

## Woman photographer daringly captures beauty of Kuwait City's backstreets

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Kuwaiti photographer Farah Salem has spent five years roaming the backstreets of Kuwait City to discover and capture the multicultural aspect of the capital through photos and video installations featured at her "In-Between the Skyline of Kuwait City" exhibition.

The exhibition, at La Galerie at the Alliance Francaise of Dubai, was the outcome of a journey that began when Salem was an undergraduate student and resulted in a book with the same title that was published in June 2016.

Salem's work invites viewers to a "dynamic meditative experience" and the video-and-sound installation offers an experience similar to a visual walking tour around the streets between the skylines of the city.

"I aim to allow people to see that there is more to Kuwait City's urban life than the dazzling modern and luxurious buildings that somehow feel lifeless. Behind them are the most scenic streets and passages that tell a far more powerful story," Salem said.

"I was an 18-year-old woman with dreams of travelling to explore new cultures and places. At that time, I had to focus on my education.

I could not afford to travel. I had a car and a camera and I decided to use these tools every weekend to park somewhere in the city and go on walking adventures," she said via e-mail from Chicago, where she is working towards a master's degree in art therapy and counselling.

Salem faced several obstacles in a country where women were often not expected to be roaming alone photographing backstreets.

"However, I made it work for me and I built honest human connections with strangers on those streets. Often, I would return with a printed photograph to offer it to shop owners or craftsmen whom I had met on the street," she said.

Salem's documentation of a 5-year period of a city that is constantly shifting generated great interest inside and outside Kuwait.

"There was great feedback," she said. "At one point a few individuals who were not happy with 'this specific image' of Kuwait asked me why I didn't document any of the modern buildings or malls. Ironically, this was my very point from this project: not to show Kuwait's modern architecture that can be easily found on a search engine but to capture the beauty that lies within the rawness of the backstreets. To include all aspects of the city and those who reside in it."

In her journey towards a full-time creative life Salem can count on the support and encouragement of her father, who is creative himself, and



**Fresh eye.** A photo by Kuwaiti photographer Farah Salem on display at La Galerie at the Alliance Francaise of Dubai.

(Farah Salem)

friends. "I also receive encouragement from the creative community that I am surrounded by and deeply appreciate the support from viewers and art enthusiasts," she said.

Salem started experimenting with photography when she was "14 going on 15," with a digital camera she would carry in her pocket to capture moments of life around her.

"My father saw potential and bought me a (professional) camera when I was 17. I began learning on my own and then enrolled in a photography course. I continued practising and taking as many courses

as I could," she said.

"By the time I was 20, I was experimenting with film and instant photography. Eventually, I started attending both photography and other art practice programmes. Like every artist, it's an ongoing practice of building your own aesthetic and conceptualisation of themes."

The media Salem is currently working with are photography, video, installation, performance and projection/light work.

"Through my artwork, I question ways of erasing socio-cultural conditioning, through looking at the societal gendered trauma, particularly rooted within my experience as an Arab woman, as well as debating ways of defeating silence and overcoming boundaries of a restricting culture. Other themes such as existential questioning also appear in my work," Salem said.

Salem said censorship is still a large issue in the Gulf region.

"I don't believe art should be restricted by any kind of ideology," she said. "It is often easier to censor women and keep their voices down. It is a part of the culture after all."

Stressing the importance of applying feminist theories in the Gulf region, she said: "I don't mean the Western version of feminism or simply the equality of gender but also taking into consideration class, race, religion, nationality and socio-cultural backgrounds. Feminism is freedom of choice. Feminism is about dismantling the systems of oppression."

"Creating platforms that can act as safe spaces, finding new processes to empower our own choices and engaging all members of society in a just way is what is needed right now," she added.

N.P. Krishna Kumar is an Arab Weekly contributor in Dubai.

### Viewpoint



**Iman Zayat** is the Managing Editor of The Arab Weekly.

## Promoting Saudi art and culture is central to modernisation drive

Saudi Arabia has always had its own writers, artists, directors, actors and musicians but for many years their talent was unwelcome in the kingdom. While Saudi artists gained critical acclaim in many Western and Arab capitals, their work went largely unrecognized in their own country.

This paradox was due to restrictive policies on art and entertainment in Saudi Arabia, which were justified – wrongly – on religious grounds. Such policies did not reflect the values of Saudi society and cut against its tradition of creativity and aesthetic sensitivity as well as its significant cultural contributions, particularly in Nabati poetry, which has been a feature of life in the Arabian Peninsula since the 16th century.

Even while art did not find the ideal environment to thrive in the kingdom, it never disappeared. Various Saudi artists gained international acclaim for their

work in recent years, including director Ali Kalthami, director Mahmoud Sabbagh, film-maker Haifaa al-Mansour, contemporary artist Manal al-Dowayan, designer Samiah Khashoggi and visual artist Hend al-Mansour.

These artists, as well as younger aspiring talents, are likely to shine in the coming years.

This is because of a gentle breeze of change that has swept through the kingdom with Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman bin Abdulaziz's Vision 2030, a daring national agenda aimed at modernising the kingdom and diversifying the economy. Its goal is to free the kingdom from dependence on oil exports and build a prosperous and sustainable economic future.

The far-reaching project has already begun. Saudi Arabia has announced it will invest \$64 billion over the next ten years in its entertainment industry, a move that was received warmly by international investors.

Earlier, British cinema operator Vue International and the Kuwait National Cinema Company both announced they would open cin-

ema multiplexes in Saudi Arabia before the end of this year. Construction on the kingdom's first opera house is to begin soon.

The kingdom is also to have 5,000 entertainment events this year, including musicals, stand-up comedy performances and other live shows from some of the biggest names in entertainment, including Cirque du Soleil, said the chairman of the Saudi General Entertainment Authority (GEA), Ahmed bin Aqeel al-Khatib.

He said 500 companies had registered to organise entertainment events in one year.

Faisal Bafarat, CEO of the GEA, added that 2018 entertainment programmes would create 224,000 jobs, including 114,000 direct and 110,000 indirect jobs in the sector by 2030.

"Families, young people and children will be able to enjoy live music performances, theatre shows, musicals, circus performances, community festivals and much more across the kingdom," Bafarat said.

These statements send a clear message to investors that opportunities are available in Saudi entertainment and that the GEA is willing to support investors who expand their business.

The development of this emerging sector will produce many jobs in the long term, as well as create an indirect economic return by expanding investment opportunities and encouraging spending on local entertainment products.

The \$64 billion that is projected to be earned in the Saudi enter-

tainment industry may sound astronomical to some but it is a small sum in the global entertainment market. Professional service firm PricewaterhouseCoopers' "Global Entertainment and Media Outlook 2015-2019" report stated that global spending on entertainment and media was expected to increase from \$1.74 trillion in 2014 to \$2.23 trillion in 2019. In the United States, the world's largest entertainment and media market, spending will reach \$723 billion in 2019, up from \$568 billion in 2014.

Saudi Arabia's expected \$64 billion, most of which is likely to be reinvested in infrastructure for the industry, is a small fraction of this number – 0.4% of global expenditure.

Recent developments show that the Saudi Arabia of 2017 is not the Saudi Arabia of 30 years ago. Indeed, the kingdom is changing and, little by little, progress will be made in harmony with existing traditions.

Such changes should include increased cooperation with Western and regional partners and efforts to strengthen cross-cultural dialogue to further develop various sectors of the Saudi economy.

Unfortunately, however, developments in Saudi Arabia have been largely overshadowed by the many conflicts in the wider Arab region and the threat of radical groups such as the Islamic State, al-Qaeda and the Houthi militia in Yemen.

For Saudi Arabia, the best way to counter such threats is to serve as a counter-narrative and model a peaceful society in which freedom and dignity are respected.

To this end, Saudis should reject false interpretations of religion that could be used by extremists to jeopardise the kingdom's agenda and they should continue on the path of progress, innovation and cultural expression – values that will help ensure the kingdom's success long down the road.



**Another side of reform.** Members of circus troupe "Cirque Eloize" perform their show organised by the Saudi General Entertainment Authority in Riyadh, on January 18.

(Reuters)

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