

## RHIZOMA (GENERATION IN WAITING) - THE EDGE OF ARABIA PROJECT IN VENICE BIENNALE 2013

Show curated by Sara Raza & Ashraf Fayadh  
Material written by Sara Raza



Rhizoma exhibition at the 55th Venice art Biennale - Courtesy of Edge of Arabia.



Ahmad Anqawi, *Wijha, and everyone has a direction to which he should turn*, 2013, xxxsizexxx - Courtesy of Edge of Arabia.

*Rhizoma (generation in waiting)* is a curatorial project with infinite possibilities to form multiple endings and create new beginnings. The exhibition's premise was inspired by a new and exciting contemporary art scene inside Saudi Arabia and was informed by the current artistic practices being performed by a new wave of young Saudi artists. The Curatorial challenge was to assess the way in which art was being practiced and performed inside Saudi Arabia and link that within a rigorous conceptual framework. The nature of art production was strikingly comparable to an actual rhizome: the ancient Greek word for the underground root of a plant that shoots its roots horizontally and vertically, against the force of gravity, and possesses the ability to replant and form new roots if cut away from its original source.

Philosophically, these ideas have been put forward by French theorists Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari within their seminal text *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia* (1980) in which they employed the term "rhizome" to discuss myriad examples of non-linearity and multiplicity orientation of data representation present within human histories, biology and the study of genealogy. Furthermore, contributions made by 10th century Islamic Persian and Arab polymaths such as Ibn Sina and Al Farabi, who professed at length about the order of natural philosophy, science, mathematics and logic have also served as a source of inspiration.

Collectively, these ideas have shaped the exhibition's thematic and artistic selection of young artists and served as an important starting point from which to explore the underground movement brewing inside Saudi Arabia as it is purposely making its ascent upwards.

The artists selected came of age during the advent of the internet and are part of a large youth cohort that is rapidly increasing. These artists are thus technologically astute in the different modes of communication that social media platforms and fast instant messaging services provide. They are the "youtube generation", young and bold in their expressions and stylistic devices and hold a non linear position in the formation of contemporary Saudi Arabian art and its history, which hasn't necessarily followed a chronological trajectory in its formation, but is rather the product of cultural and global shifts occurring in the fast pacing developing Gulf region. These new artists co-exist within both popular culture and within a subterranean art movement that embraces, craft, technology and design alongside contemporaneity.

In essence Saudi Arabia's young emerging contemporary artists form part of *Gulf Futurism*, a term coined and borrowed from Qatari artist and writer Sophia Al Maria, who has commented on the amalgamation of popular cultural and various social phenomena associated with young people growing up within the age of post-oil Gulf during the 1980s and 90s. In the case

of Saudi Arabia and its burgeoning contemporary art scene what is most fascinating to witness amongst this new generation are the transitions and ruptures that are occurring simultaneously within both a rural and urban societal and cultural context. All the way from Abha the capital of the Asir province, the oil rich city of Dammam in the Eastern Province to the major metropolitan cities of Jeddah and Riyadh, artists have formed artistic and creative hubs possessing the unique ability to exist both within their respective centers, but also sit comfortably on the edge as well.

The project took the direction of de-structuring realities hence directly engaging with artists whose concerns ranged from the subversion of Islamic geometry in contemporary art and design to performance in the public space, blogging and social satire. The cultural and creative paradigm presently occurring inside Saudi Arabia links disparate artists and their practices through the formation of a new rhizomatic culture that is both connected and disconnected with art and society. Furthermore, it was through connecting with this particular critical mass of diverse artists and cultural operators that I became acquainted with my co-curator Ashraf Fayadh, a Palestinian poet and artist. Ashraf's expertise on the ground inside Saudi Arabia meant that he had acquainted himself with the local arts scene and formed alliances with alternative non-mainstream artist groups providing the project with an injection of gritty realism. The common cultural denominator within the project, one that has connected Ashraf and I curatorially as well as with the artists was that quite literally we all came into the project somewhere in the middle. As a whole we serve as a multi-faceted group of visual cultural critics and the space that we collectively occupy is non-linear. Suspended somewhere within this middle space, we exist within a third space of both difference and indifference, and most importantly one that is not necessarily tied to purely geographical sameness. The artists selected to take part within this exhibition reflect multiplicity and charter non-linear rhizomatic journeys. All twenty seven artists, including collectives, adhere to these ideas, they are: Nouf Alhimiary, Majid Althobaity, Ramy Alqthamy, Shaweesh, Ahaad Alamoudi, Ahmad Anqawi, Basmah Felemban, Ejad Maghazil, Saeed Salem, Sami Al-Turki, Sarah Al Abdali, Sarah AbuAbdallah, Telfaz 11, U-Turn, Nora AAlmazroo, Nasser Salem, Eiman Elqibreen, Mala'a Al-Amoudi, Mohammad Makki, Heba Abed, Omamah AlSadiq, Abdulkarim Qassem, Dana Awrtani, Eiman Elqibreen, Abdullah Alothman, Batool Alshomrani and Huda Beydoun.

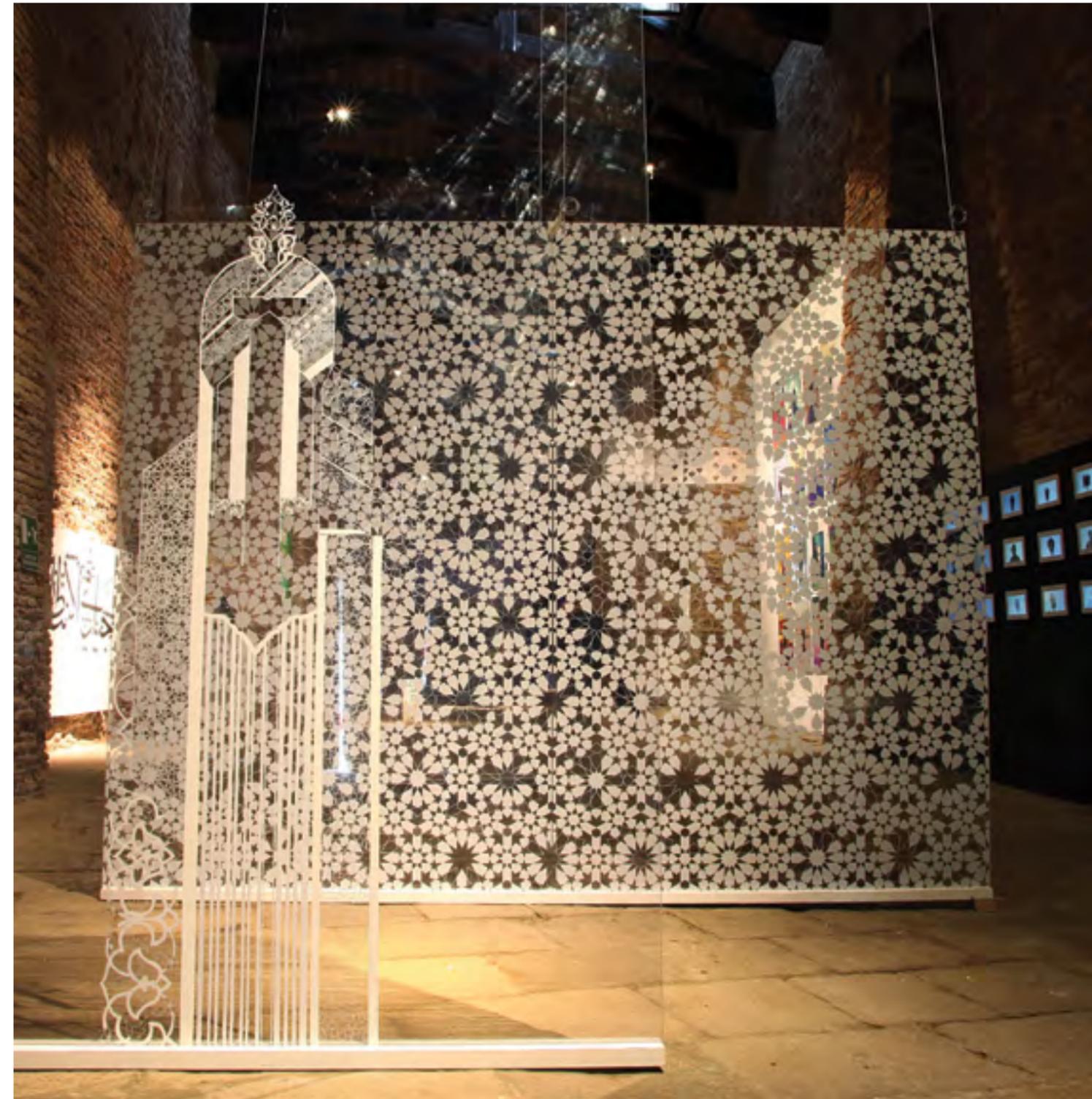
Dispelling stereotypical depictions concerning the position of women in contemporary Saudi Society is an on-going concern amongst the works of several female artists within the exhibition. In *What She Wore* (2013) a photographic blog consisting of a collection of photos of young Saudi women wearing abayas, artist Nouf Alhimiary spoofs the popular fashion blogging trend to reveal young Saudi women within various cities and settings offering both incongruous and banal images. In contrast, performance and video installation artist Sarah AbuAbdallah presents the *Salad Zone* (2013), a video installation of three seemingly disparate videos that are intentionally non-linear within their stylistic structure. AbuAbdallah's videos enable audiences to find themselves within the centre of somewhat absurd and humorous domestic urban scenarios. Also introducing humor within her work

is Ahaad Alamoudi whose *Heya* (2013) gas canister installation and video of the same title reflect quite literally on the perceived metaphoric notion of an *explosive* woman.

Satire is also a tool within Omamah AlSadiq's ongoing *300Camels* (2012-13) blog in which the artist explores the origins of her name, which literally translates as '300 camels' in Arabic. AlSadiq has been collecting images of camels throughout the Middle East and soliciting members of the public to send their camel sightings to her that she posts through social media platforms (including her blog), to create an eclectic archive.

PhD candidate and artist Eiman Elqibreen explores the position of Saudi Arabian female artists within the canon of Western art history and architecture. Within the mixed media series *Don't look at me look at my art* (2013) Elqibreen layers art history and popular culture by mocking Banksy's popular vista of French Impressionist artist Edgar Degas's ballerina figures being judged by infamous British talent scout Simon Cowell including images of Saudi female artists showing the celebrity judge their works. The work is a satirical visual commentary on art and talent as well as contradictions and Eurocentric dominance. Similarly, Elqibreen's brick installation with women's faces *Does a face make a difference?* (2013) questions the validity and identity of Saudi women. Elqibreen superimposes women's faces upon bricks as a metaphor for the fabricated manmade nature of construction and the building of identity.

Investigating informal architectures and issues pertaining to land and ownership is explored within the works of several artists in reference to the changing structure and physicality of Saudi Arabia. Artist and designer Ahmad Sami Anqawi employs the labouring task of creating a contemporary version of a traditional Makkah Ottoman miniature painting of the holy Masjid Al-Haram in Makkah for the present day aptly entitled *21<sup>st</sup> Century Makkah Manuscript* (2013) In Anqawi's version he introduces motifs such as small bulldozers that are eating away at the historical Ottoman architectural legacy inside Makkah replacing the standard geometric patterns presented within traditional miniature paintings. In addition, he also presents *Wijha 2:148 (And everyone has a direction to which he should turn..)* (2013) a large lenticular photograph that juxtaposes an old image of the Masjid Al-Haram from the 19<sup>th</sup> century with a new contemporary image of the site, to compare and contrast the architectural changes that are presently occurring. Correspondingly, Ramy Alqthamy's *Albetra* (2013) is an actual concrete graffitied block that references borders that are both real and manmade, which impede the ebb and flow of people and ideas. Challenging capitalist ideology is artist Sami Al-Turki with his *Hammour* (2013) mixed media installation. *Hammour* features a tray of sand upon which a moving image of the large white fish known as hammour is projected as both a metaphor for the popular slang term of *hammour* given to large Saudi corporations who are perceived like hammour fish to consume everything in the sea bed. Also commenting on consumerist culture is Saeed Salem's *Neonland III* (2012) triptych, which depicts a man praying under a neon lit artificial palm tree. The relationship between consumerist ideology and capitalism is further



Basmah Felemban, Drawn out truth, 2013. xxx Sizexxx- Courtesy of Edge of Arabia.

explored by performance and street artist Shaweesh's photographs that explore mainstream Saudi Arabian culture alongside American cult figures as featured within his *Superheroes* (2013) series which features a spoof of Captain America and Yoda from the cult classic film Star Wars.

New media outlets such as the internet are fast becoming a new platform for many artists inside Saudi Arabia. Launched in 2011, Telfaz 11 (an initiative of C3 Films), present an array of works produced between 2011-13 offering socially satirical sketches that explore Arab identity, systems and structures through comedy and parody. Another internet-driven collective is U-Turn, spearheaded by filmmaker Mohammad Makki and artist Eyad Maghazil the collective provides raw reality television style content that explores the social concerns of Saudi Arabia's youth culture. Documenting the lives of Saudi Arabia's youth through successive episodes often in collaboration with other artists whose works are regularly featured in the backdrop. In particular, Mohammed Makki has created a special episode under the title of Takki (2013) for Rhizoma featuring participating artists.

The use of geometric design is a prevalent theme in several artists' works within the exhibition in order to reflect on current debates concerning the relationship between traditional Islamic craft and contemporary fine arts. Artist Dana Awrtani's *Illuminations*, (2013) series offers her traditional take on the historical Qu'ranic decorative tradition of illuminations employing floral motifs and geometric embellishment, which conform with traditional methodologies and techniques, providing a departure from generic computer generated designs. In a more subversive practice that combines several artistic styles and marks a return to traditional crafts is artist and graphic designer Sarah Al Abdali applies the principles of stencil making to create a paper cut out chandelier entitled *Poem of the Atoms* (2013) after a poem of the same title by acclaimed 13th century Turkic-Persian Sufi poet Rumi. The cascading suspended work explores the scientific and Islamic principles of atoms and molecules and also serves to create a sense of drama between pattern, shadow and light. Similarly, designer and artist Basmah Felemban has created a playful yet geometrically complex silk screen and hand drawn plexi glass design entitled *Drawn out Truths* (2013), which toys with the visible and the invisible and the void spaces that exist between human navigation and the mathematical relationship between space and the body. Also investigating interactive examples of geometry is Mala'a Al-Amoudi. She presents *Nuqta (Dot: The decision game)*, 2013, a mixed media board game that invites audiences to take part in a decision making game in accordance with mathematical logic and problem solving rooted in geometry.

Intent on creating a new syntax and mode of communication, artists are looking to create new visual languages that mirror current trends in the way in which Arabic text is communicated via social media and email. Artist and designer Heba Abed's *Lost in Transliteration* (2013) typifies this trend by presenting a series of images from children's textbooks accompanied by a new language that combines the Arabic alphabet with Western numerals to create a new hybrid syntax. Moreover, mixed media artist Majid Althobaity's *The Flag* (2013) a collection of seven machine embroidered Saudi Arabian flags also explores new forms of communication. His flags bear the traditional sword related to the Al Saud ruling family yet the text featuring

the Islamic declaration of faith the kalima ("There is no god but Allah and Muhammad is his messenger") is distributed and broken down word by word between the seven flags. Also subverting tradition and history is traditional calligrapher Nasser Salem whose detail-orientated calligraphic works explore the paradox between the historical tradition of Islamic calligraphy and contemporary every signs and slogans for *Rhizoma*. Salem has made a special work that explores the theme of *generation in waiting* as a new slogan and signifier for making new histories.

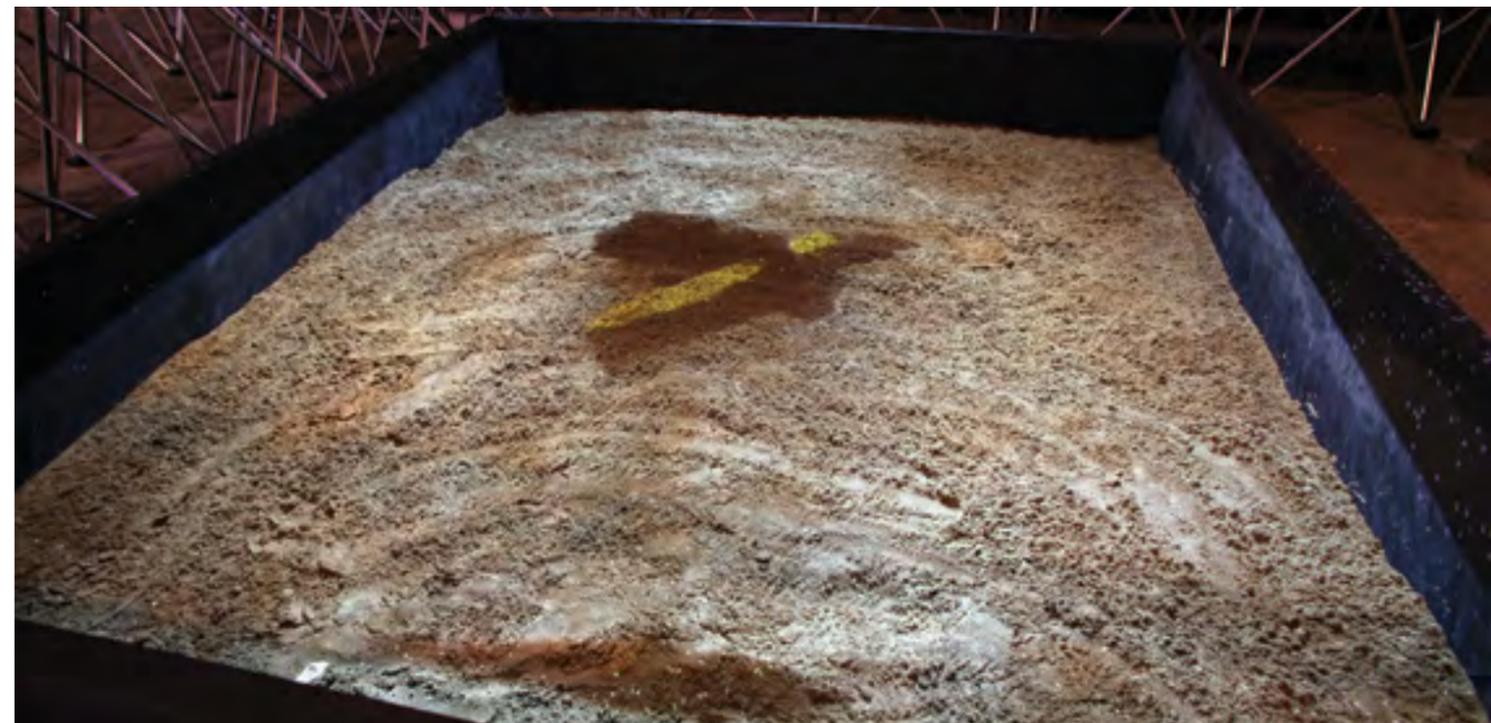
Making the invisible visible Huda Beydoun's photographic series *Documenting the Undocumented* (2013) explore the issue of labor and undocumented immigrant works in Jeddah. Her photographs feature service workers in their ordinary working environment, however, their identities are masked with opaque Mickey Mouse features and their costumes decorated with polka dots. These satirical works comment on the Gulf's precarious relationship between quest workers and their employers. Further documenting the invisible artist and soldier Abdulkarim Qassem's *The Wills* (2009-13) series of seven wills collected by the artist of fellow soldiers enlisted to protect Saudi Arabia's border with Yemen. Their names are scribbled out in a bid to conceal their identities, instead what is revealed is their practical desires after death.

Seeking communication with oneself and higher entities is also a recurrent theme within several artists featured in *Rhizoma* and is articulated via the correlation between the aural and visual. Within the works of multi-media artist Abdullah Alothman's video *The Question* (2012) the artist asked twenty eight participants about God and recorded their facial expressions, capturing an array of physical reactions from the ecstatic to the mundane all the while muting their actual verbal reactions. Further, Batool Alshomrani's audio piece *Untitled 'Athari (call to prayer)* (2013), an audio work featuring the Muslim call to prayer is perhaps the exhibition's "unofficial" soundtrack. Reverberating through the exhibition space for 3,47minutes at five separate intervals throughout the day for believers this sound signifies their literal call to prayer, whilst for others it is just background noise and part and parcel of the "everyday". Rounding out the exhibition's selection and in a bid to solicit real social engagement is sculpture artist Nora A.Almazrooa's very functional ceramic coffee cups installation. Entitled *Intertwined Echoes* (2013) and *Chinese Whispers* (2013), these cups dotted throughout the exhibition act as both incubators and invitations for engagement in real time and in person reminding artists and audiences that they really do need to talk.

Deconstructing multiplicity is an ongoing curatorial feature within the *Rhizoma* exhibition, where participating artists got engaged in the role of creating and producing new vocabularies in art and culture of their region. They demonstrate this new order by creating "other" realities pushing boundaries of the status quo, ultimately, allowing new realities, real and imaginary, to take flight.

#### About the Writer

Sara Raza - co-curator of *Rhizoma*, PhD candidate at Royal College of Art, London, adjunct associate curator at Maraya Art Centre, Sharjah and co-editor ArtAsiaPacific Magazine (West and Central Asia).



1. Eiman Elqjbreen, Does a face make a difference, & Do not judge me, 2013, installation - Courtesy of Edge of Arabia.

2. Sami Al Turki, Hammour, 2013, still video - Courtesy of Edge of Arabia.