

ART & PATRONAGE

THE MIDDLE EAST

EDITOR: HOSSEIN AMIRSADEGHI
EXECUTIVE EDITOR: MARYAM HOMAYOUN EISLER

ESSAYS:
LAYLA DIBA
ANTHONY DOWNEY
HANS ULRICH OBRIST



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Basma Al-Sulaiman

Jeddah | Paris | London

'I am very proud of the art that is produced today in Saudi Arabia. It is still in its infancy and requires a vast amount of support from the government and individuals.'

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Describing herself as 'a Muslim Saudi woman nurtured by art', Basma Al-Sulaiman's collection spans European, Chinese, South American and Middle Eastern art, and it is her intention to make it openly available to the public in her home country: 'My most ambitious project would be the foundation of a museum of contemporary art in Saudi Arabia.' Keen to share her collection, not keep it 'in the closet', her investment in art is not about 'showing off': 'It is another initiative that can get me closer to the people. Because really what we need is awareness and education. ... Saudi Arabia needs more educational institutions, galleries, museums and personal initiatives from individuals to support art projects, both locally and internationally.'

Al Sulaiman graduated with a BA in English Literature from King Abdulaziz University in Jeddah. She then went on to study for a diploma in Modern and Contemporary Art at Christie's education department. A member of several museums and foundations, including Arts Global, a non-profit association that aims to bridge the gap between art and people from Europe and the Arab world, she 'relentlessly works with projects to support the arts in Saudi Arabia and provide new alternatives for local artists to expose and promote their work, as well as providing opportunities for exchange programmes with foreign artists'.

Born and brought up in Jeddah, she describes the city as 'one of the largest open-air art galleries in the world'. The prosperity of the city in the late 1970s and 1980s led to 'the enrichment of public areas with art pieces, boasting works by Cesar, Alexander Calder, Henry Moore and Joan Miró, to name but a few'. Though the city's investment in public sculptures influenced her passion for art, the example set by Jeddah is still just the beginning of much-needed support for the arts in Saudi Arabia. The sculptures are abstract in nature, and traditional, 'mainly depict elements of traditional Saudi culture, and because the Islamic tradition prohibits the depiction of living creatures, notably human forms, the work exhibited is impressively creative and challenging'. It is her intention to do all she can to help further this development in Saudi Arabia, where the need of new locations dedicated to art, she says, 'is deeply felt'.

As the first step to seeing her dream become reality Al-Sulaiman is in the process of establishing a virtual museum, BASMOCA (Basma Al-Sulaiman Museum of Contemporary Art), a blueprint for the intended construction of a physical museum in Saudi Arabia in which to house her growing collection in the future. The virtual space in 3D will take the form of a series of different rooms housing her collection of contemporary artworks from various countries around the world. The virtual museum is modelled on the experience of visiting a real gallery space, and there will also be a facility for visiting artists to showcase temporary exhibitions alongside the permanent collection.

The website will take considerable creative planning and investment. 'I want a *virtual* experience,' she says, 'where you are actually dropped off ... there is a building ... Avatar. ... You walk through the building.' The intention for the museum is not simply to share her collection with the world, but also to contribute significantly to the education and rejuvenation of the art scene specifically and the Middle Eastern public generally.

Her collection spans broad tastes and influences. It includes works from China, India and South America: 'Art, contemporary or past, always stands as a reflection of their society, challenges and struggle'. The first piece of Chinese art she bought was a work by Yu Min Jun: 'It was so huge, this big-faced laughing man, and I opted to put it in the children's playroom, thinking they're going to enjoy looking at this big fat guy smiling.' Al-Sulaiman recalls her own first experience of art as the enigmatic smile of a female, the *Mona Lisa* in the Louvre: 'I was seven years old and on a summer holiday to Paris with my family. Da Vinci's masterpiece was enthralling. I was raised in a traditional environment and to us art had only been an element of interior decoration, in keeping with our traditions and customs.' Her own childhood home, she says: 'had just simple decoration ... We had paintings, but they were either religious or historical ... mostly to beautify the walls.'

European art informed her early ventures into collecting. Her first art purchase was a classical painting by Marmaduke Craddock, which she still owns. She remembers buying pieces by David Hockney and Frank Stella 'without realizing who they were. It was pure instinct.' Her taste now extends to the leading opt artist Bridget Riley, the expressionist Keith van Dongen, the prominent Saudi Abdunasser Gharem, the Indian artist Jitish Kallat, and the German-born British painter Frank Auerbach. Among her great passions are Monet and Picasso.

In the mid-1990s Al-Sulaiman commissioned a work by the Saudi artist Faisal Samra, who inspired her initial enthusiasm towards Middle Eastern contemporary artists: 'Coming from my part of the world, we have a very challenging and important role to play in promoting arts; we possess great artists alongside plenty of misconceptions about our region. Playing between these two extremes, patrons have a very delicate role to endorse: they must encourage and expose our art to the rest of the world ... We need to enlighten others about our art and artists, both locally and internationally.'

Al Sulaiman's interest in contemporary art, she says, 'grew on its own. Eventually I ended up influencing my family and friends, helping them to appreciate art and build their collections'. Basma Al-Sulaiman is a thriving force, an expert and creative force that only just begun to shine over the art world in the Middle East, and showing no signs of stopping any time soon.



Basma Al-Sulaiman in front of Yang Shaobin's *No.4, 2001*, oil on canvas, photographed at her home in London, 2010

Basma Al-Sulaiman

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(left)
Faisal Samra
Performance #44, 2009
Digital photography on
Lambda print (triptych)
Furniture by EDRA and
Kartell by Phillippe Starck
Photo © Manal Al-Dowayan

(above)
View of the Red Sea
with Basma Al-Sulaiman
standing behind
Abdulnasser Gharem's
Concrete Block II, 2009
Rubber stamps and
industrial lacquer paint on
wooden sculpture
Photo © Manal Al-Dowayan

(below)
Halim Al-Karim
*Untitled (Urban Witnesses
series)*, 2002
Photograph on Lambda
print (triptych)
Photo © Manal Al-Dowayan
Flower arrangements
and design by Saudi
flower designer Abdulaziz
Alnoman





(above)
 (painting)
 Zhou Tiehai
Napoleon, 2005
 Oil on canvas

(sculpture)
 Sui Jianguo
Dinosaurs - Made in China,
 2002
 Colour fibreglass sculpture

(below right)
 (clockwise)
 Zhang Xiaogang
 from *The Bloodline*
 series, 1995
 Oil on canvas

Ren Si-Hong
Mao
 Fibreglass

Tracey Emin
Our Angels, 2007
 Clear blue neon

Ai Weiwei
Table with Three Legs, 2007
 Table, Qing Dynasty
 (1644-1911)



(top)
 Basma Al-Sulaiman in front
 of Adel El-Siwi's
Hamdy and Prince, 2008
 Mixed media on wood
 Photo © Manal Al-Dowayan

(above)
 (clockwise)
 Ju Ming
Living World Series, 2005
 Wood

Kazuo Shiraga (KSH0017W)
Ton, 1999
 Oil on canvas

Banksy
Fetish Lady
 Oil on canvas

Zhan Wang
Scholars Rock, 2005
 Stainless steel

