

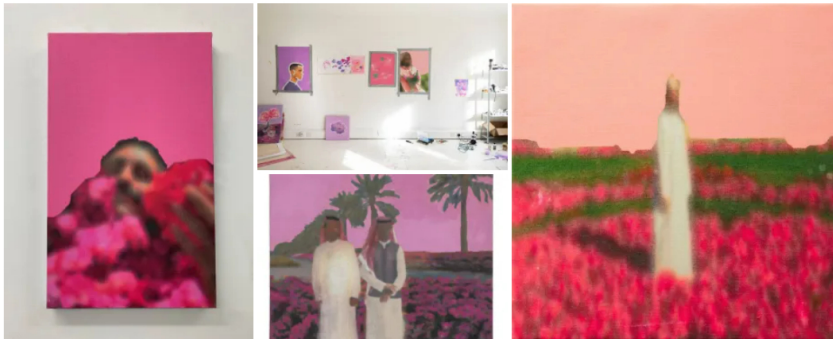
Saudi artist Hawazin Alotaibi rethinks gender norms and masculinity in the Gulf

Alotaibi doesn't sheer away from using image distortion and experimental printing processes in order to create portrayals of male figures that contend with evolving conceptions of Arab masculinity

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At last year's "Fingerprints of a Lover" show held in Berlin's Backhaus Projects space, there was one canvas that stood out. It was a calming and beautiful painting of two Arab men, standing in front of a luscious bush of magenta flowers, with palm trees in the background, and a flamingo pink sky.

The effect of the artwork was for viewers to become myopic all of a sudden. The two men in the painting were indeed out of focus, their facial features were indistinguishable. However, from their poses — relaxed and slightly coy — one could get a hint of their personalities.

The painting was "Nakhlah" by the emerging Saudi American artist Hawazin Alotaibi, currently based in Brixton, London. An interdisciplinary soul, the artist uses both sourced imagery and personal memorabilia, remixing these different sources like a composer or a DJ. The subjects of her visual remixes are the notion of masculinity and the self-representation of men in the Arab world.

Alotaibi doesn't sheer away from using image distortion and experimental printing processes in order to create portrayals of male figures that contend with evolving conceptions of Arab masculinity. Living at a time of a cultural opening up of her native country Saudi Arabia, and a massive mentality shift for younger generations of Saudi citizens — both female and male — she couldn't help but capture the idea of gender norms in a contemporary and unique way.

To understand what makes Alotaibi's paintings different, we need to bear in mind that, generally speaking, in Western art women have been referenced over and over again as the paradigm of beauty, mostly by male artists. Women are the object of admiration, rather than the subject performing admirable acts.

While the discourse of the female gaze is already quite difficult to tackle in the Western art world, transposing this relatively new outlook to the burgeoning middle eastern contemporary art scene is even harder. For a start, we know that traditional Islamic art tends to be iconoclastic and the representation of the body is mostly reserved for contemporary artists. Alotaibi herself recounts that growing up in Saudi Arabia she was discouraged from drawing faces. Of course, in contemporary art, there are many Arab women artists representing the human figure, but they tend to refer to the censoring of women's bodies in conservative societies.

Alotaibi takes the opposite approach, by reclaiming her own gaze as a woman. It's the female gaze at its finest, a womanly way of looking at what's around, rather than concentrating on her own body. Indeed, the artist decided to look at men with an interested and curious stare, looking at what's soft, vulnerable and beautiful about them. We know that these are features that are classically associated with women, but the artist points out that we might find them in the opposite sex too. In her paintings, she emphasises these traits by putting the figures among flowers.

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Hawazin Alotaibi, an emerging Saudi American artist, based in Brixton, London [Phoebe Wingrove/An Effort Art 2]

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This is seen in "Softboi", where a lean, blurred figure in traditional clothes is standing in a field of magenta flowers against, once again, a rosy sky. The figure and the flowers are elongated, reminiscent of Francis Bacon's work. However, while Bacon used his distortions to represent nightmares, Alotaibi's technique depicts dreams. This is no snarky approach, or sardonic; there's no satire in her attitude, and even the title of her series — "Softies" — is more in the realm of tenderness and playfulness

than mockery.

The artist developed this particular approach when studying in the West, like the majority of the new generation of Saudi artists; in this way they experience the perks of living across different cultures. By studying painting at the University of the Arts London and the Royal College of Art, she was able to look at her upbringing with a bit of distance, while never abandoning her identity as a Saudi woman.

In fact, she didn't take on a Western perspective uncritically. She moved away just as radically from stereotypical Orientalist aesthetics. She recounts having some tutors asking her to represent Middle Eastern tropes, like camels and deserts, something she clearly wasn't keen to take on as her subjects.

Looking back on her upbringing in Saudi Arabia — a country that, at the time of her childhood, didn't show any sign of opening up to the outside world — she was able to revisit with a critical approach the pamphlets she received in school that described how girls should behave, being modest in their dressing, and sweet and delicate in their behaviour and language.

The artist herself observed how gender norms in her own region are changing with the younger generations, mostly due to social media. She has seen that there are a number of images of Saudi men self-fashioning and representing themselves in ways that would be unthinkable just ten years ago.

Indeed, the men in her paintings are represented without any rigidity or imposing attitude; instead they have a dreamy quality to them. This emerges from a work where her subject, pasted on a sky-blue background, is placed between hydrangeas and receiving flowers from a dove.

So, while Alotaibi has declared that she suffered from heavy gender conditioning in her native country, today she doesn't seem to be resentful about it. What the artist is doing in practice is dissolving the tension created by a patriarchal upbringing, and getting us close to a different and new kind of beauty, one that simply wasn't visible before.

It's safe to say that her attitude, her unique artistic examination of gender, and the visual quality of her work, all make Hawazin Alotaibi one of the most original voices in the contemporary art landscape. She is capturing the shifting cultural and political dynamics in the Gulf.

The views expressed in this article belong to the author and do not necessarily reflect the editorial policy of Middle East Monitor.

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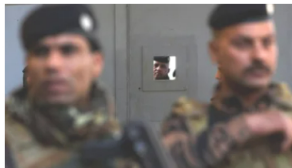
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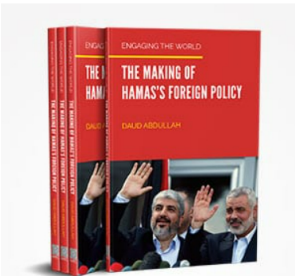
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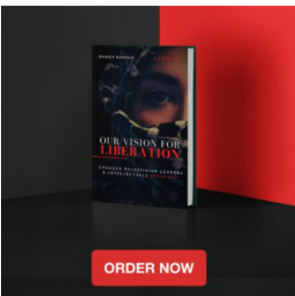
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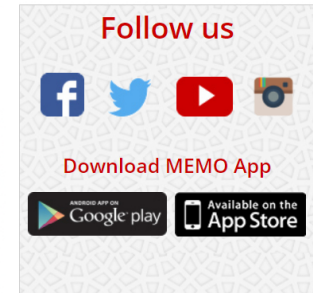
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