

Maha Malluh's way of things

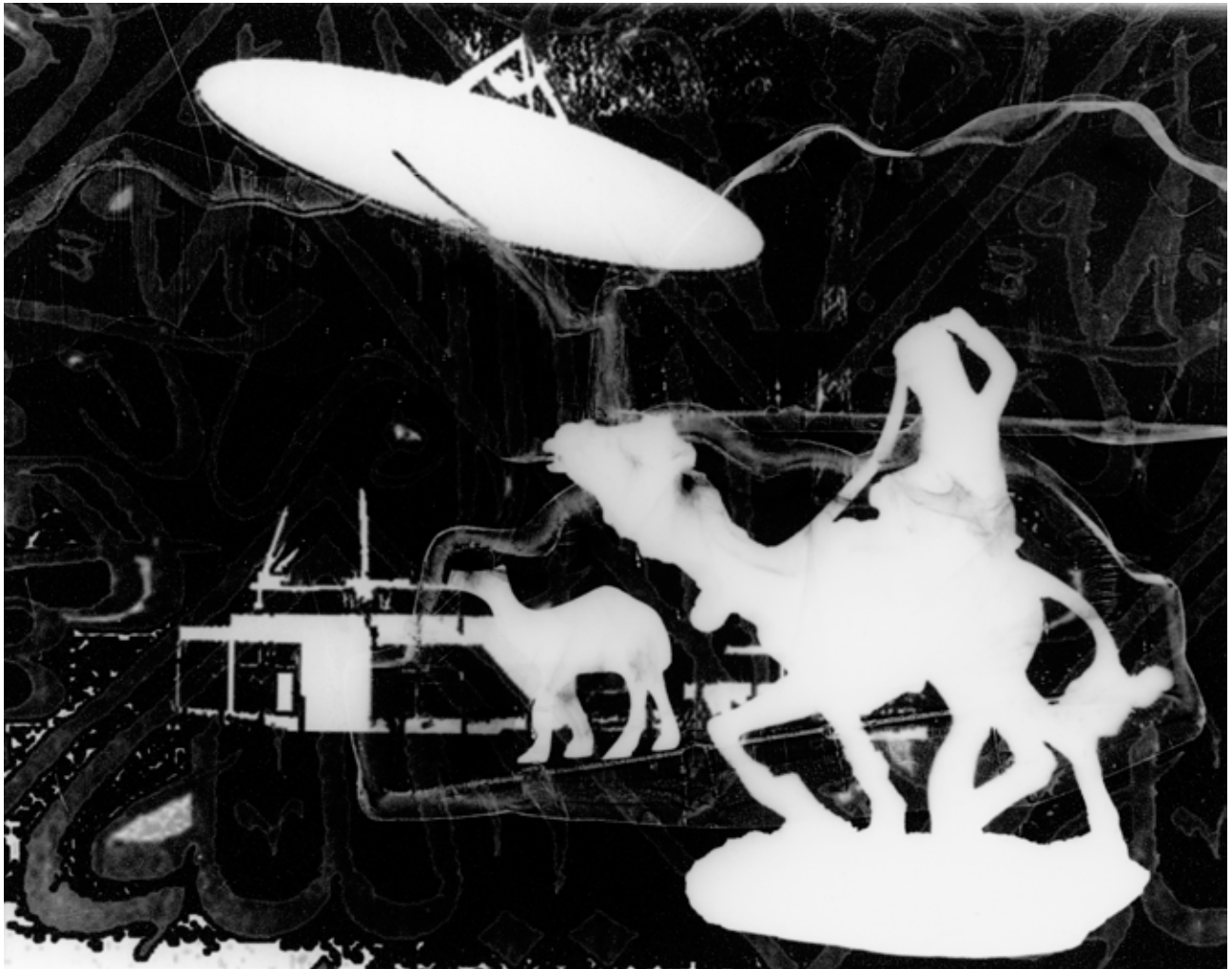
By Naima Rashid



Down Town, 2008, C-print, 75x95cm - Courtesy of artist and Athr Gallery.

Maha believes that our belongings define us. Exposed to our choice and use over lifetimes and generations, they bear the stamp of our most unconscious instincts as well as our conscious concerns, and therefore are cues to greater realities. Both as individuals and as societies, our histories and our futures, our smallest preferences and our long-term desires are mapped upon the objects we are surrounded by, the ones we bring to the foreground, the ones we relegate to the backdrop, the ones we continue to use every day, and the ones we remove to the scrap yard. This thing-index is Maha's

artistic medium, and she plays with it in different ways to interpret Saudi Arabia's complex social realities. In her earlier works, she uses choreographed compositions of selected objects from her environment to echo the cross-section of society, and the dynamic conflicts inherent in it, exploring the part of tradition and modernity, the energies of contradiction that animate it, and the synergy or chaos that alternately marks the land. In her recent work, she uses dated objects from Saudi culture to raise deeper questions about the metamorphosis and future of Saudi Arabia and the role of tradition in



The Road to Mecca, 2010, C-print, 75x95 - British Museum Collection, Courtesy of artist and Athr Gallery.

the process of evolution. Saudi Arabia is a unique and complex region, deeply bound to religion and tradition. At the same time, since the discovery of oil in the 1930s, the socio-economic paradigm, and by consequence, the cultural and social fabric was thrust towards rapid change. A lot of easy oil money started pouring in, and with that, a lot of foreign influence and presence. Flashy Western brands soon became commonplace, and to many youngsters today, anything tagged traditional seems bland in comparison with the glitz, glamour, and global appeal of well-known Western brands. How does globalization take root in a deeply traditionalist society? How does it alter the physical landscape of the place? To what extent does it penetrate the minds of people?

In what way do people resist or embrace change? If we were scientifically able to dissect morsels of lived reality, what part of it would be inspired by their own heritage and what part would be due to the massive wave of modernization sweeping the region? These are some of the concerns that Maha's photograms aim to capture. The results show that it is impossible to make any neat allocation of parts. They do not exist in contained spheres but in a delightful and energetic blaze of cross-currents - dazzling, mysterious, chaotic and surreal at the same time. In the 'Shemagh Mirage' series, Maha attempts to define the urban Saudi man. She carefully choreographs the elements that add up to what makes a Saudi urban men today, and puts them on a



Overpopulation, 2007, Photogram Lambda print, 95x75cm - Courtesy of the artist and Athr gallery.

picture plane in a kind of studied chaos. Under the powerful source of light that they are directly exposed to, the proud and mysterious profile of the Saudi in the shemagh headgear looms in the foreground, and contrasting accents of urbanity, modernization, and tradition inform the backdrop: a MacDonald's sign, canisters of industrial paint, and the massive towers of electricity ubiquitous to the landscape, but also a sign that reads 'Closed for Prayers', a rosary, and minarets of

mosques with crescent-shaped adornments on top. The photograms become a crisp, condensed visual metaphor that encapsulates the multiplicity of nuances merely showing the way towards a definition that can never be completed. It echoes the frequent trinity of religion, tradition, and eager technological embrace that define the bearing of the modern urban Saudi man.

For whatever resemblance the photograms might bear to photographs, her technique is not quite photography, in

so far as there is no camera involved. It is rather a more direct way of seeing, in which the objects are placed on a photosensitive surface and captured directly after being exposed to a source of light from above. Their energies converse with us directly. Photography captures a real or staged instance in real dimensions. It has a pretence or claim to being real. Here, the things are real to begin with, but their re-composition is fictional. The artist's manipulation with selection, sizes and arrangement and the way it determines the final result denies the dimensions and restraints of reality.

In 'Road to Mecca', the white oval of the satellite dish is as large as the Mecca-bound pilgrim on camelback. The wires of headphones loop in mid-air at the level of a man's head. This is not a claim to capture reality, it's an imaginative way to suggest undercurrents of absurdity, surrealism and magic that might run under the visible scheme of things, but which need a certain eye to be seen, and a certain atmosphere for their charge to be released. Several contrasts add up to the high-voltage zone of unresolved conflict contained in these works. The diagnostic x-ray aesthetic and the scientific principle it suggests contrasts with the dream-like charge set off by the surrealistic arrangements and deliberate disproportions of size. The lurking danger surprises from under the playfulness that seems to be at work; jagged shards lurk menacingly close to soft-bodied babies, and sharp angular forms co-exist with spherical orbs. Nothing seems static in these frames. Indeed, they seem only to have captured very fleetingly people and things in continuous forward motion. The babies in 'Overpopulation', like the tangles of headphone wires and loops of stethoscope tubes will continue to swirl in slow circles. This is how she sees her homeland – a land rife with powerful cross-currents, conflicts, and contradictions, but moving ahead at its own pace and in its own manner, sometimes gracefully and sometimes barely negotiating the balance between the weight of the past and the pull of the future.

This balance isn't always easy to strike, given the speed with which things become outdated in our times. Certain objects are no longer in use, but they remain in our distant background. Audio cassettes with recordings of religious lectures, once commonly available, are almost antiquated now. The lectures are now downloadable

or available in CD format. The cassettes might be old, but have the lessons expired as well? Similarly, a lot of Saudi households no longer use wooden baking trays or steel eating pots domestically since the materials are untenable in our new lifestyles. What is the fate of these objects then?

Using these dated objects, in her latest series 'Food for thought', she concocts pieces that seem purely commemorative and celebrate the use these obsolete objects once performed. The enameled metal pots are pasted upside-down on top of each other and erected into a temple-like tower. The audio cassettes are neatly stacked within wooden trays from three decades ago, with certain words echoing certain core moral precepts embedded within the arrangement ('haram', 'batil', and 'aib' meaning 'forbidden', 'wrong' and 'shame'). Not just intelligent space-tailoring but also a spunky conceptual remix of traditions. Sometimes, objects from the past and the message they echo need to be re-appropriated with striking creativity and made relevant and attractive to the present. For the truth is that as long as it can capture our imagination and our consciousness, it can be sustained in the present, re-appropriated and re-injected into the stream of life. Repackaging it in striking creations that sit snugly on gallery walls, and stop people in their tracks to challenge notions of usability, durability and expiry is only one way. Artists shall think up so many others.

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About the Writer

Naima Rashid is a researcher and writer about art and culture from a cross-cultural perspective. For the past three years, her area of interest has been the contemporary Saudi art scene, which she writes about extensively on different international publications and on Jeddah Blog, a blog that she co-edits and that champions Saudi art and culture.