was a star pupil but was threatened with coming bottom of the class unless he attended sermons in the mosque. "The teachers started to play with the exam marks," he says. "I was going crazy because I was a good student and suddenly I was the worst guy in the school because I was not participating in their activities. To get my marks, I had to go along and hang out with them."

His former classmates were "young and good", he says. "But something happened to them – they changed. They went from saying, 'Why not let us go along and see what is happening?' to talking about jihad and fighting." He adds: "Nothing has changed that much. It is the same education system, the same speeches in the mosque."

Entertainment is thin on the ground in Saudi Arabia, let alone fine-art education. Cinemas and music concerts are banned, there are fewer than a dozen contemporary galleries and no art schools. “My idea is to help them find their path and not introduce themselves as a sacrifice in jihad. I want them to look around and develop their humanity.”

Many of those working in his studio have been educated in America or Europe: they are some of the 200,000 young people who benefit every year from an international scholarship programme established by King Abdullah 10 years ago. Their experience had a huge impact, he says. “You can see it in their work – they are acquiring fresh ideas.”

With more than 70% of the Saudi population under 40, the effect of this education will, he believes, transform the country. “There is a group of people in Saudi who want to go back into the past and freeze history. But I hope the studio will be the space where people can share their new ideas, come up with their own vision and be connected with society – not just an artist. I am trying to give them something long-term. Intellectuals in Saudi are lazy.”

In what may be an oblique criticism of Britain and America, the exhibition is called Ricochet, inspired by the idea that every country’s actions may cause “direct and indirect chain reactions”. One of the most haunting images, by Gharem himself, pictures a stealth bomber descending from the tessellated ceiling of the mosque at Isfahan in Iran, smoke bellowing out behind it like some terrifying Fury.

“Usually people look skywards for inspiration,” says Gharem, “but now they look up and see a bomber coming towards them.” The piece is constructed out of the kind of rubber stamps used by Saudi officialdom to keep people under control, he says. “With these stamps and systems, they are killing humanity and dreams. They keep you in a cage.”

Aljan has created a piece that is an actual cage configured into a 30ft-long mosque made of steel pipes and wire netting. “The idea is that ideology is a cage,” says Gharem. Another work by Gharem senior is Traditional Pain Treatment: a film of a fellow artist called Shaweesh enduring bloodletting through “cupping”, a treatment still practised in Saudi Arabia. The cups form a cross on a map of the Middle East inked across the man’s back.

“I was trying to find something that symbolised the detoxification of a bad ideology,” says Gharem. The cups, which are removed to allow the “doctor” to hasten the bloodletting by scoring the raised rings of flesh with a scalpel, form a cross to shame all the countries that exploited the region for oil. “They have wealth,” says Gharem, “and didn’t use it for the benefit of the people or for any humanitarian good, but to cause fire and heat for the ideology of the tribes.”

Gharem: he smuggled a plastic mannequin into Saudi Arabia

After this, a bizarre photo of the students painting and drawing a nude female model comes as light relief. Life drawing is banned in Saudi Arabia so the male artists, dressed in flowing robes and traditional cotton headdresses are not focusing on a real woman, but a plastic mannequin. It was bought in Dubai and had to be sliced into sections to get it through Saudi Arabian customs, then reassembled. “I was told it is idolatry to have a human figure with a head,” says Gharem.

The one woman exhibiting in this show works as a teacher in a girls’ school in Riyadh. Njoud Alanbari took a photograph of a picture painted on a wall in her school intended to promote good behaviour among its pupils, by showing how they should dress. A picture of a woman sporting long hair has been marked with a big red cross, while the black silhouette of a woman whose face and hair are blacked out has been given a large tick. Threatening scimitars encircle the women.

In a country with no free press or media, only time will tell whether art can bring about the change Gharem wants. “The image is playing a great role in this war thanks to the evolution of communication and information,” he says. “We need to be positive.”

• Abdulnasser Gharem: Ricochet is at Asia House, London, 12-18 October.