

## A Capacity For Wonder: in a time of turmoil and transformation

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*I first met Ahmed at the Al-Meftaha Arts Village in Abha in March 2003. He was sitting in the corner of his studio in a white, ankle-length, paint-stained thawb (long shirt), and was surrounded by a sprawling collection of medical paraphernalia. X-rays, anatomical illustrations and prescription receipts jostled for space amongst bottles of calligraphy ink, spray paint cans and books on Islamic art.*

He told me how his ‘double’ life as a doctor and artist had awakened in him a creative energy and a motivation to explore humanity, in an era of religious, political and cultural turmoil. With great excitement he showed me his latest paintings; expressive layers of rich colour painted onto human X-rays, marked with religious symbols and hand-written medical

notes. “An anatomy of faith in the 21st century,” is how he described them.

These paintings were later exhibited in Jeddah as part of a radical new exhibition by the Shatta group. Shatta, meaning ‘broken up or disembodied’, was founded by a group of Al-Meftaha artists, including Abdunasser Gharem and Ashraf Fayadh, and their work was unlike anything that had been seen before in the Kingdom. Alongside Ahmed’s X-ray paintings, other artists presented chewing-gum husks in preserve jars and burial tombs made from fast food packaging. The gallery owner was furious at these visible breaks with tradition and even the printers refused to run the exhibition catalogue.

But the response from journalists and Jeddah’s creative community was one of overwhelming

enthusiasm. Features ran in all the major newspapers and the gallery had to organise special viewings to accommodate the high number of visitors.

The artists had clearly caught the imagination of a new generation, yearning to see their own thoughts and experiences reflected through art.

Ahmed's X-ray paintings in particular became a symbol for this new group of artists, and his commitment to challenging traditional ideas and materials heralded the beginning of a contemporary art movement in Saudi Arabia. The X-ray paintings are a raw, authentic expression of Ahmed's world; filled with references to his hospital work, his time at the mosque and his experiences living within Arabic culture during an era defined by what he sees as "great conflict and seismic ideological change." One painting in particular, in which the Ka'bah is crudely painted onto the heart of a human chest X-ray, left a very powerful impression on me, and was later identified by both Venetia Porter at the British Museum and Linda Komaroff at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art as the work that brought Ahmed to the attention of a western audience.

Ahmed has said that this painting, X-Ray 2003, changed his life. Two years after completion it was acquired by the British Museum and exhibited in *Word into Art*, one of the most significant surveys of Middle Eastern art in recent years.

This led to a personal endorsement from HRH King Abdullah, The Custodian of the Two Holy Mosques, as well as extensive exposure in Europe and across the Arabic-speaking world.

Emerging from relative obscurity, Ahmed quickly became one of the most talked about young artists in the Gulf.

Following the critical acclaim for his X-ray paintings, Ahmed continued to draw on his experiences as a doctor, a Muslim and a Saudi to develop the projects which are presented in the four chapters of this book. In each project one can recognise the fierce intellectual curiosity and courage of the young doctor and artist that award-winning writer Tim Mackintosh-Smith calls a "creative physician-metaphysician."

Ahmed again experimented with X-rays for *Illuminations*, a series of mixed media works on paper in which large-scale human X-rays replace the geometric, arabesque designs normally found in the opening pages of the Qur'an. Shadowy human skeletons are surrounded by layers of religious symbols and medical references, and framed within decorative borders of gold leaf and calligraphy. The paper has been strengthened with tea, pomegranate and talc – materials traditionally used for treating the paper for Qur'anic manuscripts. One *Illumination* includes semi-precious stones such as turquoise, amber and carnelian, sourced from nearby Yemen, while the X-rays in *Talisman Illumination I* and *II* are surrounded by thousands of carefully ordered numbers and letters. Set within grids and squares, they reference the powerful talismanic traditions of Arabian and Islamic culture.

A number of the *Illuminations* also reference genetic knowledge and innovation, obliquely alluding to the patterns of human DNA. "Islamic art, and especially the mathematical harmony found in Islamic geometry, reveals natural structures and orders which are only now becoming visible to modern science," Ahmed explains.

The *Illuminations* have recently been collected by major museums in the UK, America and the Gulf. Curators and critics are captivated and challenged by Ahmed's contemporary interpretation of Islamic art – drawn in by the arresting and unresolved tension between an objective representation of the human body and a subjective expression of faith and superstition.

For *Magnetism*, Ahmed draws on his love of scientific experiments and research to express what he calls the "aesthetics of the spiritual." Using the same simple magnets and iron filings he played with at school, Ahmed recreates the tawaf, the circumambulation of the Ka'bah at Makkah, which Muslims must perform during Hajj (pilgrimage). Reacting to the force of the positive and negative magnetic poles, the metal filings closest to the magnet rise up as if collectively standing in ritual adoration.

He explains, "Our parents and ancestors thought about pilgrimage and how to reach Makkah. When

they returned they would say there was a magical attraction there; something irresistible drawing you in to a spiritual state of mind.” For the photographic record of the experiment, Ahmed scales up and zooms in on the installation, accentuating the cosmic quality of the swirling metal slivers. By offering views of the phenomenon from both near and far, he asks us to examine that which we think we know, to “discuss what’s in front of you; recognise the truth. Think about the truth.”

Magnetism is a powerful and deceptively simple statement.

It explores the relationship between science and faith, reminding us of the order of divine attraction at the centre of the Islamic world, and so, too, of Love: the magnet at the centre of all faiths.

Evolution of Man is a bold artistic statement. There is little doubt that the X-ray sequence depicting a gunshot suicide transforming into an oil pump is designed to provoke a strong reaction. It is likely that most people will read Evolution of Man as an unabashed critique of humanity’s dependence on oil, and what ‘black gold’ represents to those living above the reserves.

The sentiment underlying the work—that our exploitation of nature will lead to our own demise—echoes the words of Nobel Prize-winning author and poet William Faulkner, who wrote: “the ruined wood we used to know won’t cry for retribution – the men who have destroyed it will accomplish its revenge.”

But Evolution of Man is more than just a political statement by a child of the Saudi oil boom, it is also a statement by a doctor who confronts life and death every day, and a personal expression of the artist’s own fears, born of experience.

Ahmed explains: “I am a country man and at the same time, the son of this strange, scary oil civilisation. In ten years our lives changed completely. For me it is a drastic change that I experience every day.”

Originally entitled Evolution of Man (What Darwin did not know), Ahmed recounts how the work was devised.

“I wanted to take this photo during my daily life at the hospital. I used the X-ray because for me, it is a unique force for revealing the inside. I used my

friend’s gun and took this X-ray picture of myself. I don’t know why I thought about suicide...maybe because sometimes we talk about suicide with ourselves.”

Yellow Cow is a series of interventions, performances and installations inspired by a passage in the Surah Al-Baqarah (The Cow), which is the longest chapter in the Qur’an.

The Surah contains many important commandments, including fasting and Hajj, but for Yellow Cow, Ahmed focuses on two key incidents between Moses and the Israelites: their fall into idolatry and God’s cryptic commandment to sacrifice a ‘perfect’ yellow cow.

Ahmed explains how as a child he read the Qur’an every day.

“The stories I heard in the Qur’an study group were the main stories of my daily life. They were like a guide.” The Surah Al-Baqarah resonated in particular with Ahmed because his family worked on a farm, where he would accompany his mother to take the cows grazing every morning.

Ahmed says he conceived of his first Yellow Cow performance just to see how people would react. He went to a farm and, using saffron-based dye, coloured a white cow yellow before setting it free in the village. He then watched the delighted reactions of the villagers, which reminded him of the stirrings of his own imagination as a child in the mosque.

Believing the Yellow Cow was as relevant now as it has ever been, Ahmed decided to “set the story free.” He wanted to release the messages held within the Surah—kept alive in mosques and Qur’anic study groups for 1300 years—into the contemporary world. In order to make the story relevant to people’s lives in the 21st century, he created a brand and initiated a ‘line extension’ of mass-produced Yellow Cow cheese, butter, yoghurt and milk products – flooding the market and giving it a material presence in people’s homes, workplaces and local shops.

Yellow Cow is not a work of art that seeks resolution. It is an ongoing project that literally and figuratively places this ancient story into contemporary consumer society. To date, the project has been realised in the art marketplace as a film, a shop installation and a

series of limited edition products, all asking the same question posed by the story in the Qur'an:

what is so special about this yellow cow?

The creative confidence in Ahmed's work is particularly impressive given the lack of a precedent in Saudi Arabia, where contemporary art is still something of an underground movement, mostly practiced behind closed doors and relying heavily on patrons and supporters from abroad.

Growing up, Ahmed and his peers had almost no exposure to visual art at school or university, largely due to a belief that drawing representations of living things—along with photography and film—was irreligious. "People thought pictures were souls," Ahmed recounts. As he developed as an artist there were no local art galleries or libraries to visit for inspiration and no specialised art shops from which to source materials.

Because of these restrictions, Ahmed, like many of his peers, pursued a professional practice alongside his artistic one.

Saudi artists are also doctors, soldiers, teachers and engineers – all drawing inspiration from their 'real life' careers. It is this relationship to daily working life that sets them apart from artists in the West, and, in my opinion, it is this that propels them to produce such distinctive work.

Ahmed's experiences at the Abha hospital and as a travelling doctor in the tribal areas of Aseer greatly influence his artistic approach. He explores ideas directly connected to his encounters with ordinary people in real life situations, and because of this, his work is as authentic as it is accomplished, while his underlying narratives speak to a universal human experience.

Ahmed describes the three main axes along which his work moves as such: "the huge gap between life in a village and life in a city; the extinction of basic human relations; and the era of consumerism." It is this ability to engage with and relate to people without abiding by borders that has brought Ahmed the respect of artists and curators not only in the Gulf, but around the world.

Since 2003 I have witnessed Ahmed's creative journey from the mountains of Aseer through to

the hectic glamour of the international art world. Over the past three years his work has been shown in major exhibitions in London, Berlin, Istanbul, Sharjah, Cairo and Venice, with acquisitions by major museums in Europe, America and the Gulf. Ahmed's success as an artist coincides with a growing interest in contemporary art from across the Middle East and the Arab world in general, which has made him a cultural figurehead in the Gulf. In 2008, the then 28-year-old Ahmed was voted one of the 100 most influential Arabs in the world by Arabian Business magazine, and this position as a role model is something he relishes.

"As a young Saudi artist I want to be part of a creative movement which will inspire a new generation, and give them something to aspire to," he says.

Ahmed has set up a number of local cultural initiatives, and in 2003 he and I co-founded the Edge of Arabia project to create an international platform for Saudi artists. The televised invasion of Iraq was the backdrop to our first conversations, and our shared reaction to that conflict galvanised a strong friendship and shared vision that continues to this day.

Ahmed has opened a window for me onto the landscape of a culture, a religion and a society which is often depicted

in the West as one of the most closed and uninviting in the world. He is challenging that premise from the centre

of the Islamic world at a time when the global community

desperately needs to hear moderate voices sounding across

borders – both physical and cultural. It is a great privilege to have this opportunity to reflect on an artist and a close friend who continues to inspire and challenge his audiences with intellectual courage, and a boundless capacity for wonder.

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