

# JEDDAH CALLING



Four years and five cities later, Edge of Arabia stages *We Need to Talk*, its first exhibition in Jeddah. **Myrna Ayad** attends the organisation's largest show to date, marked by a number of events that included Ayman Yossri Daydban's solo show at Jeddah's Athr Gallery.

**M**ost artists and curators will concede that the week before a vernissage is fraught with anxiety. Naturally, such angst is augmented depending on the nature of the show – its timing, subject matter, audience and place – all of which were central in the staging of Edge of Arabia's (EoA) latest exhibition in Jeddah, *We Need to Talk*, sponsored by Abdullatif Jameel Community Initiatives and supported by Abraaj Capital. And yet, for most of the participating artists and the show's curator, Mohammed Hafiz of Jeddah's Athr Gallery, the merriment surrounding EoA's 'homecoming' not only dispelled any pre-vernissage anxiety, but also rallied the support of individuals and organisations in what became a collectors' programme of sorts. The week included a symposium on Contemporary Saudi art, visits to collectors' homes, a dinner hosted by Christie's, trips to Jeddah's old souk and the World Heritage Site of Mada'in Saleh, as well as to the vernissage of *I Am Anything, I Am Everything*, a solo show by

Ayman Yossri Daydban at Athr Gallery. Visa challenges aside, the occasion brought together some of the art world's key figures, including Tate Director Chris Dercon, German artist Wolfgang Tillmans, Art Dubai Fair Director Antonia Carver, patrons Ramin Salsali and Tariq Al-Jaidah, and curator Jack Persekian.

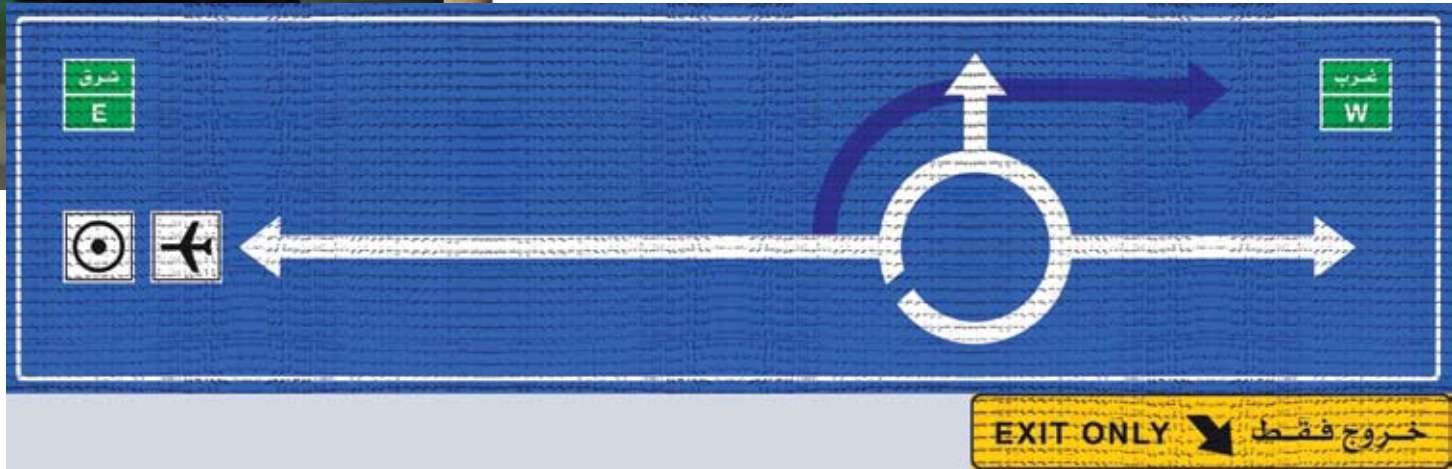
*We Need to Talk* was a show eight months in the making and which marked the organisation's seventh incarnation since its inaugural exhibition in 2008 in London, after which came Venice, Berlin, Istanbul and Dubai. Recent EoA editions have catered to the cities in which they have been held – *Terminal* (2011) in Dubai, for example, reflected the emirate's positioning as a global hub; *Transition* (2010) in Istanbul took its inspiration from the city's location between East and West. *We Need to Talk* is a title aimed at prompting a definite response, and was a rejoinder to a society which has, over the last few years, demonstrated an increased interest in Contemporary visual art, especially on the part of its youth. This is largely

due to the efforts of organisations such as EoA and Athr Gallery, the Kingdom's premiere Pavilion at the 2011 Venice Biennale and the acquisition of Contemporary Saudi artworks by institutions such as the Los Angeles County Museum of Art and the British Museum.

For the residents of Jeddah, *We Need to Talk* provided much food for thought, representing as it did EoA's first-ever show in the Kingdom and the city's largest ever exhibition of Contemporary art – with both milestones inevitably celebrated by organisers and participating artists alike. After raising the flag for Contemporary Saudi art, the troupe came home, victorious. "There was a great feeling of pride that we were giving something back to Saudi Arabia," says EoA's Creative Director Abdullah Al-Turki.

## OPENING ACTS

It was in April 2010 that Al-Turki and Hafiz spotted the 1000 square-metre space in the-then under



construction Al-Furisiya Marina and Mall overlooking the Red Sea. They managed to convince the landlords to keep the space's raw concrete finishing until after the exhibition had taken place. Later that month, Hafiz was appointed curator of the organisation's largest show to date, comprising works by 22 artists. "I knew what I wanted this show to be from day one," he recalls, "and I wanted the artworks themselves to provoke deep discussions." Dialogue is central to Hafiz's practice and, by extension, to EoA's philosophy. After numerous meetings with the artists, Al-Turki and EoA co-founder Stephen Stapleton, the concept behind *We Need to Talk* was born. Provoking precisely the sort of "deep discussions" Hafiz had always envisaged, it was at once a call for immediate feedback as well as an invitation for dialogue. 'We need to talk' embodies a two-in-one petition, one that is immediately intimidating and suggestive of something requiring urgent attention yet which also invites audience engagement and potential resolution of the issue(s) at hand. This clever call for ac-

tion is also subliminally laced – it both goads and summons the public to come and see just who is doing the talking: in this case, the artists, and they certainly had much to say. "You could tell that the Jeddah show was a 'here we are' moment for us," says participating artist Manal Al-Dowayan; "we all just wanted the Saudi community to interact with each other and there was a lot of dialogue. We need to talk? Well, everyone was talking!"

But talking about what? To try and answer this, Hafiz and the EoA team broke the exhibition down into three parts – *Past, Present* and *Future*. The artists were invited to create artworks inspired by these three different moments in time and, in so doing, provide audiences with a history, written through artworks, of where Saudi society was, is and may be heading towards. Hafiz was keen to include "iconic artworks" in the show, such as Abdunasser Gharem's *The Stamp (Amen)* installation and Ahmed Mater's *Evolution of Man* light-box. It worked well. "The pieces applied themselves," he says.

Above, clockwise: A view of Manal Al-Dowayan's installation, *My Name*, 2012. Wooden prayer beads on wool string. Nine pieces. Overall height: 350 cm. Image courtesy Cuadro Fine Art Gallery, Dubai.

Ibrahim Abumsmar. (Detail) *Birdhouse*, 2012. Cardboard birdhouses on wooden poles. 25 birdhouses and poles. Birdhouse: 22 x 28 x 15 cm; poles: height ranges from 158–259 cm, width: 30 cm and depth: 30 cm. Image courtesy Athr Gallery, Jeddah.

From left to right: Mohammed Chamdi. *Untitled*, 2011. Mixed media on canvas. 116 x 145 cm. Image courtesy Athr Gallery, Jeddah; Ahmed Mater. *Comboy Code*, 2011. 3000 plastic cap gun discs. 312 x 600 cm. Image courtesy the artist. On the floor: Ahaad Alamoudi. *Ana*, 2012. Fibreglass boxes filled with mud. 50 pieces. Sizes increase according to the Fibonacci ratio, smallest box: 8 x 8 x 8 cm, largest box: 21 x 21 x 21 cm. Image courtesy the artist.

Abdunasser Gharem. *Exit Only*, 2012. Industrial lacquer paint on rubber stamps (on nine-millimetre Indonesian plywood). 70 x 320 cm. Image courtesy Edge of Arabia.



POINTS OF DEPARTURE

The show began with the *Past*, where artists reclaimed emblems – both physical and spiritual – of Saudi’s history, a heritage that is being washed away by the tides of globalisation and progress. A spiral of Plexiglas boxes, ascending in size and filled with mud was centred in the space. It referenced verses in the Holy Qur’an in which the origin of man is purported to be mud. Ahaad Alamoudi’s *Ana* installation was a call to remind one of their roots. “Let’s consider the pace of life today, let’s remember that our origin is that small, little box from where everything grew,” ventured Hafiz. Hanging on the wall were six installations by Maha Malluh; each *Food for Thought* 7200 piece featured 80 cassette tapes held together in a wooden baking tray. The tapes are recordings of religious sermons which were distributed for free in the 1980s; the trays – also about 30 years-old – were taken from traditional Saudi bakeries. What bound the materials together was their age and their offering, thereby metaphorically raising the

# We Need to Talk stood tall, proud and bold.

notion that both were ‘fed’ to the Saudis three decades ago – hence the work’s title.

The *Present* was concerned with decidedly contemporary issues, ranging from concern for the environment to the nature of modern society and the hazards of globalisation. Here stood Ibrahim Abumsmar’s *Birdhouse* installation, comprising 25 cardboard birdhouses in a show of disdain over current levels of environmental neglect. Also in *Present* was Gharem’s *Exit Only* signboard, made in his trademark industrial rubber stamps and featuring multiple routes. On its corners are the symbols for East and West – allegories for Saudi society and the West and the optional crossroads that lie within.

*Future* suggested potential paths ahead for Saudi society and was inevitably a compilation of desires and hopes. Perhaps no other artwork expressed these as eloquently as Al-Dowayan’s *My*

*Name*. This exhibition showstopper featured nine giant *masbahas* (rosaries), each strung with natural wool woven by Saudi Bedouin craftswomen and 33 specially manufactured maple wood beads, hung from the ceiling. It wasn’t so much *MyName*’s sheer size which made this artwork so exceptional, as its profound meaning. One of 10 female artists showing at *We Need to Talk*, Al-Dowayan has never shied away from addressing women’s rights through her work. Her *I Am* series – exhibited in *Present* – features Saudi women in various guises – scuba diver, petroleum engineer, UN officer – and fearlessly asks: just who are the authorities determining what roles women can take on? *My Name* displayed similar boldness. In a country notorious for its strict laws on what women can and can’t do, Al-Dowayan sought to address the curious habit among some Saudi men and boys of





Facing page: Maha Malluh. 2012. *Food for Thought 7200*. Tapes on wooden baking trays. 110 x 60 x 10 cm.

This page, clockwise: A view of Ayman Yossri Daydban's *Flag* series at his solo show *I Am Anything, I Am Everything* at Athr Gallery, Jeddah. The 49 works in the Gallery B space were created using mixed media on 100 per cent cotton acid-free paper.

Ayman Yossri Daydban. *Reflections 06*. 2011. Stainless steel. 206 x 41.5 cm.

A view of Ayman Yossri Daydban's solo show *I Am Anything, I Am Everything* at Athr Gallery, Jeddah.

All images on facing page and this page courtesy: Athr Gallery, Jeddah.



Visitors standing in front of these works appear disfigured in the reflective metal; other pieces have been folded over and over into boxes – an inference to how insular one becomes when delving into the depths of self-questioning. Daydban had expended much physical effort on these works, using his bare hands. The resulting works are liberated, open and inviting. This is where Daydban has arrived: identity is a collective and an all-embracing concept; he is everything and anything.

In a room within the gallery, micro flags were framed all along the walls. From a KitKat wrapper and a Prozac box to a Marlboro pack and a Coca-Cola can, Daydban attempted to outline consumer culture but also hit home the message that while identity is restricted to the parameters of physical borders, such consumer products are not: they travel freely in and out. And so does Contemporary Saudi art. Indeed, both these recent shows gave their audience a real understanding of where Contemporary Saudi art has come – home, full circle and a long way away from EoA's debut 2008 exhibition at London's SOAS Brunei Gallery, where the objectives were to raise awareness and alter pre-existing stereotypes of the Kingdom. *We Need to Talk* is miles ahead from such aims and stood tall, proud and bold. 🇸🇦

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not giving their mothers' or sisters' names when asked. "It's got to the level where a woman's name in itself should also be veiled, so to speak," explains Al-Dowayan; "the woman has become just a body." With the help of Twitter, Facebook and her own website, Al-Dowayan gathered together hundreds of women and held one-day workshops in Jeddah, Riyadh and Al-Khobar, where each woman wrote her name on a bead. Fathers attended and wrote their daughters' names on beads too. "It is up to us as women to secure our own rights," asserts Al-Dowayan, "and I like the idea that we're all literally linked in *MyName*."

## PATHS TO IDENTITY

In what can be classified as the perfect end to *Future*, was Ayman Yossri Daydban's *The Opening* – eight prints of play-by-play scenes from the Hollywood blockbuster *Malcolm X*. The aesthetics become secondary when one reads the subtitles, which instantly communicate a moment of vulnerability and hope on the part of the pro-

tagonist, but in extension, to Saudis themselves. In the prints, Malcolm X prays to Allah for direction and it is the sixth print's subtitle which encapsulates *Future: Guide us upon the Straight Path*.

The latter term could be extended to Daydban's *I Am Anything, I Am Everything* solo show at Athr. The Palestinian-born Saudi artist has been grappling with issues of identity in recent bodies of work and has sought spiritual and emotional guidance along a '*Straight Path*'. He spent a month in Beirut reflecting, and then put on a show, curated by Robert Klujiver, which took viewers around Daydban's journey of self-actualisation. It is rather akin to a line in Hisham Matar's seminal novel *In the Country of Men*, in which the author writes, "Nationalism is as thin as a thread, perhaps that's why many feel it should be anxiously guarded." Daydban placed some works from his *Flags* series at the beginning of the exhibition, emphasising the starting point: the flag as a symbol of identity and folded in a way that resembles actual flags. As one walked along the path, the flags became distorted, illustrative of periods of deep introspection.