

BASMA AL-SULAIMAN



Portrait of Basma al-Sulaiman in front of Henry Moore's *Three Piece Reclining Figure No. 1* (1961–62). Courtesy Basma al-Sulaiman Museum of Contemporary Art, Jeddah.

SHADIA and RAJA ALEM, *The Black Arch* (detail), 2011, stainless steel, cast iron, fabric and stone with projected photographs and sound installation, 700 x 20 x 350 cm. Copyright Cateley and Institut du Monde Arabe, Paris. Courtesy Basma al-Sulaiman Museum of Contemporary Art, Jeddah.

Wearer of Many Hats

BY SARA RAZA

As a teenager in her native Jeddah, Basma al-Sulaiman persuaded her mother to purchase an artwork for her. It was al-Sulaiman's first acquisition, a painting by local Saudi artist and Central Saint Martins graduate Safeya Binzagr. One of Saudi Arabia's leading female artists, Binzagr is known for her depictions of the rich cultural traditions of Hejaz, the western Saudi Arabian region. The experience of acquiring a work of art, al-Sulaiman remembers, was defined by pure instinct and sheer pleasure. She was hooked.

So began what would become an ongoing journey with contemporary art for the vibrant and colorful collector, now in her 50s, who divides her time between Jeddah and London, where her plush Belgravia home plays host to works by a varied and dynamic roster of international artists. When we meet for breakfast al-Sulaiman is immaculately attired in a black peplum shirt and matching skirt, quirky patterned tights and towering platform heels. Early in the conversation, she proudly insists that, to this day, her choices are still first and foremost defined by the same instinct that guided her as a teen. Eschewing the services of art consultants and advisers, al-Sulaiman has built a collection of more than 200 works by a varied cohort of Asian contemporary practitioners including India's Anish Kapoor and Subodh Gupta; London-born Shezad Dawood, of Indian and Pakistani descent; Chinese artist Zhang Xiaogang; as well as leading Saudi artists Ahmed Mater and Abdulnasser Gharem. "The East was a mystery that always played on my imagination," al-Sulaiman says. "I started by collecting Chinese art and then beyond, to the Indian subcontinent. It opened my eyes to a whole other world."

It takes more than gut instincts to build this sort of collection, al-Sulaiman acknowledges. Her decisive collecting methodology involves research, travel and studies at Christie's Education in London. "The lack of arts education available in Saudi Arabia has made me more aware of sharpening my tools: my knowledge and my eyes," she says. "If I make a mistake, well, it is my mistake and no one else's. My art is a direct representation of myself." That said, al-Sulaiman does welcome advice from her (very influential) friends in the art world. She counts among her coterie Melissa Chiu, the recently appointed director of the Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden in

Washington, DC, and Chinese gallery owner and socialite Pearl Lam.

As it happens, Lam sits on the advisory board of the Basma al-Sulaiman Museum of Contemporary Art (BASMOCA), a virtual museum launched in 2011 to share highlights of al-Sulaiman's collection. Through Second Life technology, "visitors" to the museum assume personal avatars to explore its virtual galleries in 3D. A live chat function enables networking and the exchange of ideas.

Why virtual? Although al-Sulaiman considered building a physical museum in Saudi Arabia, she abandoned the idea due to conflicts with Saudi authorities over the nature of some artworks and the thorny subject of men and women intermingling in a public space. Going virtual turned out to be the right move in a region boasting one of the world's youngest populations, which, having come of age in the internet era, is perhaps best reached using the language of technology. The majority of BASMOCA's online traffic comes from Saudi Arabia and the Gulf, and most visitors choose female avatars. "In Saudi Arabia and the wider region there is a thirst for knowledge of contemporary art, particularly among young women," al-Sulaiman notes.

Although relatively new to Saudi Arabia, contemporary art holds immense potential for the creative community which has been denied access to arts education, al-Sulaiman points out. BASMOCA Education programs will help fill the void, bringing accessible knowledge on visual culture to budding enthusiasts. "For me it's about educating people and making 'art language' more accessible to all audiences, from art lovers to students," she says.

Points such as these make it clear that al-Sulaiman's relationship with art is not just as a collector, but also as a patron. Establishing herself as a custodian of Saudi contemporary art, she recently acquired *The Black Arch* (2011), a multimedia installation by Paris-based Saudi sisters Raja and Shadia Alem. Presented at the inaugural Kingdom of Saudi Arabia Pavilion at the 54th Venice Biennale in 2011, the piece explores the artists' childhood memories of Mecca. "*The Black Arch* is one of the most significant contemporary Saudi Arabian works of art," al-Sulaiman attests. "It is an iconic work by two accomplished female artists." Acquired in loving memory of the collector's late son, it was until August on loan at Paris's Institut

du Monde Arabe, part of the traveling exhibition "Hajj: Journey to the Heart of Islam," originally organized by the British Museum in cooperation with the King Abdulaziz Public Library, in Riyadh.

Another rising favorite of al-Sulaiman is contemporary calligrapher Nasser al-Salem. Shortlisted for the 2013 Jameel Prize, al-Salem possesses, in the collector's words, "a fantastic eye for reproducing the Arabic word. He has a bright future ahead of him." In addition to being part of her collection, al-Salem was included in "Moallaqat," an exhibition curated by Saudis Aya Alireza and Raneem Farsi for the launch of the Saudi nonprofit 21,39. Based in Jeddah (for whose geographic coordinates it is named), the arts organization was founded in February 2014 by the Saudi Art Council together with a group of local enthusiasts, al-Sulaiman among them. In addition to exhibitions, 21,39 sponsors lectures and workshops with the aim of championing contemporary art and education in Jeddah, the country's commercial capital.

It should come as no surprise that al-Sulaiman also had a hand in the recent renovation of the Jeddah Sculpture Park. Organized by Abdul Latif Jameel Community Initiatives, the high-profile project—part of a municipal plan to develop the city's central Corniche—refurbished 27 steel sculptures brought to Jeddah between 1973 and 1986. Among them are works by such greats as Henry Moore, Jean Arp, Victor Vasarely, Joan Miró and Rabi'a al-Akhras. For her services to art and culture in Saudi Arabia, al-Sulaiman was commended by prince Mishal bin Abdullah bin Abdulaziz, Governor of Makkah, making her the first Saudi woman to receive that particular honor.

On a warm August afternoon after the holy month of Ramadan, al-Sulaiman and I are seated in her drawing room in London discussing future plans for BASMOCA. "This is more than a project," she says. "This is the most exciting time in Saudi Arabian contemporary art. We have everything at our disposal in order to thrive."

A tireless, forward-thinking promoter of Saudi Arabian contemporary art and artists, al-Sulaiman shows no sign of slowing down as she continues to transcend frontiers both real and virtual. "I see myself as a public institution, collector and patron," she explains. "I change my hat accordingly."