

BENAKI MUSEUM



which, originally appearing to refresh Hagar and Ishmael in the desert, was rediscovered by the Prophet's grandfather who was told to dig — as a beautiful manuscript illustration shows — where he saw a white-footed crow feeding on ants) to ceramic tiles, gold coins, ivory figurines and photographs. Together they build up a many-faceted, lively and, occasionally, a delightfully quirky historical picture.

Most striking is the way that the ancient and the modern, the past and the present, are blended together. Historical artefacts intermingle with works by living artists, ancient accounts with contemporary reports, manuscript paintings with stunning photographic images. And, essentially, there seems little difference between them. Once, scripts were inscribed upon a camel's jawbone. Now, murals of jet aircraft are painted on village walls. Whether pilgrims have trudged for weeks across deserts, or carried rich palanquins in exotic caravans, or crowded on to steamboats or taken package flights to Jeddah, the fundamental nature of their spiritual experience remains the same.

Haji, this show stresses, is a profoundly unifying experience, even in its failings, as an exuberant 13th-century illustration of an old man haranguing a crowd of over-excitable pilgrims makes clear. Not that curators in a show which is painstakingly tactful — there are no images of the Prophet, or mention of trampled people (and rather too much grateful attention paid to the generosity of the House of Saud) — dwell on problems too heavily. Instead, they put their efforts into creating an atmospheric hang which, from the cries of arriving pilgrims that burst out around you as you enter, to the filmed testimonies at the end of the show, encourage the visitor to move beyond mere intellectual engagement towards an emotional response.

In the long run, however, though laudably ambitious, this exhibition falls foul of the problem that afflicts any show of Islamic art in this country. Because of its dominantly non-figurative tradition, Islamic culture remains something of a specialism.

On the upside, there are some mind-boggling statistics: three million people now make the pilgrimage; each of them throw 49 pebbles at the pillars; some 300,000 will need medical attention; 27,000 people are employed to provide them with water. The numbers speak for themselves.

This is certainly the first time that I have reviewed an exhibition of which I can honestly say, "the more people the merrier". The longer you have to queue, the harder you have to jostle, the more uncomfortable and claustrophobic you become — the more vividly the experience will impress itself upon you.

Haji: journey to the heart of Islam runs from Thursday to April 15 (britishmuseum.org; 020-7323 8311)

Flowering in the sand

After decades of cultural repression, Saudi Arabia is hosting its first big show of contemporary art, Damian Whitworth writes from Jeddah

On the bare concrete walls of a half-finished shopping mall in Jeddah hangs a huge work that could just be the next incendiary development in the contemporary art world. "This is a bomb," says Ahmed Mater, its grinning creator. "The amount of material inside this could make a bomb."

The work, *The Cowboy Code II*, is fashioned from thousands of caps from a toy gun. His claim of pyrotechnic viability may be dubious, but he is part of a sizeable detonation in the cultural life of Saudi Arabia.

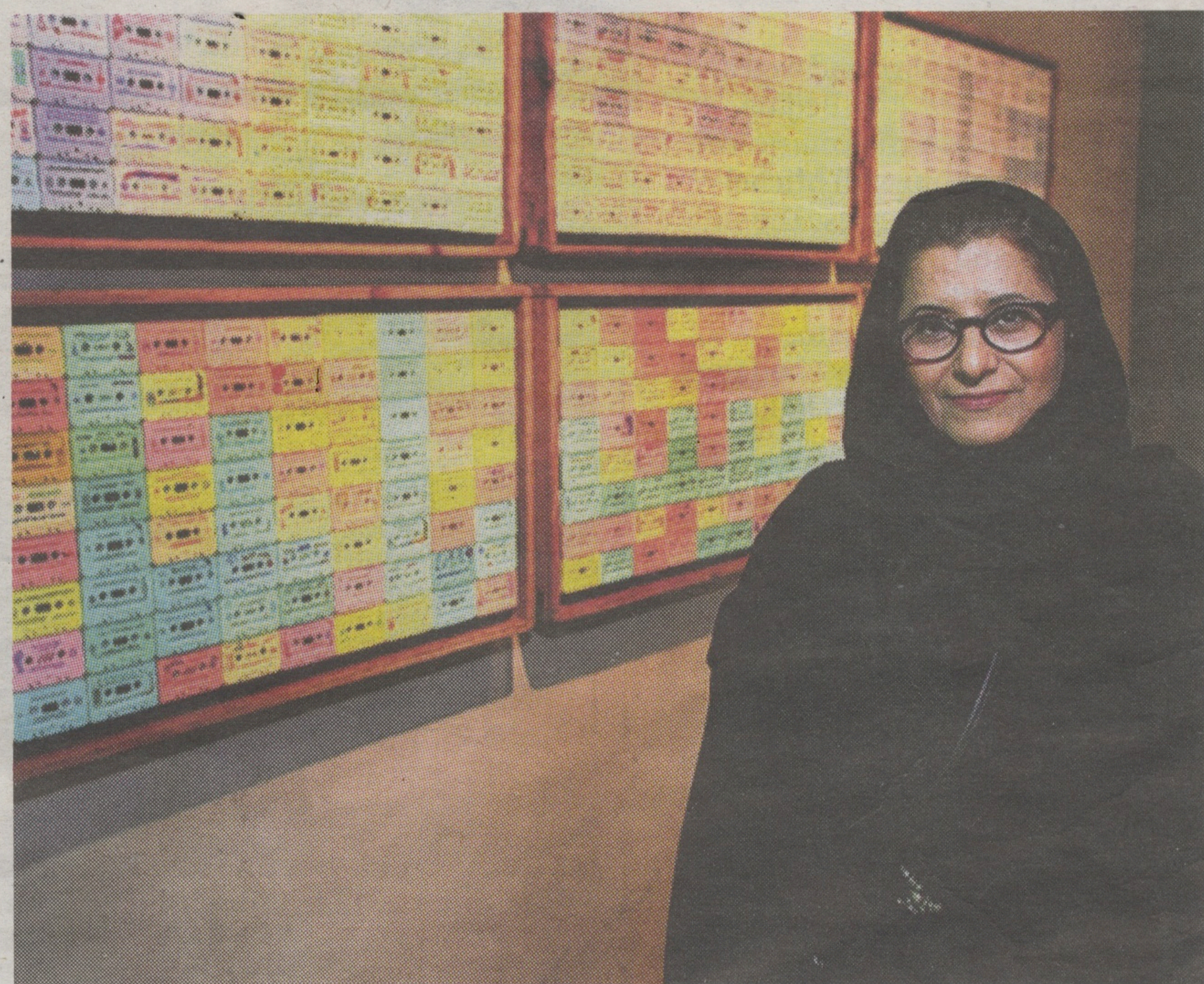
Perhaps you thought that the words "Saudi Arabian contemporary art scene" were a satirical joke at the expense of one of the world's least open societies (there are only seven art galleries in the kingdom and no cinemas). But a contemporary art movement has sprung up out of the sand over the past few years in one of the most unlikely of artistic flowerings.

In the *Edge of Arabia: We Need to Talk* exhibition, a band of Saudi artists explore the boundaries of what is acceptable in a country with little artistic tradition and a very active religious police. *Edge of Arabia* has staged a number of exhibitions in other countries, including Britain, but this is the first big contemporary art show in Saudi Arabia. Four of the artists are simultaneously showing works at the British Museum's *Haji* exhibition, which opens this week.

Mater, also a doctor, is one of the best known. *The Cowboy Code II* is a list of the reputed rules of the Wild West alongside sayings of Muhammad. The easiest interpretation is that he is having a dig at George Bush. He admits that placing the code directly alongside tenets of Islam is controversial. "I'm trying to push it. Let's see."

The work for which he is best known will be at the heart of the *Haji* exhibition. Using magnets and iron filings, *Magnetism* depicts the Kaaba, the cube-shaped shrine at the centre of Mecca that pilgrims circle during the Hajj. He declines to comment on whether it would ever be allowed to go on display in Saudi Arabia.

Another prominent piece at the British Museum is a road sign by Abdunasser Gharem, showing Muslims and non-Muslims which lane to get into on the road to Mecca. He has another road sign on one wall in the Jeddah exhibition, this time with arrows pointing East and West and comments such as "East is west, West is West, Never the twain, Shall Meet" and "Islamophobia". One arrow points to



Maha Malluh with her work; she is one of nine women in the show

“Artists are still often uneasy about figurative paintings

the airport and Gharem, who attended school with two of the 9/11 terrorists, says that he wants us to think about the way that event "still affects us". The piece also seeks to make the viewer think about how Saudi Arabia sends thousands of students abroad but makes it difficult for travellers from the West to visit.

He has also produced a giant rubber stamp. "You can't do anything in Saudi Arabia without the stamp," he says. A lieutenant colonel in the army, he sold a work at a charity auction in Dubai last year for more than \$800,000 (£514,000) — a record for a living Gulf artist. "Why do you say I am critical of the system?" he says when this is suggested. "I am trying to help the system." Like several of the artists he praises the modest reforms of King Abdullah, the Saudi ruler.

Strikingly, nine of the 22 artists in *Edge of Arabia* are women. Maha Malluh, a grandmother, writes in the catalogue that the historical figure she would most like to meet would be the Prophet Muhammad "to ask him what he thinks of the status of women in our society". Last year King Abdullah granted women the right to vote and participate in municipal elections but in public the sexes are segregated, driving is still effectively illegal for women and they must have permission from their male guardian if they want to work or to travel.

One of Malluh's works features old bread trays filled with cassettes of radical religious teachings. "It's the food we were fed for the past 30 years," she says, chuckling. But she too rejects the suggestion that she is doing anything provocative. "For me it's just an object. People think it's controversial. I don't."

Her piece in the British Museum is a photogram that shows the clutter on the road to Mecca. The images in the

frame are sketchy. Is that a female posterior? No, she says, it's a man. I must have been seeing things she didn't intend. She is a painter but chooses to create the shadowy images of photograms because "in my society they don't like to discuss things clearly".

The exhibition features an arresting sculpture by Eyad Maghazel, of a baby with an umbilical chord attached to a computer games console with buttons labelled "terrorist" "atheist" "corruption" and "drugs". Photographs are allowed, but artists are still often uneasy about figurative paintings.

Manal Al Dowayan, a young woman artist, has strung giant prayer beads from the ceiling, each inscribed by a woman with her name. She wants to encourage women to use their own names because often they are identified only as wives and mothers of sons. When she first exhibited a few years ago she had to leave the gallery so that men could view her work. "Now it is different. For Saudi art, this exhibition is a milestone."

Nevertheless, there are ingrained attitudes to overcome. One man examining her beads was overheard joking to a friend that he would commission her to do a piece using the names of all the women that he had slept with.

The exhibition has official permission, but there were concerns about whether it would go ahead right up to opening night. Several hundred people turned up, including the top people from Christie's and Sotheby's in London, and Chris Dercon, the director of Tate Modern. Local media reported the event. The odd disapproving online comment has not become a furor. "We couldn't have done this last year or the year before," says Stephen Stapleton, who curated the show with two Saudis. "This is the right time because there is a sense of dialogue from the top," he says.

How fast the country will move towards greater freedoms remains to be seen. Ahmed Mater says that Saudi society tends to take a few steps forwards and then a couple back. For his next project he is planning to examine the economy and commercial life of Mecca, which will be "very, very controversial".