Visiting the Arabian Peninsula: A Brief Glimpse of Contemporary and Not-So-Contemporary Culture in KSA, aka the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia

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‘I went to Southern Arabia only just in time.’
Wilfed Thesiger, introduction to Arabian Sands

‘What new era had begun – what could they expect of the future? For how long could the men stand it? This night had passed, but what about the nights to come? No one asked these questions aloud, but they obsessed everyone…’
Abdelrahman Munif, Cities of Salt

There are many moments in life when our conscience should subliminally nudge us to have a second thought about something about to be said or done, or just said or done. Such instances can be important to the small, domestic details of daily life and relationships, or meaningful at a much more macro-level. A recent invitation to visit the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia – aka KSA – as part of a ‘VIP programme of events’ of ‘leading art professionals and patrons’ prompted such a conscience nudge in the writer of this essayistic diary. Momentarily flattered to be addressed as a ‘leading art professional’ (to which I can make no claims whatsoever), there were, however, some immediate reservations about accepting. I like to think I have a personal political and social compass that will always veer towards opposition to acts of deep injustice and inhumane practices, and as far as KSA is concerned there were several considerations that pulled my internal compass needle quite far in that direction. There were, for example, the now confirmed reports of the particularly gruesome murder of a dedicated exiled Saudi journalist in the Saudi consulate in Istanbul in October 2018, and other media stories of imprisonments, disappearances, torture, beheadings and the discriminatory treatment of women in this conservatively religious society.

There was also the question of the ongoing Saudi-led coalition’s military attacks on its neighbour, Yemen, since 2015, against supposed ‘Houthi rebels’. This imbalanced war, launched like so many other modern military interventions in the name of ‘counter-terrorism’, has resulted in

1 From the introduction in Wilfred Thesiger, Arabian Sands, Longmans Green and Co Ltd, London, 1959, p xiii
2 Abdelrahman Munif, Cities of Salt, translated from the Arabic by Peter Theroux, Vintage International, New York, 1989 [1984], p 222. The author, who died in 2004, was stripped of his Saudi nationality (although he was born and grew up in Jordan) for political reasons. Cities of Salt, which chronicles the meeting of Arabs and Americans in an unnamed Gulf kingdom over the development of oil extraction and a petro-culture, has been banned in Saudi Arabia.
3 Reports, and evidence, that the scarcely believable method of murder of the journalist Jamal Khashoggi was carried out by agents of the Saudi government are now undeniable.
much destruction and loss of innocent lives and has led to the very real possibility of a humanitarian disaster in the form of famine and a cholera outbreak. I happen to have been born in the Yemeni port city of Aden, in coincidental thrall to parents servicing the colonial educational infrastructure in the last years of British occupation of the region, and although this gives me no right to have any attachment, harbouring a lingering sense of interest in all that happens to the country is unavoidable.

The prevailing narrative in the ‘West’ of Saudi Arabia is of an oil-rich, non-democratic, autocratic, highly patriarchal and ultra-conservative state that does not tolerate freedom of speech or any form of dissent and enacts grave punishments on those who attempt to exercise the freedoms taken for granted elsewhere. Yet, large portions of the rest of the world are beholden to the Kingdom for oil, to sell billions of pounds or dollars or euros of military hardware to, and to many of its citizens as wealthy consumers of international real estate and luxury goods. Blind eyes are turned in the pursuit of economic gain and regional influence, citing the politically necessary mantra of ‘jobs’.

This description is not a false one, but as with any picture, there are subtexts and narratives that get overlooked and which are simply just not easily perceptible to outsider eyes, ears and minds. This is, after all, the country that has the two holiest sites in Islam: the Masjid Al Haram (the Great, or Grand, Mosque) in Mecca and the Masjid An Nabawi (the Prophet’s Mosque) in Medina. Every nation-state has multiple subtexts to the grand narratives of its politics and ruling bodies, with cultural life at all levels and forms striving to find ways and means to be active and relevant. It is relatively easy to sit comfortably away somewhere within the ambit of one’s own national narratives and from there pass judgements on others, perhaps refusing to visit a country or buy its products, in protest at its actions, and there is a more than honourable and effective history of such justifiable practice.

But if this was to be taken to a logical endgame, there would be ethical problems in remaining resident in one’s own country. My own country of residence – the UK – is itself a partner in the Saudi-led coalition bombing Yemen, and an enthusiastic retailer of military jets and other hardware, and despite some of its undoubtedly honourable liberal traditions, it is no stranger to miscarriages of justice, human rights abuses and military aggression. Not forgetting also the deeply influential and ongoing legacies of its history as a former global colonial power, with few corners of the world, including the Saudi/‘middle east’ region, being immune from those legacies.

But one’s nation of residence is more often than not a result of chance and accident that there is little choice over, and however much desire there might be for our governments to ‘do the right thing’, they frequently pursue economic and political paths and actions that suit the purposes of a governing and controlling elite, whether in a country that follows democratic principles or in one that does not.

4 I am not going to potentially incriminate myself here by giving direct references to any reports or evidence for what such blind eyes reportedly do not see. But examples can be found in many international media sources, both mainstream and otherwise.

5 Against apartheid South Africa, for example, or the current Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions (BDS) campaign against the state of Israel and its military occupation of the West Bank and East Jerusalem, its blockade of the Gaza strip, and its discriminatory policies towards its Arab/Palestinian citizens.
So, the initial hesitation I experienced before accepting this VIP invitation, after some internal weighing up of conscience, gave way to curiosity and to what I hope is an appropriately tuned sense of cultural inquisitiveness. Here, in an attempt to preserve balance, positivity, a little reserve of judgement, and perhaps a more bearable lightness of being, I relate something of the visit in the form of an essay-diary. It is inevitably a particular perspective from an individual intellectual history, and a personal geography and place, and an unavoidably biased one as I admit from the outset my prejudices and knowledge limitations, but there is a responsibility sometimes to tell of people and situations other than the grand state narratives and actions conveyed in the general media. There is more to know about Saudi Arabia and the Arabian peninsula, its history and contemporary culture, than such narratives allow.

The preliminaries
In the UK, one of the less publicised outcomes of the Istanbul consulate events in October 2018 was the closure of the Saudi embassy in London to any public access, including visa applicants. The Kingdom has essentially been closed for many years to all but business and diplomatic travel and the many millions of hajj pilgrims going to Mecca/Makkah from around the world who must apply for a special hajj visa, usually through group tour operators. It has not had any form of tourist or visitor’s visa (although there are currently moves afoot for this to change). The closure of the London embassy meant using an intermediary agent from a long list, at considerable (and apparently random) cost, but with the required official supporting document from the Saudi Ministry of Foreign Affairs a ‘government visa’ was eventually issued.

The check-in officer at Heathrow airport misheard me when he asked where I was going. Rio? he queried. No, Riyadh, I replied. ‘On holiday?’ he smirked. I also laughed, and felt decidedly uncomfortable replying ‘No…’ The London-Riyadh flight was fairly empty; some Saudi citizens returning home perhaps, and a handful of solo, youngish, very fit-looking ‘Caucasian’ men (‘security or military connections’ was the thought that drifted through my mind as I tried to push it away), although the young man in front of me drank his way through more small bottles of free wine than I would have thought possible, until the cabin crew subtly dissuaded him from continuously asking for more with ‘the bar is now closed, sir’. Presumably making up for what he would soon be unable to do, with alcohol banned in the Kingdom under its strict interpretation of Wahabi Islam (it is haram, or forbidden, to take any in or to be intoxicated with it), this young man would risk arrest and possible lashings, or worse, and immediate deportation for merely smelling of alcohol.

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Day One: Riyadh

Morning

The modern city: Like many other modern Arab cities rapidly constructed over the last few decades, Riyadh has lots of high-rise buildings, multi-lane highways, shopping malls and dark-windowed SUVs. (I tried hard to look out for any women drivers after the ban had been lifted on them driving themselves in 2018 but never spotted any, although I was assured that many do now drive to work or take their children to school.) But the desert sand still blows in to these modern megalopolises and settles in corners, seeps through windows and banks up the edges of pavements and sidewalks. Thus reminded that not so long ago it was desert, the city was shrouded in a sandy-coloured haze, neon-lit at night; and all the buildings seemed to have become the same colour, with no discernible horizon.

The older city: The introductory stop on the first morning of this VIP tour was to the Addiriyah Museum on the northwestern outskirts of the modern city. Here, on the edges of Wadi Hanifah – still a water lifeline that runs through the modern city – are the ruins of the settlement of At-Turaif in Ad Diriyah. The Addiriyah Museum, due to open to the public in the near future, has been created out of part of the heavily renovated adobe ruins that date back to the fifteenth century (in Christian era dating). Described as a citadel and a settlement with palaces and mosques, At-Turaif was placed on the UNESCO World Heritage List in 2010 because of its relevance as an example of traditional desert architecture and for its importance in the history of the region. The settlement
became the base of the first ‘kings’ of the ‘House of Saud’ who established themselves there in the eighteenth and early nineteenth century. Hence – as became clear in the tour of the Museum by the enthusiastic, young female guides – the importance of the site in underpinning the narrative of the origins of the Saudi state and its monarchy, and the links to culture being forged by the newly built and created Ministry of Culture just opposite.

Like many other state-sponsored museums, the Addiriyah Museum reinforces a story of a nation and its rulers, as borne out in the words on the museum’s walls in phrases such as ‘the State’s springboard’, ‘the First Saudi State… with religion at its core’, ‘the cornerstone on which the Saudi state was founded’. The successes in pushing back the Ottomans in the nineteenth century are celebrated (‘the Saudi State stood tall in the face of challenge and adversity’), although the creation of the northern land borders of the modern state by the British colonial administrators drawing lines with a crayon across a map in the early twentieth century is not mentioned.7 The museum tells the heroic story of the state and its royal house of Saud through wall texts and a limited number of artefacts, many of them replicas of items in the royal collection or the much larger National Museum in Riyadh, including an impressive display of swords. The royal lineage is illustrated with

7 The long border with Iraq in the north was created in 1922 in the Treaty of Mohammara between British officials and Ibn Saud, followed by the Al Uqair Convention later the same year that regulated the boundary with the ‘British Protectorate’ of Kuwait in the northeast. Other land borders with Jordan, Yemen, Oman and the Emirate states of the Gulf have been the subjects of various treaties and agreements, and ongoing disputes, over the 1900s and up to the present day. A good source for a history of the kingdom of Saudi Arabia and the region is Jörg Matthias Determann’s *Historiography in Saudi Arabia: Globalization and the State in the Middle East*, I B Tauris, 2013.
the extraordinarily extensive, multiple branches of the royal family tree – in two parts, necessarily, as it is so large, and culminating with the current king, HRH Salman bin Abdulaziz, who became king only in 2015. This focus on the royal lineage was no surprise, but what, it might be wondered, would be done when the head of the tree changes? When the current Crown Prince, Mohammed bin Salman (or ‘MBS’ as the western media has taken to referring to him) assumes the throne properly? A new design of top of the tree will be needed.

The family tree of the Royal House of Saud on a window in the Addiriyah Museum, Riyadh, photo courtesy of the author

Afternoon

Studio visits: Following lunch in a traditional restaurant close to the Addiriyah Museum, in a renovated group of buildings clearly designed to welcome tourists and local visitors with its soon-to-be shops and restaurants on the banks of the Wadi, the afternoon was devoted to some studio visits. It shouldn’t have been a surprise that Riyadh has former industrial buildings being used as artists’ studios, not so dissimilar to many American cities, but somehow it was. I always feel a trespasser in other artists’ studios wherever they might be, but it was interesting, qualms momentarily laid aside, to see the work and meet some of the young, and not-so-young, artists in these studios – artists such as Saed Gamhawi, Marwa AlMugait, Homoud Al Ataoui, Sultan bin Fahad and Ahmed Mater. Artists’ studios are not always the best places to view work, but they can provide informative
glimpses into working and research processes. The younger artists had clearly done some preparation for this VIP visit, with work-in-progress carefully mounted or installed as if for an exhibition (there were several international curators and at least one collector in the VIP group), but there was little time unfortunately to really engage with the artists and learn more about their ideas and work.

Ahmed Mater’s expansive studio in Riyadh would be the envy of many an artist in New York, Berlin, London, or indeed anywhere. Mater is one of the most well-known contemporary Saudi artists and his work has been widely exhibited outside the kingdom. Recently relocated to Riyadh from Jeddah as a base, as he is in the process of working on a new project concerning the capital city, the artist is perhaps best known internationally for his major work on the city of Makkah (Mecca). This extensive project, under the collective title Desert of Pharan: Unofficial Histories behind the Mass Expansion of Mecca, explored the city of Mecca through what the artist has described as his method of ‘expansive documentary ambles’. In photography and moving image, the project represents years of work documenting the city, the pilgrims, the migrant workers working on the destruction of the older city (and the consequent privatisation of formerly public space) as the city is transformed to make way for hotels, roads and the modern infrastructure deemed necessary to facilitate the tides of over a billion people who visit the holy city each year. In tandem with his now

8 See https://www.ahmedmater.com/ and especially https://www.ahmedmater.com/desert-of-pharan
9 This project is published in book form as The Desert of Pharan: Unofficial Histories behind the Mass Expansion of Mecca, Catherine David, ed, Lars Müller Publishers, Zurich, 2016. ‘Pharan’ is the old name for Makkah/Mecca and the desert and mountains that surround it (it is also the ‘desert or wilderness of Paran or Faran’ in the Old Testament of the Bible).
international career and success, the artist, who trained and still practises as a medical physician, is keenly aware of the responsibility to his ‘community’ of artists, and the challenges they face in contemporary KSA.\(^\text{10}\) Originally from the southwestern town of Abha, far from urban centres such as Riyadh and Jeddah, Mater has been instrumental in collaborating with others in founding organisations to help young artists and support, encourage and promote modern visual culture in the kingdom, the ‘Arab world’ and internationally. In his hometown of Abha, he founded the Miftaha Arts Village; he has also led a young artists’ collective, Ibn Aseer, and co-founded the Edge of Arabia initiative in 2003 (www.edgeofarabia.com) and the Misk Art Institute in 2017 (www.miskartinstitute.org). The artist, in keeping with his medical training and its focus on helping others, is clearly formative in how the contemporary art scene is evolving in the country, and if The Desert of Pharan is any indicator, his latest work-in-progress on the dusty capital city of Riyadh should prove to be more than worth the extensive work the artist will be putting into it.

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Ahmed Mater also writes. A contribution to ArtAsiaPacific in 2015, ‘Singing without Music’ is a thoughtful, not entirely damning, essay on education in Saudi Arabia, how it is dominated by religious interpretation and practice, and lacks any visual or creative art component: ‘The official academic curriculum in Saudi is not based on imported knowledge, as it is in some parts of the region, for example in the United Arab Emirates and Qatar where American and European systems are popular. I believe having a homegrown education system is a good thing because it allows for a middle ground between imported and community knowledge without imposing foreign methods or thought. However, our system has not yet found this middle ground.’

https://www.ahmedmater.com/essays

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Ahmed Mater, Untitled, 2012, from the Desert of Pharan series, Fineart Latex printer on matt unbleached printing paper, 145 x 200 cm, edition of 5, courtesy of the artist and Athr Gallery, Jeddah
Evening

Opening of Sultan bin Fahad’s solo exhibition, ‘The Red Palace’: This major exhibition of the work of Sultan bin Fahad, curated by Reem Fadda, opened in a curious building that, like the Addiriyah Museum, was also another part of Saudi royal and state history, if the more modern history. And like the building itself, bin Fahad’s installations and video works that were on show here in the rooms of this former palace are intimately connected to that history. The Red Palace was constructed in 1944 (on what would probably, at the time, have been the desert peripheries of Riyadh) by the man considered the founder of the modern Saudi Arabian nation, King Abdulazziz. It was built for his son, the crown prince and later King Saud, although when the crown passed from Abdulazziz to Saud, the new king left the Red Palace for another royal residence and the building was used as government offices until the 1980s. Abandoned since that time, using it as an exhibition venue for this body of work by Sultan bin Fahad was the first time the building had been put to any other purpose, although there are apparently now plans to convert it into a boutique hotel. It isn’t possible to see what kind of palaces the current king and crown prince reside in, but this earlier one was surprisingly modest in many ways and not particularly large or grand. Despite its evidently old electric wiring and its faded, slightly shabby ‘decorative order’, it was, however, an ideal temporary exhibition venue for bin Fahad’s work, and the artist had made direct reference to some aspects of the building’s history in several of his individual works.

Sultan bin Fahad, To Dust, 2019, crystal, brass, copper, steel and mirror, installed in the Red Palace, Riyadh, March 2019, photo courtesy of the artist and Athr Gallery, Jeddah
The palace featured as both a physical and a metaphorical space in bin Fahad’s series of installations, video and works in other media on show in the fourteen rooms of the first two floors. The works are inspired and informed by many aspects of his country’s culture and its modern history – from pivotal moments of political and religious import (the conflict known in the west as the first Gulf War in 1991, or the Mecca uprising of 1979)\(^\text{11}\) to the increasing commercialisation attached to the sites of pilgrimage (the ‘Holy Economy’ as the artist refers to it), and the ‘Chinese whispers’ of the forces of global trade, migration, and cultural translations, crossings and mixings. Taking as his general timeframe the years the Red Palace itself was in use, the artist therefore gently avoided any potential contemporary controversy. Yet in a subtle reference to the practice and the economy of imported labour that is endemic to the region (as in the neighbouring Emirates), a series of video works under the collective title *Labor* exhibited in the former kitchens explored this. The word ‘labour’ in Arabic can also translate as ‘the hands of labour’, and these layered videos showed glimpses of unidentified hands working fast and deftly in the preparation of food, polishing silverware, washing dishes, dealing with linen and laundry, the mostly unseen forces of the domestic and other work behind the public scenes, unacknowledged and hidden, that would have been the case in the days when the Palace was occupied, that has been behind the growth of the modern state, and is still so now.

\(^{11}\) In November/December of 1979, an armed civilian insurgency captured the holiest site in Islam, the grand mosque in Mecca/Makkah, demanding the overthrow of the House of Saud accusing it of having become too corrupt and ‘westernised’. The uprising held out for two weeks, causing shockwaves throughout the Islamic world, with many hostages taken and hundreds dying, including security forces, hostages and ‘militants’. The Saudi security forces finally took control of the situation, and the leaders and over 60 others were captured and later beheaded. The king at the time, King Khaled, subsequently insisted on a stricter form of sharia law, and the episode is generally viewed as being the key event in the turn towards stricter religious conservatism and greater suppression in the kingdom. See journalist Stephen Rakowski’s analysis of this, following another thwarted attack on the grand mosque in June 2017, on [https://worldview.stratfor.com/article/how-1979-siege-mecca-haunts-house-saud](https://worldview.stratfor.com/article/how-1979-siege-mecca-haunts-house-saud), accessed September 27 2019.
Hidden labour was also inherent in the artist’s collaborations with Nigerian beadworkers, part of his investigations into the ‘holy economy’. Scarves produced in India with images of Mecca to be sold as souvenirs have been reproduced (with variations: the mosque at Mecca resembling / transforming into the Taj Mahal) as wall hangings by the beadworkers under commission by the artist. Such forms of collaboration – or, bluntly, the using of skilled artisans elsewhere in the world – are not original, yet despite the possible accusations of exploitation or appropriation that could be levelled at him, the artist is not unaware of the ambivalences: it is the material cultures and the hidden labour behind them that is of interest to him. Bin Fahad also uses, and makes wry comments on, the material culture of his own world, from the installation of crystal chandeliers apparently dumped in a cage that formed the entrance to the exhibition (suggesting a contempt for the emptiness and vanity of such glittery pomp and mammon) to iconic artefacts of the cultural and religious life and history of the country: the prayer mats, and the tourist tat sold to hajj pilgrims. If appearing to revel in and celebrate these colourful, sometimes humorous, and all very human, manifestations, many of bin Fahad’s works could possibly border on the edge of critical acceptability in his milieu, given the potential constraints and cultural mores in play across all parts of Saudi society.

Sultan bin Fahad, *Manasik II*, from the *Holy Economy* series, 2019, cloth and plastic beads, photo courtesy of the artist and Athr Gallery, Jeddah.
Day Two:

Al Ula – A private brush with ancient histories and the Nabataeans

An early, non-commercial flight from Riyadh’s ‘private airport’ (between the public one and the royal one in the hierarchy of the city’s airports) took the group to Al Ula in the northwestern part of the country. Al Ula is an extensive archaeological site not currently open to the public. The Kingdom has not been open for tourism, or very readily accessible to foreign archaeologists either, so the area is little visited and not generally known outside of specialist circles. The spectacular desert landscape in this area is reminiscent of the American southwest, with its wind-carved rock formations and its evidence of early human habitation – from the Paleolithic through the Bronze Age, to the Dadanites and Liyanites in the pre-Christian era and the Nabataeans around the era of the start of the first Christian millenium. There are ruins of human settlement from several thousands of years ago, but it was the Nabataeans, in the area now known as Al Hijr or Mada’in S’aleh, over a period of about four hundred years around the time of the birth of Christ who settled here and who carved out of the rock the many tombs (111 of them) and other ‘rooms’ that were probably public gathering spaces, perhaps civic or temple spaces – the same Nabataeans responsible for the much better-known Petra further north in Jordan.

The area was on the trade routes linking the Mediterranean with eastern and southern sources of incense and spices, among other goods. There are inscriptions carved on rocks in Aramaic, Dadanitic, so-called ‘Thamudic’ (a name invented by nineteenth-century scholars to cover as yet undeciphered and little studied scripts), Minaic, Nabataean, Greek, Latin and Arabic. One particular area where there is a concentrated collection of such inscriptions in mainly Dadanitic and
Lihiyanic is known colloquially as the Lihiyanite Library, and has been important in attempts to understand the languages, societies and cultures of the period in this widespread region.

With the coming of Islam in the later centuries of the first millennium, the region also became a key site on the pilgrimage routes south to Medina and Mecca, and under the Ottoman occupation the Hijaz railway was planned to link Damascus with Mecca, although with the interruption of World War I, and the subsequent demise of the Ottoman empire, it was never completed. Twelve railway stations were, however, built in the Al Ula area, now like film sets for a spaghetti western waiting for the train to come through town. The entire region thus contains much of historical relevance, and spectacularly so in the case of the rock tombs, and the country clearly has plans to open it up to tourism. It would be hard to argue against visitors from the rest of the world being denied the opportunity to experience such global human heritage that can be seen in this region, but tourism can also cause much environmental and social damage. The Al Ula airport was not yet, at the time of this 2019 visit, open to commercial airlines or tour operators, and it can only be hoped that the Kingdom will manage its opening-up to tourism with great care and limit the potential for environmental and social damage and restrict unfettered corporate development.\(^{12}\) One aspect of this brief private visit that was brought directly to our attention was the involvement of local people, especially young women, in all aspects of the project of opening up to tourism, so maybe at least some attention is being paid to the more positive benefits that tourism \textit{can} bring.\(^ {13}\)

\(^{12}\) However, a report on the Arab News website in December 2018 mentions ‘rock climbing and other forms of adventure-related tourism’ and that ‘[t]ourism will account for 70% of Al Ula’s economy’, both of which sound some alarm bells. See http://www.arabnews.com/node/1426801/saudi-arabia

\(^{13}\) There have been training programmes for hospitality and catering, for example, including opportunities to train in Paris at one of France’s leading schools of culinary arts and hospitality management. The Institut du Monde Arabe in Paris also opened an
Day Three: Jeddah

After a night of very comfortable desert glamping surrounded by some of Al Ula’s dramatic rock formations, in what will no doubt be one of the accommodation venues for future tourist visitors, a third flight in as many days led to Jeddah, Saudi Arabia’s second largest city and its commercial and cultural capital, more so than the political administrative base in Riyadh. Jeddah is also the kingdom’s most liberal city. Situated on the country’s Red Sea coast, Jeddah is historically an ancient port city, and the entryway for pilgrims to Mecca and Medina in the centuries before flight travel. A tour by the architecture and design group, BrickLab (www.brick-lab.com) led us through the old part of Jeddah. The old centre, with its narrow streets, still has many traditional wooden structured buildings with their mashrabia windows to conceal women from the public eye, but which also cleverly channelled the cooling sea breezes into the interiors. The small mosques, cafés and shops continue to cater for the modern pilgrims who come from across the globe, as they have done for over a thousand years. In 2019, between three and four million pilgrims are expected to undertake the hajj to Mecca, although the majority of them will now more than likely go straight from the airport on a coach or bus laid on by an organised hajj trip, to the plethora of modern hotels now skirting the holy city around the black square of the Kaaba at its core.

A building in Jeddah’s old city, photo courtesy of the author

exhibition on 9 October 2019, ‘Alula, merveille d’arabie: L’oasis au 7000 ans d’histoire’
Jeddah is increasingly becoming modern Saudi Arabia’s cultural centre, with several contemporary galleries and ‘alternative’ spaces, and it is to this city that the younger generation artists, many of whom have studied abroad, gravitate as there is a burgeoning contemporary art scene there. Art Jameel, the organisation that since 2003 has been actively supporting and enabling cultural production in and from across the broadly-defined ‘Arab world’ across all levels, both contemporary and traditional, will soon be opening a major base in Jeddah and extending the work it has been doing from its Jameel Arts Centre in Dubai. This new centre, the Hay: Creative Hub (hayy refers to the Arabic word for ‘neighbourhood’) is due to open in late 2019/early 2020 and is intended to be a community-oriented base for all the creative industries (www.artjameel.org/centres/hayy-jeddah) and will curate and host exhibitions both regional and international in scope.

There was little opportunity, however, in the all-too-brief time (less than twenty-four hours) on the Jeddah part of this tour to take in the full extent of any of this or to find out more; to do so would require some deeper immersion and more time. A quick visit to Hafez Gallery (www.hafezgallery.com), a commercial gallery founded in 2014, provided a brief glimpse of the work of some contemporary artists the gallery represents (Sarah Alabdali, Maryam Beydoun, Mohamed Banawy, Mohammad Barangi and Rashed Al Shashai). Hafez represents Saudi or Saudi-based artists as well as some from the wider Arab world, and Iran. A little disconnectedly, their website also includes the Brazilian photographer Sebastião Salgado who had a solo exhibition there in 2016. Commissioned by *The New York Times* in the early 1990s, Salgado photographed the torched and burning Kuwaiti oil wells, set alight by Saddam Hussein’s retreating forces in the first Gulf War in the early 1990s in, it must be said, some dramatic images.14

Rashed AlShashai had several works in the gallery, part of a group of works collectively titled *Amygdala*, in which the artist has split many ordinary, daily objects into two with a clean cut down the middle, objects that range from a minibus taxi, household items and electrical goods, to a bead-spangled, white Christian-style wedding dress. Many of the objects are commonly familiar to ordinary Saudi citizens – these are not Gucci handbags or gold-plated table lamps – and were found by the artist at Jeddah’s Souq al Sawarikhh. The work is a homage in many respects to the Souq, a large marketplace on the edges of the city where the modern meets the pre-modern and where the centuries-old human practice of gathering in one site for the purposes of commercial exchange and acquiring what is needed continues. Across the region, souqs would also have been sites of social gathering and important stop-offs and destinations on trading routes, where news was exchanged and travelled onwards. Their modern role is a little different, but the contemporary Sawarikh souq is apparently the workplace for about 40,000 people and provides a counter to the widely-held, if superficial, outside view of all Saudi society as being immensely rich from its oil revenues and only interested in high-end, luxury, branded consumables. The amygdala is a part of the human brain that has two mirroring but connected parts and is thought to be involved in memory, decisions and

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14 Salgado has been criticised for aestheticising and ‘otherising’ poverty and extreme exploitative labour, but his images of the burning oil and the workers trying to cap the wells are undeniably spectacular and captured some of the fallout of the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait and its subsequent impact. They have been recently collected in a book published by Taschen, *Kuwait: A Desert on Fire* (2019)
emotional responses, and the seemingly simple device of cutting-in-two employed across such a multitude of mundane objects has the powerful effect of suggesting the seen and the unseen splits – material and psychological – that permeate twenty-first century Saudi society and culture, with its particular brand of modernism trying to emerge from but also blend with the traditional, and the dichotomies between religious versus secular, state versus people, men versus women, East versus West.

The other gallery that plays a significant role in Jeddah’s contemporary art life is Athr Gallery (www.athrart.com). Founded in 2009 by Hamza Serafi and Mohammed Hafiz, and now directed by Alia Fattouh, Athr is more than a gallery. In a context such as this where the visual art ‘scene’ has not been defined as it might be in many European cities by public institutions such as art schools, galleries, cultural foundations and centres, or an established art market with collectors, Athr is many things in one. A commercial gallery, with a stable of artists who are mostly Saudi but not exclusively, and a regular programme of exhibitions and participation in art fairs, Athr also commissions and supports young artists and helps enable and finance residencies abroad. Athr recognises the value that international residencies can have for an artist, impacting on their work and ideas at any stage of their careers, but particularly for the younger generation of artists. Residencies allow time and space for concentrated work but also for research, different ideas, exposure to other countries and environments, and for new opportunities, contacts and influences.
The gallery space itself, multi-level and spacious enough for exhibitions, symposia, performances, events and film projections, also acts as a vital social locus and networking hub for the city’s cultural communities.

Zahrah Al Ghamdi’s Streams Move Oceans, 2019, polyester, plaster and water, in one of Athr Gallery’s spaces, Jeddah
Al Ghamdi represented Saudi Arabia in a national pavilion at the 2019 Venice Biennale, the country’s first representation there since 2011, photo courtesy of Athr Gallery, Jeddah

Athr has made many links with organisations and centres internationally, and holds open calls for exhibitions and residency opportunities. The day of the visit related here saw an exhibition ‘10 Years of Athr: Out of Place’, marking the gallery’s ten-year anniversary and featuring the work of young Saudi artists who have been on residences in Berlin, Paris, Zurich, London, New York, India, Bahrain and Scotland, among other places. Some of these young artists have studied in established European art schools, and the language and media they use is familiar as the international forms and gestures of contemporary art. Much of their work has an almost inevitable and frequent referencing of ‘identity’, however tangentially, but there are often interesting twists and other dimensions. Dana Awartani (described as a Palestinian-Saudi artist) studied for some years in London at Central St Martin’s school of art, and at The Prince’s Foundation School of Traditional Arts after acknowledging a need and desire to research more closely her own Islamic heritage of traditional skills and history. As well as her contemporary British art school training (of two very different strands, as anyone who knows anything about these two London institutions will be familiar), she has also worked towards a Ijaza certificate in Islamic illumination with masters in Turkey – not a path that a young woman would have traditionally taken. Her work blends the traditional use in Islamic art of line and geometry and methods and skills such as embroidery, finely detailed brushwork and measured drawing with contemporary materials and methods of installation and display, including performance, familiar to a visitor to a contemporary international gallery. It is not only the techniques themselves that she investigates and aims to master through daily practice,
but the philosophy and the poetry, often associated with the non-material and the transcendent that is embedded in the abstract visual language and codifications. In this show at Athr, she showed not only ‘finished’ works but display cases with notes, written and visual, in a form of installation, and a clear demonstration of how the processes are an intrinsic part of the work itself.

![Image of a textile artwork](image1)

Dana Awartani, *Depression*, from the *Five Stages of Grief* series, 2015, antique textile and embroidery on cotton, 85 x 14 cm, courtesy of the artist and Athr Gallery, Jeddah

The work of two of the other young artists in Athr’s ten-year show, Sara Abdu (b 1993) and Nasser Al Salem (b 1984), also touches on different aspects of the non-material. Sara Abdu’s *A Kingdom Where No-one Dies* installation (2019) uses the patterns of sound waves in sand, from both the Saudi and Yemeni deserts, generated by the sound of a poem (‘conceal all borders…’). The artist grew up in Saudi Arabia but her parents are from Yemen and India, and the work references this with its soundtrack (eerily reminiscent of sounds in the desert landscape) and use of sand as a material, a material that pays no heed to human-constructed borderlines drawn on maps.

![Image of a sand installation](image2)

Sara Abdu, *A Kingdom Where No One Dies*, 2019, installation with sand, wall text and sound, courtesy of the artist and Athr Gallery, Jeddah
Nasser Al Salem, like Dana Awartani, is also a certificated Ijaza calligrapher, and a trained architect. His series of works on paper, *Pale Blue Dot: God Made All That is Perfection* (2019), took as their starting point Carl Sagan’s disquisition in his 1994 book, *Pale Blue Dot: A Vision of the Human Future in Space*, on the image of Earth taken from space by the space shuttle Voyager as a ‘pale blue dot’, but the artist spins that out to infinity, matter or non-matter, gravity (or lack of it), and to the fact of human existence, and to all its sometimes futile attempts to map and control.

The ultimate stop of the tour was to see a group exhibition, ‘Al Obour’ (transit/crossing/transcending), curated by the Saudi artist and curator Effat Abdullah Fadag, in the Saudi Arts Council’s own large, white-cube gallery at its headquarters (although, tellingly, it was very clearly in partnership with the Swiss investment bank, UBS, and the luxury jewellery company Van Cleef & Arpels). This was an ambitious but mixed offering of the work of some Saudi artists of different generations, a couple of others (from Bahrain and Lebanon), and several German artists (for no clear reason). The ‘transcendent’ seemed to feature once again in many of the works, although interpretation of that was very broad (the catalogue notes and labels on individual works did not help much). Technology featured in several works, sometimes it seemed for its own sake and requiring audience participation. But distinctively different, and in a league of its own, was Lawrence Abu Hamdan’s *Rubber Coated Steel* installation (2016) with its analysis of the acoustics involved in the case of the shooting and killing with live ammunition, not rubber bullets as claimed, of two Palestinian teenagers by Israeli soldiers in the West Bank in May 2014. The politics and investigative aspect behind Abu Hamdan’s work, which was produced in collaboration with the
Forensic Architecture group, stood out as markedly different in intent and resolution than other work in the exhibition. It would not, I suspect, have been possible for the same generation of Saudi artists as Abu Hamdan to produce any work with a similar critical analysis of any action of their own country and society. Without wishing to denigrate and devalue the transcendent, ephemeral or non-material, the power and value of sound in the case of Abu Hamdan’s work with the acoustic and non-physical in elucidating certain human and state-supported actions is on a different level.

Parting thoughts
This was a brief, time-compressed visit to a country frequently named in the international media – and rightly criticised in many forums on many accounts – but little visited by anyone other than national leaders, politicians, journalists, hajj pilgrims and those involved in certain types of business. But this is possibly on the cusp of changing as its unelected rulers take steps to open up and liberalise, although the evidence of the 2018 events in the Istanbul consulate bring that assumption into question. There are clearly plans well underway to allow tourism, in a bid more than anything to seek alternatives to what has been a lucrative economy based on the oil trade, a finite natural resource that will inevitably see an eventual slowdown in production and demand which will have an endpoint in the not too distant future. The rapid economic success stories in the fields of culture and tourism of Saudi Arabia’s Emirati neighbours ( notwithstanding that that success has been at the cost of sometimes terrible abuse of immigrant labour) must have been watched and

noted. As the Kingdom makes apparent attempts at conformity with some of the broadly accepted, more liberal mores and expectations of its Western allies, how far it will actually go on this path is yet to be determined.

This three-day visit allowed for a brief glance at three UNESCO World Heritage sites (Mada’in S’aleh, At-Turaif/Ad Diriyah and old Jeddah) that are an impressive part of all of humanity’s global heritage. It also provided a skimming glance at a contemporary art scene and its many young practitioners who have a unique skill-and-idea-set to work with and who are eager to find their own voice, and of the cultural organisations working hard to help them with the outlets to do that. The current younger generation of Saudi artists, who have not necessarily grown up in the urban centres, are cognisant of and use recognisable international languages, but behind the superficiality of that there are distinctly different ideas and influences. The influence of traditions, culture and the more transcendental and philosophical aspects of generally accepted sensibilities are evident. What is harder to say, however, is whether there will be any artists bold enough [either within the Kingdom itself, or anywhere else in the world]16 to incorporate any analysis and criticism into their work of some aspects of their country’s markedly troubling politics and recent history, and whether it is even possible for it to be on their agendas at all. The possibility of the existence of a metaphorical space, and actual physical spaces, to allow for that to be realised in was not very evident, although there were some suggestions of a more critical perspective in the work seen in the studios of some of the younger artists in Riyadh for example.

But reflecting on how artists in other parts of the world have responded and negotiated the forces and actions of state power and control, and been provided with the forums in which to do that – not just through their own practices but through other forms such as writing, academic research, symposia discussions and direct action – cultural practice in the Kingdom itself has some catching up to do.

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16 After all, Jamal Khashoggi was murdered in another country, albeit in the ‘national’ territory of a state consulate, for his political criticism of the Saudi Government