

The Clocks Are Striking Thirteen

An ATHR exhibition during 21,39 Jeddah Arts

Opening: Thursday, 8th February 2018

ATHR Serafi Mall, Tahlia St.

ATHR This 21,39



Image of *He walked from Turkey to Germany carrying his 3 kids on his back* from the *Soleless* series, 2018, by Aya Haidar: Image courtesy of the artist and ATHR Jeddah

Opening on Thursday, February 8th, at 7:30pm, Athr presents “*The Clocks Are Striking Thirteen*”, a group exhibition, as part of 21,39 Jeddah Arts. The participating artists are Aya Haidar, Ayman Yossri, Dana Awartani, Larissa Sansour, Maha Nasrallah, Moath Alofi, Mohammed Abdelrasoul, Mohammed Al Faraj, Mohammed Monaiseer, Muhannad Shono, Nasser Al Salem, Reem Al Nasser, Sara Abdu, Tamara Al Samerai, Wael Shawky and Zahra Al Ghamdi. The exhibition is curated by Maya El Khalil.

Athr has long prided itself as a space where alternative points of view and ideas can be explored, shared and discussed – artists can create narratives that have provoked debate and at times dissent. It is within this framework of an open and fluid discussion that the gallery has invited artists to respond to a specific condition of our time: the incessant hunger for truth and the role of storytelling.

In a global, connected world, truth is mediated and nuanced by a large variety of lenses, contexts and individual perspectives. However, in “*Manufacturing Consent: The Political Economy of the Mass Media*” (1988), Chomsky asserts:

“[the media] serve, and propagandise on behalf of, the powerful societal interests that control and finance them”.¹

This idea that global information systems are built on a power structure that prevents us from balanced consideration and informed discussion seems to resonate more than ever today.

For this exhibition we have encouraged artists to offer alternative points of view to question the idea of absolute truths. Each artist has responded with different and prevalent narratives, from the domestic, to the geo-political, the spiritual to the trans-historical. In this process, they draw our attention to what is hidden, what inspires them to action and propose strategies for us to deal with conflicting truths. Each tells her or his story as a reflection of their subjectivities, their knowledge of the world, their passions, observations and fears.

Despite their individuality, the works provoke familiar and overlapping themes - artists express commonalities in their approaches to the subject, and the idea that so often truth really does seem stranger than fiction.

For **Ayman Yossri**, truth is a search, not a gift; it is in the hidden, not the revealed. His practice of self-censorship is a tool to take control in the dark of the world around him. He obsessively and in an intentionally unfathomable way struggles to find coherent meaning. He questions the power of hindsight and the privilege of retrospection. On multiple screens we are invited to spool through video sequences at high-speed, sequences chosen due to their highly personal meaning and resonance for him; we are offered moments or flashes of Yossri’s story. But making sense of it all is up to us; it is our responsibility. In a way, his work constitutes the perfect introduction to this exhibition. What one sees is only as real as one wants it to be.

“We are all hostages of media intoxication”

Jean Baudrillard²

The French philosopher and cultural theorist Jean Baudrillard wrote a series of articles in 1991 and 1992 articulating the complexity that accompanied our encounter with the dissemination of conflict on our television screens.

A decade earlier Baudrillard wrote his seminal text *Simulcra and Simulation* in which he states:

¹ Noam Chomsky and Edward Herman *“Manufacturing Consent: The Political Economy of the Mass Media”*, 1988

² Jean Baudrillard *“The Gulf War did not take place”*, 1992

“We live in a world where there is more and more information, and less and less meaning.”³

When we are able to dial-up the most extreme forms of brutality and watch the “reality” of a war at the touch of a button, from the comfort of our armchair, how does this inform our cognitive and emotional responses, beside our belief in the authenticity of the stories we are being told? Can stories presented like this still elicit an emotive and human response, or are we ultimately all becoming de-sensitised?

A number of artists in this exhibition reference current conflicts, the resulting human cost and respond through deeply personal expressions, showing how the very act of making and doing can help us reach some form of empathy, authenticity and understanding.

Aya Haidar implores us to look at the daily, human cost of conflict. She uncovers individual stories of refugees in flight: their pain, loss and traumas. Beneath the sole of a shoe, she embroiders a symbol representing a memory within the individual’s journey. She goes on to further embroider on refugees’ plastic bags, items they took with them when fleeing. This work contains the sentimental, the practical, the essential, and the desired. What is left behind is the subject of a quilt embroidered with poignant stories.

The act of making and recording is also at play in the work of **Reem Al Nasser**. Al Nasser weaves her tale around the fragrant and fragile beauty of Arabian Jasmine and the destructive and brutal impact of bullets. The shape of the jasmine has given rise to a common name locally, Bullet Jasmine (*Full Rassass*). In southern Saudi Arabia, these Full Rassass adorn the dresses and decorative apparel of young brides, celebrating the successful achievement of their inculcated destiny. Al Nasser alludes to the binary truth/deception that marriage, like war, can often be a misleading narrative.

The loss of identity and meaning through repetition and familiarity is strongly felt in the work of **Maha Nasrallah**, where a wall of *qobqabs* (traditional Syrian slippers) bears witness to lives lost, lives in flight or simply the disappeared. For the artist they also produce an echo or substitute for our hidden memories of displacement. The *qobqabs* are at once common, yet individual and highly personalised by their ownership and the status of that ownership.

By contrast the symbolic multiple in the work of **Mohammed Monaiseer** presents a brigade of 3500 hand drawn toy soldiers. These emblems of childhood question the innocence of play. The perceived sameness of each soldier both trivializes the real human cost of war and alludes to the disconnected nature of sending men into

³ Jean Baudrillard, “*Simulcra and Simulation*”, 1981

battle; regimental uniforms reminders of the socio-political legacies of imperial culture.

“I’m always interested in what gets left out. I’m interested in the tension between what is represented and what isn’t represented, between the articulate and the silent.”

Edward Said⁴

Some artists in the exhibition disregard or explicitly question attempts to tell a story with the logic and simplicity of a beginning, middle and end. Edward Said wrote his final work when he was aware that his life would soon end. He reflects on his realization that life narratives are never straightforward, and that rather than coherence, we lead messy, chaotic lives that defy logic. He questions the ambition that we have for great artists to always progress and to create work that successfully builds to a climax, as an accumulation of all their knowledge and skill. Conversely he argues that as we mature, the gaps and the spaces between the perceived significant events are what become important. To understand and to explore what we don’t know becomes urgent and liberating as we look back.

The artist **Dana Awartani** recovers hidden histories and gives voice, through the familiar recitations of a group of professional young Saudi females, to radical female poets across the centuries. Women who shaped and changed history in whispers, words and expression, are given space to elucidate on their roles in the gaps within histories of art, politics and science.

Tamara Al Samerraei also retrospectively explores omissions. Her work literally clouds the site and memory of more recent times: working from photographic “evidence” she reinterprets a holiday location and a place of repose specifically designed for relaxation which becomes uncomfortable, dark and unsettling.

Mohamed Al Faraj examines what is deliberately edited out by juxtaposing three apparently unrelated news reports that are presented in such a way to manipulate our analysis of the facts, in consideration of the prevalent discussions of ‘fake news’.

Sara Abdu considers the quest for unrestricted focus, the sense of clarity and truth that can come in meditative acts of repetition. In an environment of perpetual doubt when truth is so hard to grasp, we reach for liminal and transcendent moments of respite. Striving for personal authenticity is the artist’s rejection of conformity and the inauthenticity prevalent in culture, politics, and everyday life.

In his work *Amma Baad*, **Nasser Al Salem** creates a stage or a pause in which he shuts out the distraction of the before and after. He asks us to consider the moment, when time and space are fused into one truth, that of existence. We pivot in the space between the idea and its realisation.

⁴ Edward Said *“On Late Style”* published posthumously in 2006

“Who controls the past controls the future, who controls the present controls the past”

George Orwell⁵

George Orwell, writer of seminal dystopian novel *Nineteen Eighty-Four* and the ultimate cynic of received truths, explored power struggles and how the manipulation and distortion of facts can reverse the truth. The title of the exhibition is an adaptation from the first line of this novel.

It is perhaps unsurprising that we see several artists, like Orwell, not just playing with time itself but retreating into a world of alternative or parallel realities in an attempt to control and create other stories, for better or worse. In recent years there has been an emerging interest in science fiction in the Arab world across literature, filmmaking and the visual arts. In this exhibition, Palestinian artist and filmmaker **Larissa Sansour** uses the tools of science fiction to unsettle a chronology, re-order time and take control of the narrative as an act of empowerment in an otherwise helpless position.

Moath Alofi's work likewise treads the line between reality and fiction, mystery and truth as he questions the selective presentation of facts in a series of photographs of the mysterious and unexplained monolithic land formations near the holy city of Medina.

And just as Moath Alofi brings to light what is in front of us but that we can't see, **Mohammed Abdelrasoul** explores science fiction's drive to imagine the impossible, unfettered by the yoke of the present reality. He expresses concern as to how our inter-connected, digital age is driving us inevitably towards de-humanisation.

Zahra Al Ghamdi creates a hybrid form that might prove as virulent as the Triffids described in John Wyndham's post-apocalyptic novel of 1951, *Day of the Triffids* where we find the hero confronted by a world in which *“we danced, on the brink of an unknown future, to an echo from a vanished past.”* Her organic forms sprawl and creep across the gallery and we are left in doubt, as to its beginning or its end.

Wael Shawky demonstrates a masterly ability to express the elasticity of truth, meaning, and narrative in his work *Al Arab Al Adfuna III* (2012-2015) the third part of a trilogy in which he manipulates time, identity, and narrative structure to re-enact a story that in the first place is based on unreliable evidence.

In contrast to these intertwined or complex stories, **Muhammed Shono** reveals that telling moment when truth becomes distorted. Not negating the existential role storytelling plays in our lives, he nonetheless draws attention to the consequences of adopting the wrong stories.

⁵ George Orwell, *“Nineteen Eighty-Four”*, 1949

Since the earliest times, it has been apparent that we need stories not because they provide valid epistemological descriptions, but because they have a cognitive function: the very act of creating, telling and hearing stories, whether true or not, allows us to make sense of things.

The irony is not lost that in enabling this exhibition at Athr, we have by the very definition of our roles, constructed a certain narrative, or at least selectively presented one. With this in mind I would urge you to construct your own truth and have the audacity to tell that story, whether it's really "true" or not:

"The truth was a mirror in the hands of God. It fell, and broke into pieces. Everybody took a piece of it, and they looked at it and thought they had the truth." Rumi

Maya El Khalil

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NOTES TO THE EDITOR

ABOUT ATHR

Founded by Hamza Serafi and Mohammed Hafiz, Athr is a contemporary art project space and gallery which since 2009 has enabled artistic dialogue between contemporary artists across the world.

Based in a 20,000 square feet/metric space in central Jeddah, Athr represents Middle Eastern and international artists, and encompasses spaces for creative experimentation as well as a visual arts bookshop and a terrace for outdoor presentations. It provides a creative environment for artists and showcases an exhibition schedule of international and Saudi contemporary art supported by extensive public programmes aimed at encouraging engagement with local audiences. Athr is currently developing a cultural exchange scheme with international artists and curators as part of its commitment to promoting cultural dialogue between Saudi Arabia and the rest of the world.

ABOUT 21,39

“21,39” is a non-profit initiative organized by the Saudi Art Council, a group of local art enthusiasts who wish to contribute to the local community through the promotion of art and culture in Jeddah.

Illustrating the geographic coordinates of the city (21.5433°N, 39.1728°E), “21,39” seeks to maintain and develop the phenomenon that has, for decades, seen Jeddah at the forefront of Saudi Arabia’s contemporary art scene.

The program will include curtaed exhibitions, gallery openings, workshops and a series of talks and discussions that aim to build bridges with the outside world through the universal language of art.

Of equal importance, “21,39” presents Saudis with an opportunity to view and appreciate the artistic culture that exists and is developing in their homeland. By organizing an annual city-wide initiative encompassing a range of events, partners and locations, “21,39” offers an unforgettable journey into this historic city.