



Collector Frances Reynolds Marinho and Basma Al-Sulaiman stand in front of Tracey Emin's *Our Angles*.



Art Dubai's Zain Masud with Mona Khashoggi and *Canvas* Deputy Editor Myrna Ayad.

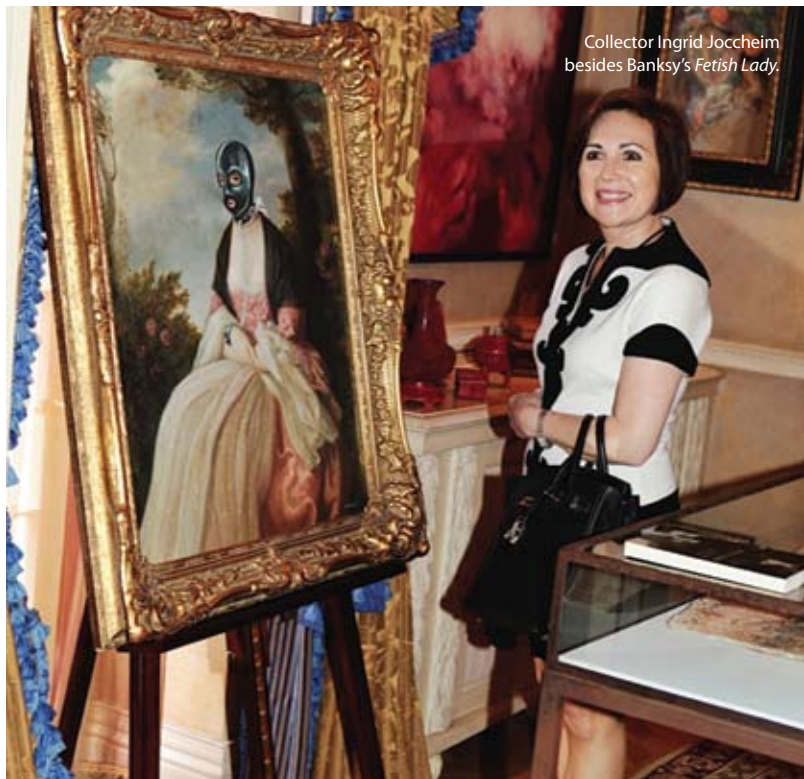
BASMOCA LAUNCH

Saudi collector Basma Al-Sulaiman held the second BASMOCA (Basma Al-Sulaiman Museum of Contemporary Art) launch event at her London residence on 8 June. The world's first virtual art museum was inaugurated in April in Jeddah (page 48) and features a selection of international artworks from Al-Sulaiman's private collection, which includes works by renowned artists such as Adel Siwi, Abdul Nasser Gharem, Ai Weiwei, Andy Warhol, George Baselitz, Gerhard Richter and Subodh Gupta.

Works by Antony Gormley at the entrance of Basma Al-Sulaiman's residence. *Bollards (Oval, Snowman)*. 2001. Cast iron. Height: 99 cm.



Princess Alia Al-Senussi with *Eye CU*, a work from Arne Quinze's *Stillhouse* series.



Collector Ingrid Jocheim besides Banksy's *Fetish Lady*.



Cathie Shiro, Basma Al-Sulaiman and Belgian artist Arne Quinze.

REALLY REAL



The sun is shining, the sky is blue and a row of palm trees lines the path towards the glass staircase of the museum – a modern structure set in the centre of an island. From a distance, I see a sculpture by the Gao Brothers and another by Jaume Plensa at the museum’s entrance. A group of museum visitors stand around a plaque that reads BASMOCA, while others walk around the stunning landscape. Except this is no ordinary museum and certainly not a ‘real’ one in the physical sense – BASMOCA stands for Basma Al-Sulaiman Museum of Contemporary Art and I’ve come on this tour via Second Life, a software programme which enables access to the Metaverse museum, based on Virtual Worlds Technology, in which people can interact in a 3D cyberspace. I’ve created an avatar for myself, as have others at BASMOCA, and our names float above our heads. If we like, we can become ‘friends’ and discuss the art on view. Better still, we can make an appointment with the museum director and have her give us a curator-led tour.

One woman’s dream to share her collection in her home country resulted in the construction of a private museum. **Myrna Ayad** speaks with Basma Al-Sulaiman about BASMOCA and how a virtual museum in 3D hopes to reach the Saudi audience and beyond.

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The museum is, however, very much real and so are the artworks it houses, and it is a vision born of its founder’s lifelong mission: “A non-profit entity aimed at educating audiences

in the Arab world about art and a platform for interaction where people can meet, discuss art and have a museum experience virtually, in place of a lack of physical museums in the Gulf.” Accessing the museum is indeed virtual, yet nothing short of a unique and exciting adventure.

VIRTUAL REALITY

Saudi-born Al-Sulaiman began collecting Contemporary art in the 1990s, largely stirred by a course on Contemporary art at Christie’s in London, as well as by trips to Europe and the USA which saw her visit museums and galleries regularly. Her extensive collection spans the Middle East, Asia and the West, with works by acclaimed artists such as Omar El-Nagdi (*Canvas 4.4*), Yan Pei-Ming, Andy Warhol and Gerhard Richter. “I love collecting and art has been a passion for so long,” she says, “I’ve been asked to show my collection numerous times but I always wanted to do something in Saudi Arabia as it’s my home and where I am from.” In the name of “promoting cultural vision”, Al-Sulaiman launched Progress Art in August 2010 (www.progressart.net), a Saudi-based art consultancy which curates private as well as corporate collections through a

network spanning artists, galleries and art fairs in the Middle East, Europe, Asia and the USA. The organisation also offers collection archiving services, book publishing and insurance; its slogan is ‘We Live Art’ and that is precisely what Al-Sulaiman does – from collecting art and commissioning artists to create site-specific works for her home to curating the Edge of Arabia Istanbul exhibition in September 2010 and launching BASMOCA. She lives and breathes art.

Early on, Al-Sulaiman was keen on founding a private museum that would showcase her collection as well as other works from public or private collections. Despite a fervent desire to launch such an institution in the Kingdom, she realised such a venture might run into problems as works in her collection include some that are politically charged or display nudes, making it impossible to exhibit them there. Two years ago, Al-Sulaiman came across Virtual Worlds Technology, which triggered the concept for BASMOCA. She went through roughly the same processes a real, physical museum would entail, namely the design and planning of its architecture, and again, in keeping with her desire for the museum to be Saudi-based, she ensured that BASMOCA’s physicality resembled her hometown of



Left: A virtual view of BASMOCA's entrance.

Below left: Bridget Riley. *Tambourine*. 1989. Acrylic on canvas. 237.5 x 110 cm.

Below right: Bassem Al-Sharqi. *Jeddah Barcodes*. 2010. Mixed media on canvas. 36 pieces. Variable dimensions.

All images courtesy BASMOCA.

Jeddah. "I wanted it to look like Jeddah, with its palm trees, fountains and seaside," she explains, "and the overall museum is built like a modern Arab tent."

CLICK TO VIEW

During its launch week last April, the site experienced 11,000 hits. "No one believed that it came out of Saudi Arabia, because of the stereotype mentality," says Al-Sulaiman, going on to mention that such typecasts are what she seeks to combat through BASMOCA. "I want to show the world that we have opportunities [in Saudi Arabia] and that where there is a will, there is a way," she asserts; "We have visions, culture and art that exist in different forms, such as calligraphy and poetry, but we are a young nation. I'm showing you that there is no difference [between us]." BASMOCA's launch exhibition showcases works from artists hailing from all corners of the globe – it is perhaps the first time viewers are given the opportunity to see works by art world luminaries such as Bridget Riley, Anselm Kiefer and George Baselitz hang alongside those by Middle Eastern greats such as Faisal Samra (*Canvas 1.2*), Abdunasser Gharem and Shadia and Raja Alem (the latter are representing Saudi Arabia at the Kingdom's premiere participation at this year's Venice Biennale). While BASMOCA's first phase showcased some works from Al-Sulaiman's collection, the museum's second phase will invite guest curators to stage an exhibition or retrospective for one artist; phase three will involve



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works on loan from other collections. Eventually, BASMOCA hopes to stage two or three exhibitions a year, but right now Al-Sulaiman is mostly keen on communicating the concept. "When we sent out invitations in a 'save the date' format just as galleries do, some people RSVP-ed saying they couldn't make it!" she laughs, "so we're still testing the waters in a sense, even though the positive feedback has made me a lot more comfortable and confident."

While BASMOCA has epitomised, albeit virtually, what most art patrons seek – to share their collections with others – it has also provided for Al-Sulaiman the positions of museum director and curator, something that will undoubtedly

arouse interest and perhaps have a bearing on the prices of artworks which she hopes to acquire. Yet the commercial aspect doesn't interest her in the least. "My main aim is for BASMOCA to become a platform for promoting artists," she says modestly, "and I don't claim to have a better collection than anyone else; I'm just presenting it in an advanced and technological way." Humility is one of Al-Sulaiman's characteristics. "The novelty can wear off, so I sometimes ask myself 'is this special, is this different?'" she reflects. Oh but it is. It's literally Second Life in action, and it's viewing art in a radically new setting. 

For more information visit www.basmoca.com