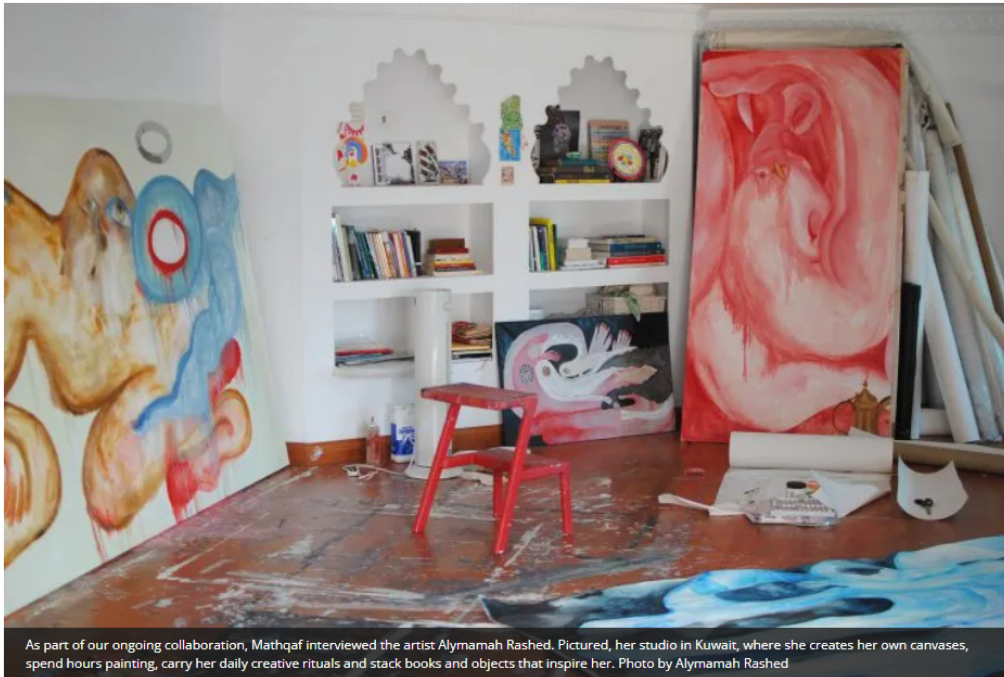


The unseen and the un-thought: Hunna/ هُنْ gallery represents powerful women artists from the Gulf

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As part of our ongoing collaboration, Mathqaf interviewed the artist Alymamah Rashed. Pictured, her studio in Kuwait, where she creates her own canvases, spend hours painting, carry her daily creative rituals and stack books and objects that inspire her. Photo by Alymamah Rashed

Naima Morelli naimamorelli

August 26, 2021 at 3:10 pm



Many of us have misconceptions and preconceived ideas about the art scene in the Gulf countries. Hence, when we see the work of a gallery like Hunna/ هُنْ — founded this year and representing eight women artists from the Gulf — we open our eyes in disbelief. How can these artists possibly talk about such thorny issues, like questions of power or the female body, and get away with it? Don't they get censored?

"Seen from the outside, the artists represented by Hunna may seem daring," explained the founder of Hunna/ هُنْ, Océane Saily. "But the Gulf has a history of art, full of artists who have paved the way and demonstrated that there is room for critical narratives, and this room keeps getting bigger."



Océane Saily, Founder and Director of HUNNA/ هُنْ in front of Alia's Zaal painting

That being said, she added, there is no denying that censorship and self-censorship exist. "The latter is enforced by the existence of blurry red lines and the will to avoid political or social conflicts."

One thing is sure, from the erased mythology of the Arabian Peninsula to the refugee experience and the weight of contradictory cultural and societal norms, the artists represented by Hunna/ هُنْ are developing cutting edge visual languages and research that challenge expectations and stereotypes. If starting online has allowed it to showcase art without any restrictions, the gallery's upcoming exhibitions will test both the audience and its reactions.

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Hunna/ هُنْ only represents women artists. This was

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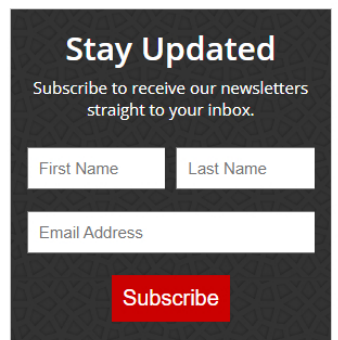
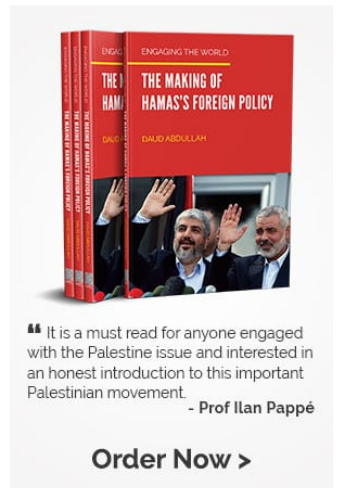
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not planned. "When I started drafting lists of artists I wanted to work with, they were mostly women," said Saily. "It was women artists' work that interested me, mostly because of their unique visual languages and the topics they explored. A lot of them were the unseen and un-thought."

Only later did she envision a gallery of women artists, encouraged in this decision by the artists themselves who were longing for a space to support each other. The first feedback and sales vindicated the decision. "Most of our customers are women collecting art for the first time, because the works spoke to them in an intimate way, and they identified with the artists and their stories."

However, Saily steers away from the label *women's art*. "If you look at the work of these artists, their research and practices, you can only be astonished by the variety and depth. It was important to show it in a global art world that is still male-dominated." In this regard, she has found that local art scenes in the Gulf are much less unequal in terms of gender, compared with the West, because many artists, gallery administrators and directors of institution are women.

In the style of the great gallerists of the past, Saily decided to establish nurtured relationships with her artists, rather than purely commercial links. She and the artists speak with each other weekly.





"We are always in contact. I try to share with them any open calls for projects to make sure they can catch relevant opportunities while focusing on their work. We also talk a lot about their practices and doubts. It is very crucial. As gallerists, we need to accompany artists on their journey, encouraging them to take risks and explore."

Born and bred in France, Océane Saily's first encounters with West Asian and North African (WANA) culture were through literature and visual art, which she studied at university. She was especially attracted by the work of artists who were tackling the questions of identity, racism, integration and socio-economic issues.

"These artists were developing new visual languages while revealing issues in our society that were usually overlooked or silenced," she told me. "It demonstrated that art is a powerful way to create counter-narratives, a space for resistance and reflexion."

Her knowledge of WANA contemporary art deepened as she worked as an assistant to visual artist Majida Khattari, an artist who tackles the questions of orientalism, the western gaze and the representation of women both in the West and in her country of origin, Morocco. "Working with her really helped me reconsider the representation of 'the Other' and the political use and consequences of this representation, thoughts that were furthered by reading critical thinkers."

Her interest was drawn later to the UAE for its emergence as a cultural hub. She travelled there to meet with artists, curators and gallerists, and then wrote about contemporary art in the Emirates at a time when it was quite unknown in France. "It was a starting point which led to working for the Emirati-French cultural programme and, ultimately, to Hunna/هُنَّا"

When asked about how her experiences signalled the need for an independent initiative, Saily replied: "Back in 2016-2017, the UAE art ecosystem was already well structured. Yet, three things were missing to support emerging artists: independent spaces for artists' collective work; constructive criticism about their work and practices; and a link between their institutional support and their representation in the market. The UAE cultural policies were crucial in supporting the artists, but there was a missing link with the local galleries that mostly represented foreign artists." While the situation has already evolved a lot, she decided that her contribution would be Hunna/هُنَّا.

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While she has lived for the past three years in the Gulf and, before that, travelled a lot to the area for her research and work, as a French woman Saily remains very aware of the orientalist gaze. "I have discussed it a lot with the artists represented by Hunna/هُنَّا and the issue of orientalism — as well cultural imperialism — is quite central to my academic research and professional practice. I have been staying with my friends who are Bahrainis, Emiratis, Kuwaitis, Qataris or Saudis, or from the WANA region but based in the Gulf. Sharing their daily lives, staying with their families, travelling or working with some of them has broken down any possibility of a monolithic or stereotyped vision of the region."

Saily pointed out that Hunna/هُنَّا is not a gallery that was created to target a Western audience specifically, but the international exposure for the artists could help to bridge a gap and create better representation for them. For this reason, she implements a horizontal way of working with the artists. "I am bringing in my experience and network, but I am not interfering in the artists' practices and every decision for the gallery is discussed between us."

It's important to note that the artists represented by Hunna/هُنَّا are from the same generation as Saily herself. "Each one of us had a different upbringing, stories, experiences and struggles, but we have also a lot in common because we are millennials, women from the internet generation, living in an interconnected world, and we share a vision."

Saily is working on several exhibitions for 2022 and the opening of a permanent space that will be announced in the coming months. With this, she hopes to expand the gallery's work, reaching new audiences and continuing to defend and diffuse the artists' work, regionally and internationally.

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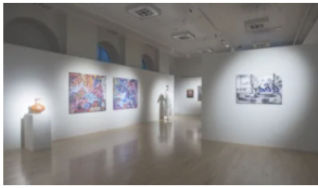
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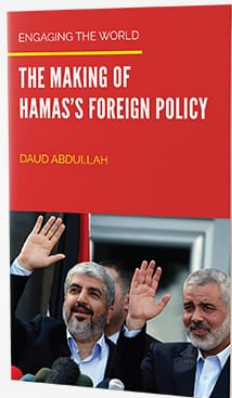


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