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A Saudi Arabian Trickster

ART Abdunasser Gharem is a leading figure in the nascent Saudi art scene. He is preoccupied with the idea of commitment -he introduces his newest project at the Side by Side Gallery Akim Monet.

BY BRIGITTE WERNEBURG

The scenery along the road that leads to Yemen from the town of Khamis Muschait in southwestern Saudi Arabia is dry and mountainous. Heavy rains cause spring floods to rush through the dry valleys crisscrossing the area. It was early 2000, when under threat of heavy rains, an entire village community evacuated their town, escaped with their belongings over the nearby newly built road and took shelter on a reinforced concrete bridge. But the bridge was poorly built. It collapsed, burying the villagers under it. No one survived. Nowhere was the accident reported.

In 2003, Abdunasser Gharem, a lieutenant in the Saudi Arabian army stationed in Khamis Muschait, loaded up his car with food, coffee, tea, and cans of white spray paint. He packed his brothers and friends into the car and drove with them to the remains of the bridge. Together they began to spray on the road the same word over and over again: "Siraat", which means "the path". The term refers on the one hand, to life decisions; on the other hand, it refers to the day of the last judgment described in the Koran as a bridge that crosses from Hellfire to Paradise. It took Gharem's 24-member team four days and three nights to completely cover the bridge. Then Gharem asked a goatherd, whom he had discovered in the vicinity, to lead his animals over the bridge through the darkness, where he filmed them using a camera outfitted with night vision equipment, thus giving the animals that famous Gulf War-green appearance.

Military service as a niche

Because a westerner would understand this as an artistic intervention or performance, one might think of Abdunasser Gharem as a Saudi Arabian Ai Weiwei. This is true but also not true.

The Saudi Arabian army lieutenant simply saw this undertaking as a means to record the tragedy, and thus capture a part of the unwritten history of Saudi Arabia. He started to draw early in life and later applied to study art at the university in his hometown. When he was not accepted, he opted for military service. Surprisingly, he found his niche there. He became a voracious reader and rented a studio near Khamis Muschait in Al Miftaha Art Village.

There he began to experiment with his ideas on art. He no longer painted landscapes. Instead he had friends wrap him with plastic to a tree, where in order to breathe, he used the oxygen produced by the tree. He was not a fan of this particular tree. On the contrary, *Conocarpus erectus*, the button mangrove, is native to Australia and was brought to Saudi Arabia as part of a beautification program. No one had thought about the growth pattern of the tree, whose roots grow horizontally into the roots of surrounding trees and shrubs, depriving them of water. The people in Khamis Muschait were flabbergasted. Never before had they seen anything like Gharem's action.

From an Arabic perspective, he could be seen as a slightly crazy storyteller, a "rawi".

Henry Hemming, the British journalist who wrote the first monograph about Abdunasser Gharem, dubbed him the archetypal Trickster. The Trickster, according to definition, is a mythological figure who upsets the order of things through his frauds and tricks. However, he usually has good reasons for creating chaos and therefore often acts as a hero: someone who accomplishes great deeds with fundamental social consequences.

Internationally recognized

Certainly a Trickster in that sense of the word, Abdunasser Gharem has evolved into a major Saudi Arabian artist since the days of the "Siraat" spray event, becoming a leading figure in its emerging art scene, who is already experiencing international recognition. In 2010 he exhibited "Siraat" in Berlin with Edge of Arabia, the artists' initiative he co-founded. In the 2011 ifa- Gallery exhibition "Political Pattern - Ornament in Transition", he showed "Men at Work", a painting composed of rubber stamps used by printers.

Now the artist is back in Berlin. At Side by Side Gallery Akim Monet he presents his newest project: "Towards the Amen Art Foundation". Because, as he says, a true artist is one who "changes things, and doesn't just say they should be changed". The exhibition is about the creation of an art foundation run by the participating artists themselves.

Of all places, the foundation will be located in Riyadh, the extremely conservative capital of Saudi Arabia. His idea, explained Gharem during his visit to Berlin for Gallery Weekend, came from his country's young generation of visual artists, filmmakers and musicians, and the Internet television Telfaz11, also Riyadh-based.

Side by Side Gallery acts not only as an exhibition space for some iconic works by Gharem, but also aspires to be a meeting place for all who are interested in the Foundation and want to contribute. Therefore, in the entry corridor of the gallery information plinths are hung on the walls and pencils are supplied: those interested can leave an address and suggestions. The artist gladly accepted our invitation to visit to find out about our cooperative model and the Panther Foundation. All information is valuable. Not only for him personally, but for Saudi society in general. "They are missing out on the opportunities to acquaint themselves with what is going on in the world," says Gharem. "No one is educating the people or explaining."

This is where he, The Trickster, wants to jump in and help. So he made monumental wooden stamp sculptures, as can be seen at Side by Side Gallery. On the red rubber stamp pad you read in Latin and Arabic script: "*Have a bit of commitment. Amen.*" Not only would you want to see this expression of commitment in every public office in the world, but it also confirms the very concrete goals of the Amen Art Foundation, in which children would not only read and draw, but also perform music and plays, while for young people and adults there would be lectures and continuing education opportunities. "We created huge buildings and cities. One constantly sees these 3-D presentations of them, but I don't think these plans can succeed if we don't also develop the people and the administration. Here I want to help. This is my mission. "

Abdulnasser Gharem

Born in 1973 in Khamis Muschait in southwestern Saudi Arabia. On his Internet site abdulnassergharem.com one can read how the artist himself makes art: "I have no studio, so my studio is wherever I can find people. When I see the opportunity, I go. That is my way of thinking about art."

In Berlin Abdulnasser Gharem is currently on view at Side by Side Gallery Akim Monet. The exhibition "Towards the Amen Art Foundation" runs until July 13, Potsdamer Strasse 81b, Tue-Sat 11-18 o'clock.