

عبد الناصر غارم

ABDULNASSER  
GHAREM

8 OCT – 8 NOV 2013

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The artist in Riyadh, 2013

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ayyam gallery

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EDGE OF ARABIA

in partnership with  
Ayyam Gallery





Still from Riyadh Book Fair, 2013

Video





Detail from *Flora and Fauna*, 2013

# A SAUDI ARABIAN TRICKSTER

by Henry Hemming

A version of this text first appeared in *Masquerade* magazine.

They stand in line, unaware that they are being filmed. To begin with these men look alike in their regimented white *thobes* and the effect, as you can imagine, is impressive. We are hard-wired to be impressed or afraid by the sight of a near uniform group acting as one. Yet look a little closer at this group, part of a video installation in the London exhibition of Saudi artist Abdulnasser Gharem, his first solo show outside the Gulf, and an alternative picture will emerge. As the video develops it ceases to be a portrait of unthinking unity but of endless and endlessly subtle variations. The men are of different heights and ages, some of them boys not much older than ten, others not actually in *thobes*, there are those too old to kneel when required while no two beards or moustaches are alike. But it is in the *keffiyehs* that you see the most detailed intersection of tribal and individual identities with the setting, and in this case the setting is key. The men lined up in prayer are at the Riyadh Book Fair which despite its prosaic-sounding name has become one of the most controversial and tense cultural events anywhere in Saudi Arabia.

‘Everyone is just waiting for something to happen,’ explains Gharem. ‘The book fair is now like a cultural war, which for me is interesting. In my country you have two kinds of ignorance. The first is holy ignorance when everyone follows what the holy men say. The second is an established ignorance. This is when people have just one way of thinking. Books can change this.’

Gharem is not out to make a partisan point. ‘I’m not on one side. I’m a witness.’ As with so much of his *oeuvre* he engages with modern Saudi history and the politics of now to present what he calls ‘an unofficial history’, the leitmotif of his exhibition in London.

His piece ‘Riyadh Book Fair’ is typical of Gharem’s new direction. He has found a position at the cutting edge of the accelerating cultural evolution within Saudi Arabia and now collaborates with groups like the Saudi comedy collective Telfaz11. Together they set up earlier this year the Amen Art Foundation. For many young creatives in Saudi Arabia he remains a pioneer, and much of that is down to the struggle he has endured over the years, one which helped to open up the Saudi art scene.

Gharem first came to the world’s attention in 2011 when his sculptural installation *Message/Messenger* sold at Christie’s Dubai for \$842,500 (including the buyer’s premium), one of the highest prices paid for a work of art by a living Arab artist. From a distance this represented one man’s sudden arrival. Yet for Gharem it was no more than a milestone after a decade of producing art.

With no formal training—there are no art colleges in Saudi Arabia—Gharem spent the years after his military training learning about art in his spare time. By the late 1990s he began to order in as many art books as he could afford and otherwise scoured the embryonic Internet for more information. He taught himself English and produced and occasionally exhibited ground-breaking work alongside a handful of other young Saudi artists such as Ahmed Mater and the poet Ashraf Fayadh.

Yet the problem they faced was one which remains in Saudi Arabia to this day, albeit reduced. Every work put on display requires a complex negotiation between what the artist is after, what his family might think, how it could reflect upon his tribe and what is acceptable at that historical moment in the eyes of the Ministry of Culture and Information and the local religious police. These worries even followed Gharem abroad when in 2008 he was selected to take part in the first Edge of Arabia exhibition in the Brunei Gallery in London’s School of African and Oriental Studies.

In the days before the show opened Gharem had various works removed. Part of his response was to produce an over-sized wooden stamp emblazoned with the words

‘Have a Bit of Commitment’ and to fly out to London and use this to stamp the walls of the gallery, thus authorizing everything in the show.

Here is another refrain which plays out through his work. His London solo show will contain a series of three enormous hand-carved stamps made by Moroccan craftsmen, each one a direct descendant of that original stamp. There will also be stamp prints on paper such as ‘The Stamp (Amen)’, ‘The Stamp (Inshallah)’ and ‘The Stamp (Moujaz)’, and in each Gharem challenges our notions of formal bureaucratic approval, the power that goes with a stamp and to what ends these objects are used. The last of these pieces is also timely.

‘In Arabic ‘Moujaz’ means ‘in accordance with Sharia law’,’ he goes on. ‘Many Saudi banks use this slogan to bring in new customers. People want their bank to be approved by Sharia. But recently some of these banks were exposed for breaking the rules. They were not sharia.’ Over the summer of 2013, when the twitter hashtag #مايكفي\_الراتب\_حاجة took off (it translates roughly as #salaryisnotenough), generating millions of tweets and becoming an outlet for frustrated Saudi youth, these banks and their use of the word ‘Moujaz’ became a target.

Perhaps the most poignant work in this new exhibition is ‘Manzoa’, part of an ongoing series which followed a chance encounter with a group of impoverished local fishermen. They had been bought out of their homes by the government but had since spent the money on *qat*. Over their houses the word *Manzoa* was daubed, which means ‘to be demolished’. On seeing it, Gharem improvised a performance by painting the same word onto his shirt and moving around this shantytown like a Saudi Arabian trickster. Since then he has documented the lives of these people, seeing them as refugees from their home and from society. ‘You look at the news in Syria,’ he adds, ‘and there you see the same thing. Empty homes, demolished homes, refugees. Really, I want to be a witness to this, to make people look at these things in a new way.’ Again it is the unofficial history which draws him in.



Detail from *The Stamp – Moujaz*, 2013

## PLATES 1 THE STAMP

The Stamp – Moujaz

The Stamp – Inshallah

The Stamp – Amen

Each day in Saudi Arabia thousands of stamps are slammed down onto a mosaic of official papers by bureaucrats, officials, policemen and soldiers, and together they articulate an unconscious and collective imprimatur. They spell out what is acceptable, or which is the 'right path'. As Gharem explains, 'with The Stamp I declare Inshallah, Amen, Moujaz and Have a Bit of Commitment: have a bit more intellectual rigour, more bravery, more faith in your convictions. In committing to this action, I become my own authority, and the controller of my own destiny.'





Detail from *The Stamp* – Moujaz, 2013



*The Stamp – Moujaz, 2013*

Hand Carved oversized wooden stamp with embossed rubber face. Handle 95 cm & stamp 95 cm circumference and 18 cm deep



*The Stamp – Moujaz, 2013*

Silk-screen print with 2 colours and 2 glazes on 410 gsm Somerset Tub paper  
Edition of 25



*The Stamp – Inshallah, 2012*  
Silk-screen print with 4 colours and 2 glazes  
on 410 gsm Somerset Tub paper  
Edition of 25



*The Stamp – Inshallah, 2013*  
Oversized wooden stamp with embossed  
rubber face. Handle 95 cm & stamp 95 cm  
circumference and 18 cm deep





*The Stamp – Amen, 2012*

Silk-screen print with 4 colours and 2 glazes  
on 410 gsm Somerset Tub paper  
Edition of 25



*The Stamp – Amen, 2013*

Oversized wooden stamp with embossed rubber face.  
Handle 95 cm & stamp 95 cm circumference and 18 cm deep  
Variation of 8



Detail from *Camouflage*, 2013

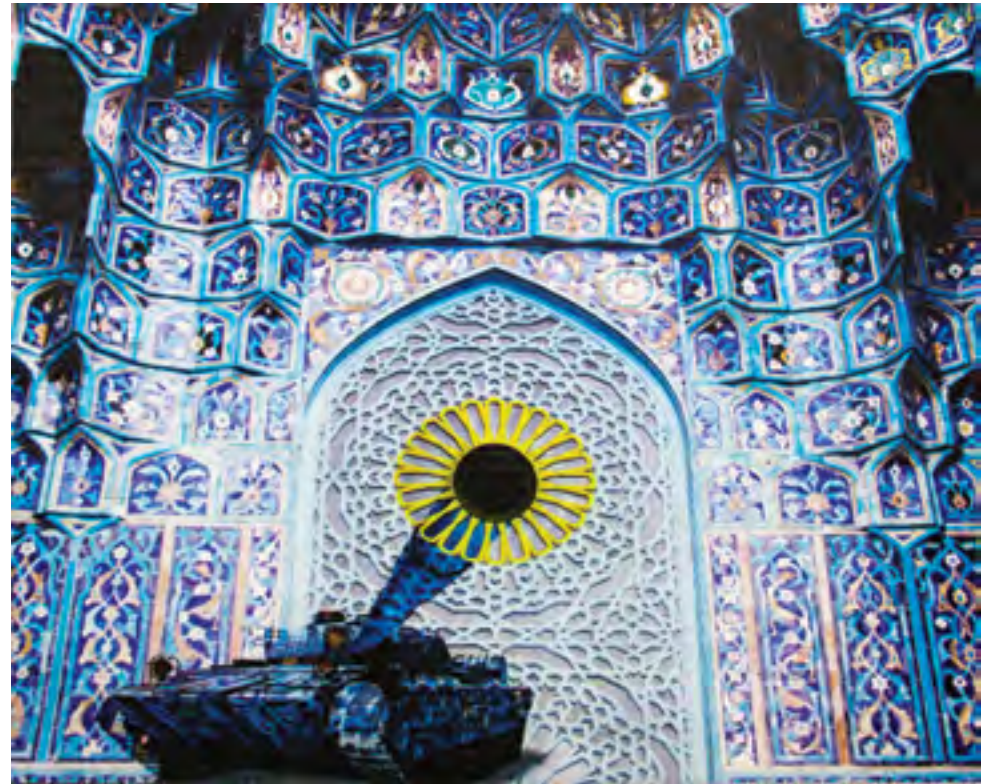
## PLATES 2 STAMP PAINTINGS & SCULPTURES

Hemisphere  
Camouflage  
In Transit – Fighter  
Concrete – Mocárabe  
Road to Makkah



*Hemisphere, 2013*

Rubber stamps, digital print and paint  
on 9 mm Indonesian Plywood board



*Camouflage, 2013*

Rubber stamps, digital print and paint  
on 9 mm Indonesian Plywood board





Detail from *Camouflage*, 2013





*In Transit - Fighter, 2013*

Rubber stamps, digital print and paint  
on 9 mm Indonesian Plywood board



*Concrete - Mocárabe, 2013*

Rubber stamps, digital print and paint  
on 9 mm Indonesian Plywood board





*Concrete Block (Red & White), 2013*

Rubber stamps, digital print and paint  
on 9 mm Indonesian Plywood board





Road to Makkah V, 2013

Rubber stamps, digital print and paint  
on 9 mm Indonesian Plywood board



Detail from *Manzoo*, 2013

## PLATES 3 PERFORMANCES

Manzoo

Manzoo – House Number I

Manzoo – House Number II

Flora & Fauna





Manzoa, 2013

Collage





Detail from Manzoa, 2013





Manzoa – House Number I, 2013

Found object collage



Manzoa – House Number II, 2013

Found object collage



*Flora & Fauna*, 2013

Pigment print with silk-screen glaze  
on photorag paper

## FLORA & FAUNA

Soon after Gharem had moved to Khamis Mushait the municipal authority had thousands of *conocarpus erectus* saplings planted down the main streets. They flourished, and, as promised, their leaves remained a vibrant shade of green all year round. But as the *conocarpus erectus* reached maturity a strange thing happened. Nearby cottonwoods, willows and other indigenous trees started to die off. Nobody knew why. The afflicted trees were not too old and there was no evidence of disease.

It turned out that these trees were dying of drought. Most had compact root balls that sought moisture deep in the ground. The *conocarpus erectus* has a different strategy. Its roots shoot out in horizontal veins that keep close to the surface, drinking up water before it can reach the roots below. In short, the balance of the local ecosystem in Abha and Khamis Mushait had been upset by the introduction of these imported trees. Abdunasser Gharem planned to stage a performance that would highlight what had happened.





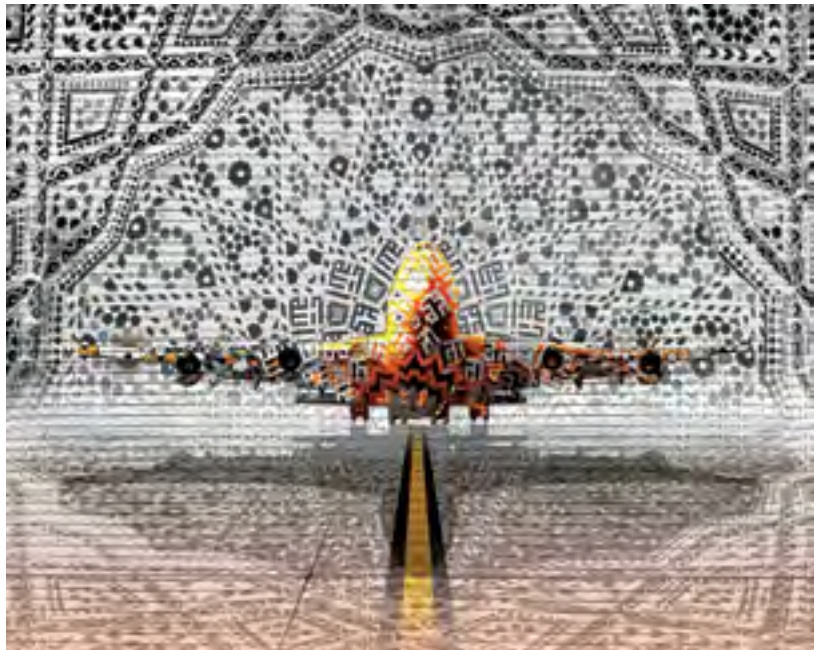
*Flora & Fauna, 2013*  
12 Coriander Digital Prints with silk-screen  
glaze on Photorag paper presented in cloth  
covered solander box



## PLATES 4 EDITIONS

Siraat - The Path  
In Transit  
Men at Work I - IV

Detail from *Siraat - The Path*, 2012



*In Transit*, 2013

Silk-screen print with white diamond dust  
printed in 15 colours and 2 glazes  
on 410 gsm Somerset Tub paper



*Siraat - The Path*, 2012

Silk-screen printed with 16 colours and 2 glazes  
on 410 gsm Somerset Tub paper





*Men at Work I - IV, 2012*

Silk-screen print with 11 colours and 2 glazes  
on 410 gsm Somerset Tub paper,  
soldier applied with diamond dust and collage





