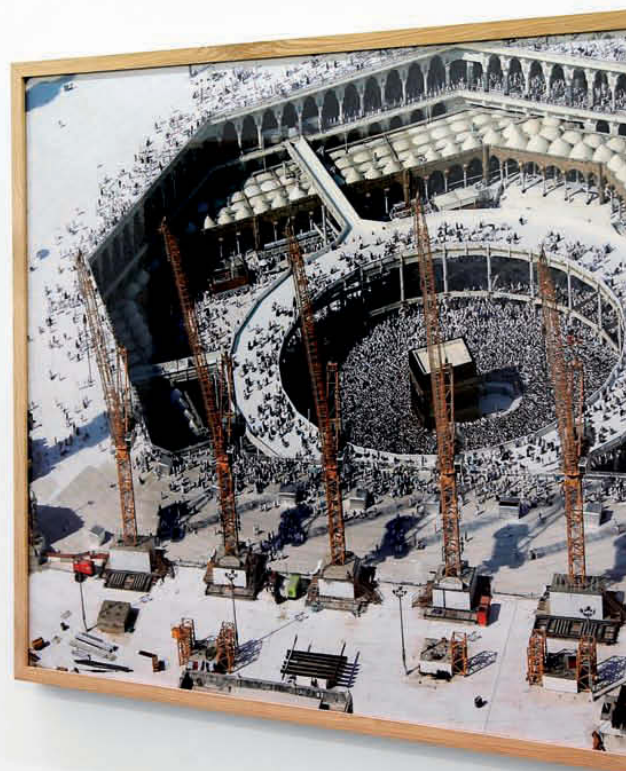


# SPHERES *of* INFLUENCE

*Last month, Tehran's Mohsen Gallery staged the first group exhibition on Arab art in the country. **Tahereh Sariban** headed to Tehran to survey the works on show*



For as long as anybody can remember in this region, relations between Arab nations and Iran have been complicated. When they are not political, they are socio-cultural. When they are not territorial, they are religious. As is unfortunately too often true between close neighbors, the Arab-Iranian relationship has been characterised by deadlocks, dead-ends and various other demises. In the field of visual arts, the landscape looks like a one-way street: the past decade has seen many an Iranian artist accessing Arab audiences and international markets by way of Arab platforms, with contemporary Arab art remaining largely unnoticed in Iran.

But times are changing. “Iran is opening up” is the new catchphrase, and that gets a lot of people thinking. Including Ehsan Rasoulof, Founder of Tehran’s Mohsen Gallery, who saw the current juncture as an opportunity to take stock of “the relationship” and offer his gallery as a platform to define a new and better relation, one highlighting similarities and shared experiences to create dialogue and connections. *Spheres of Influence* opened in April in Tehran at Mohsen Gallery, the first group exhibition of Arab artists in Iran’s history. Curated by Lila Nazemian, the show explores, through the medium of photography, the oppressiveness and alienation that emanates from spaces built without the human in mind. From inside Iran, the commentary extends to the Arab-Iran relationship, and the spaces of overlap—spaces of hilarious absurdity, spaces of chaos, contradiction or outright conflict and spaces where human beings are obliterated by the crushing might of established structures of power. Drawing on the practice of five Arab artists, Nazemian’s selection of artworks reflects an ongoing number of double takes on the word “space” as both a physical and metaphysical place. The documentary-style photography depicts actual places in the Middle East, which in turn tell the story of a present-day transformation (whether construction or destruction); it then spurs a reflection on the wider socio-cultural impacts occurring as a result.

The celebrated Saudi artist Ahmad Mater exhibits *Desert of Pharan*, an ongoing project documenting the rapid construction around Mecca’s Holy Shrine and the resulting awkward redefinition of the private space. Mater’s aerial shots exacerbate the loss of human scale this outward-focused construction has wrought and the bizarre social constructs created in the process of profit-guided urban development. Tall and towering, the cranes and the concrete are larger than life, reducing human forms and the religious element to specks in the landscape. In *Stand in Pathway and See*, Mecca’s old town of humble bricks and two-storey houses can be felt to be retreating from the shiny epicentre of the shrine, pushed by the greedy weight of a new luxury hotel development. Watching from the shadows is a non-descript figure, the human refuse of a violent and alien urban invasion

of the private space. The Kuwaiti artists Tarek Al-Ghoussein and Al-Sawaber share a similar reflection on the power of placement and displacement held by structures of authority, and the resulting obliteration of personal stories. In *K Files*, Al-Ghoussein documents how, in the recent modernisation of Kuwait’s public infrastructure, meaningful public spaces have been being cast aside along with the human life they used to contain. Like Mater, Al-Ghoussein’s camera snaps deserted public spaces, recording the magnitude of their emptiness—physical, emotional and spiritual. Al-Sawaber’s lens is more nostalgic, capturing residents’ left-behind items in a housing complex scheduled for demolition. In two short videos from the project *Never Never Land*, the Saudi artist Al Neami turns inconspicuous imagery from daily life in Saudi Arabia into a commentary on the grotesque nature of gender issues. In *The Ashes* series, Wafaa Bilal presents a series of photographs of miniature model buildings destroyed by war and sprinkled with real human ashes. The *Ashes* series is immediately ascribable to Iraq and Bilal engages the viewer, desensitised by years of media coverage, to rethink the words “bombardment” and “rubble.” His close-up shots of material destruction pose the question: when we lose our ability to empathise with human loss, what is it exactly that is being destroyed? “By turning the private into an image for the public to see, I hope these images will enter human consciousness and function as a symbolic reminder of the engine of oppression in human and cultural conflict,” says Bilal. Alienation isn’t just felt in public places. In the *Majlis* series, Lamyia Gargash explores how spatial organisation is used to divide the self from the other within the confines of traditional Emirati homes. Her photographs posit the plush, sunken cushions and warm grounded feel of the tribal den against the stiff sofas and sharp glass tables of the parlor reserved for outside guests.

Mater’s cold cranes say it all: in the human rush to build, it is often barriers that are erected first, pulverising human intention and human rapport. *Spheres of Influence* takes stock of those barriers and in so doing, offers an avenue for rethinking the Iran-Arab relationship around an idea of sameness—not the divisive sameness of neighbours sharing a region and a religion, but the sameness of a hectic journey through life, society and politics peppered by humour, controversy and satire. ■



An installation view of *Spheres of Influence*. From left: Ahmed Mater’s 2013 *Abraj Al Beit Tower* and his 2012 Untitled work. Both: Digital Archival Print on Hahnemuhle Photo Rag Paper. Courtesy of the artist