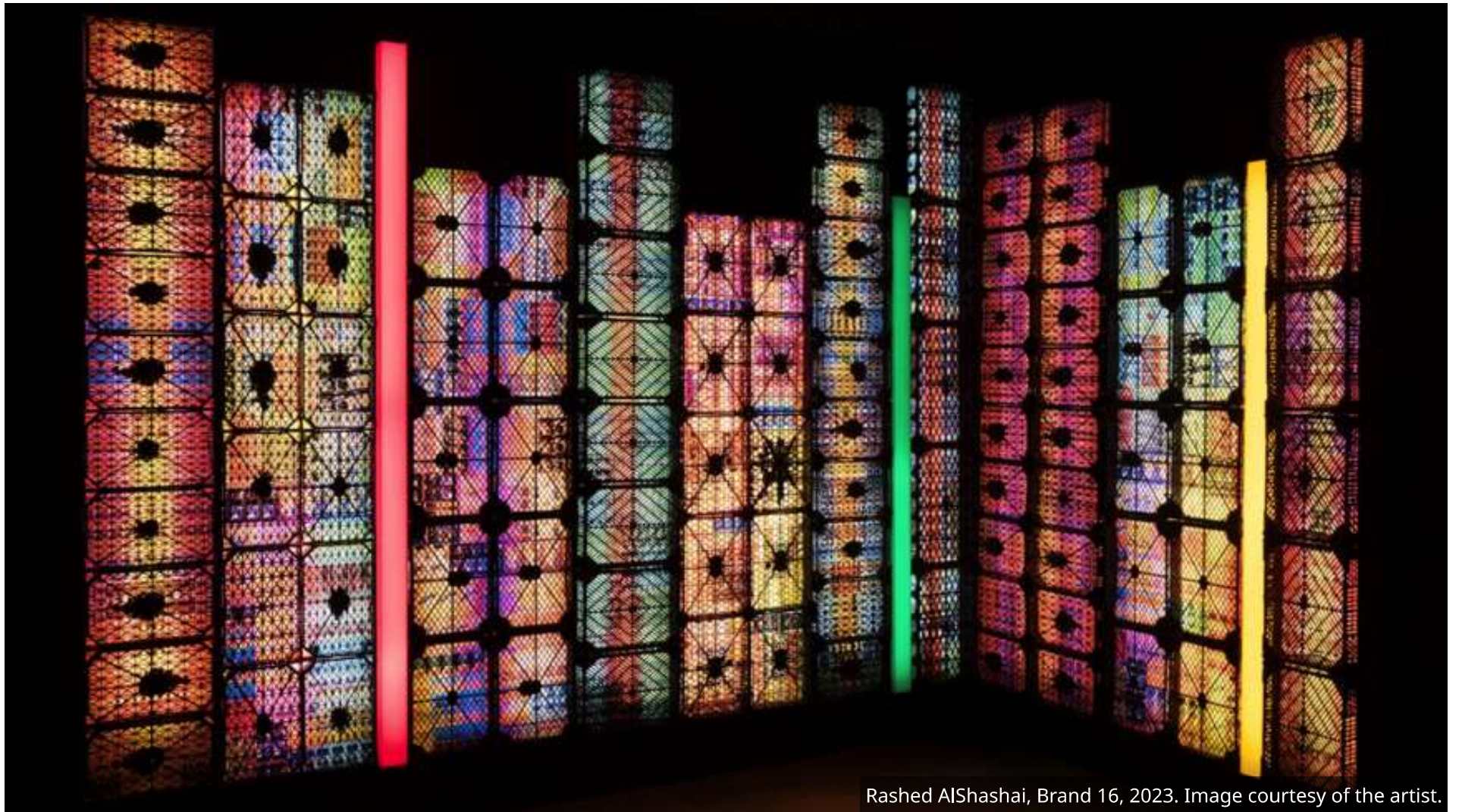


Saudi Arabia sets art ambitions with Noor Riyadh Festival

A tour of this year's Noor Riyadh Festival sheds light on Saudi Arabia's ambition to become a cultural hub and, consequently, a tourism hub in the region.



Rashed AlShashai, Brand 16, 2023. Image courtesy of the artist.

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RIYADH, Saudi Arabia — Standing in the middle of the King Abdullah Financial District (KAJD) in [Riyadh](#), a swarm of drones creates delicate constellations on the horizon. A virtuoso is playing the piano on a stage, complementing the 3,000-drone performance conceived by Studio Drift — an artist duo formed by Dutch artists Lonneke Gordijn and Ralph Nauta — called “Desert Swarm.”

The scene invokes the term “future shock,” which was coined by American writer and futurologist Alvin Toffler. It describes the strong psychological disturbance caused by the super-rapid growth of industrial societies.

The drone show is part of the opening ceremony of the biggest light art festival in the world, Noor Riyadh, now in its third edition. Comprised of large-scale light art, building projections, performances, talks, workshops, tours and experiences, the festival tries to have something for everyone from the art aficionado to families and invites the local community to appreciate contemporary art and make it part of their lives.

Noor Riyadh is just one project under the bigger umbrella of Riyadh Art, an initiative launched in 2019 by King Salman meant to transform the Saudi capital into an open art exhibition.

However, despite the success of this 2023 edition — adding six new Guinness World Records to previous years' achievements — the festival is conceived more as a huge entertainment machine rather than as something meant to slowly grow Saudi sensitivities and appreciation of art.

“Overall, the festival has also launched the most drones in a week,” Shareena Ali, a press officer for Noor Riyadh, said with some satisfaction, confirming to Al-Monitor that it's all about scale and aspiration.

Why would the Saudis go as far as to re-create the stars and their positions in the universe? “Because art is about creative possibilities,” said French curator Jerome Sans at a press conference for the opening of Noor Riyadh at the JAX District. “Because they can,” many in the Western world would echo. Because they have the money needed to materialize the biggest dreams.

Some of these big-scale dreams were also conjured up by artists and curators in the West but never came to fruition because of the lack of funding intrinsic to the art world.



DRIFT, Desert Swarm, 2023. (Image courtesy the artist and HAVAS. Photo © Noor Riyadh 2023, a Riyadh Art Program)

“Light is a unifying force in these times of progress-induced isolation,” director of the Riyadh Art project Nouf al-Moneef told Al-Monitor. She worked together with a blend of international and local curators, including Sans, Pedro Alonzo, Fahad Bin Naif and Alaa Tarabzouni, to create this edition of the festival under the theme “The Bright Side of the Desert Moon.”

Artworks are displayed across five main hubs scattered around different parts of Riyadh, including the KAFD, JAX District, Salam Park and Wadi Namar.

A festival for the community

We know that Saudi society has been changing at an ever-increasing rate since Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman introduced a new social reform plan called Vision 2030, funding an [art scene](#) in partnership with the private sector to create cultural infrastructure — a plan that is bound to extend and expand over the coming decade. Riyadh in this sense is in the eye of the storm, and Noor Riyadh is clear evidence of the success of this plan.

The drone performance at the KAFD finishes and the DJ takes the floor again. Photographers are everywhere. “It’s like a red carpet,” says one journalist, a bit flattered. “And I love a good party!”

The festival is quite packed; it’s rare to see so many people walking around the habitually deserted streets of the capital city. After all, Riyadh’s young and rapidly growing population of more than 7 million residents craves to be entertained, and art seems to be serving precisely this purpose.

Families take selfies in the artwork with mirrors and spend time with aesthetic video projections. More lighted installations — one made of rearview mirrors and another consisting in an abstract projection on the floor of courtyards — are scattered around the city center.

The community element of Noor Riyadh is also central in another spot of the festival, specifically in Salam Park where Saudi families usually hang out. Here, several works are completely fun-oriented and meant especially for

children, such as the room acting as a mini-funhouse where you'd get in and experience a series of projections on the wall, reverberated by the mirror floor and ceiling.

In between palms are some tubular hairy shapes in neon colors lit up from the inside, alongside inflatables and other amusement park-style artwork. The kids love it, as it encapsulates the aim of the festival to cater to everyday people.

JAX District

Riyadh is on a 10-year mission to become one of the world's most livable and [competitive cities](#), as well as becoming a global arts hub, following in Dubai's footsteps. Events like Noor allow the Saudi capital to quickly gather the necessary momentum to make this happen, in terms of getting the art world's attention, with big art events coming at a fast-paced succession.

Noor Riyadh's main show — which runs until March 2 — takes place in the JAX District, which is a cluster of art galleries and studios. The main show is curated by Neville Wakefield and Maya Al Athel. It is themed around mythology, astrophysics and the properties of light, and features more than 30 artists working across light, art and technology.



Tobias Rehberger, Lost to Find, 2023. (Image courtesy the artist and HAVAS. Photo © Noor Riyadh 2023, a Riyadh Art Program)

Some works are simple but scenic installations, like a net with a light inside projecting shadows on the surrounding walls. Another room is completely dark, with only one rock with a rotating lantern suspended on top of it — an image of the beginning of times, evoking the platonic caves.

Some video works, such as "The Swarm" by Emirati photographer Farah al-Qasimi, warning about the dangers of social media, were a bit lost in a festival that isn't very reflective but is more about the "cool factor."

One artwork achieving that result is a performance in a dark room with three barely lit drummers in their ghutras — traditional, white Emirati headdresses. It looks like an image from some music video clip evoking Gulf futurism — a current that takes traditional elements of local culture and revisits them in a futuristic aesthetic.

Besides the main show in the JAX District, several works of art are showcased in artists' studios. There is also a big projection of a slow-motion, silent wave on the side of a warehouse, and some more minimalist works like the neon installation by German artist Carsten Holler called "Decimal Clock."

Another studio presents a mirror that encourages the spectator to "leave one's fear" behind, to then guide the visitor into a second room full of inspirational fluorescent quotes and poetic phrases such as "You dream of a better day, alone with the moon," and "The light inside yourself."

One of the most mesmerizing works in the JAX District is "Absent Sky" by Muhannad Shono, the artist who represented Saudi Arabia at the last Venice Biennale. It consists of a room with super-white, lighted walls and, in contrast, a black, dark-moving matter on the ceiling simulating heavy clouds.

I ended my visit to the JAX District at the studio of another of Saudi Arabia's most acclaimed artists, Ahmed Mater, who was hosting a party. In the middle of the evening, a sudden clamor occurred. Moneef stands on the stairs with teary eyes, announcing that Riyadh has won the 2030 World EXPO.

The fact that Saudi Arabia will host the [2030 World Expo](#) is significant because it represents another chance to change the purview of the West on the country and its culture. Riyadh was competing for the 2030 World Expo against Rome and South Korea's Busan, and its candidacy was endorsed by delegates from 119 countries during a ballot organized by the Bureau International des Expositions, the Paris-based organization that oversees world expos.

A risk worth taking

The most significant part of the Noor Riyadh Festival is at Wadi Namar.

The location itself is quite suggestive, being it is a natural valley just near an elevated super highway, where Saudi families usually go picnicking.

Works of art are placed scenically in the landscape, including a piece by Indian artist Shilpa Gupta that says "We change each other" in three different languages, and a big perforated installation — with abstract shapes reminiscent of animals and natural elements — that projects shadows onto the viewers.

There are other rooms built here and [there in the wild](#) — either small containers, or big square rooms made of tents — encouraging visitors to slow down and relax. Perhaps the most suggestive work of the entire festival is in one of these rooms by an artist collective called Random International studio, consisting of the duo Hannes Koch and Florian Ortkrass. Their work is called "Living Room."

You enter a dark room that would gradually be lit by thick columns of lights originating from both the ceiling and the ground. By walking through the light columns, you experience an eerie sensation of being in a suspended space with no coordinates. Then slowly the room goes darker, then light up again, to an even more wondrous effect of losing a sense of space. The play of lights gives you the intimate feeling of having accessed a new dimension inside yourself. This work, alongside others at Wadi Namar, represented a much-needed meditative break from the party vibe of Noor.

"Noor Riyadh 2023 has not only illuminated our city but also our hearts and minds," said Khaled al-Hazani, executive director of Riyadh Art, at the end of the press conference. "We look forward to the continuous enrichment of Riyadh's art and culture landscape."

This edition of Noor Riyadh saw flocks of visitors from abroad and residents of Saudi Arabia's capital city joining in, indicating that contemporary art in Saudi Arabia is striving to get closer to the local community. The potential for a future shock — culturally speaking — given the fast-paced change, seems to be a risk that Riyadh is happy to take.

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