

Akim Monet Fine Arts, LLC



Abdulnasser GHAREM (b. 1973)

The Stamp (Amen)

Silk-screen printed with 3 colours and 2 glazes on 400GSM Somerset Tub paper

59 x 47 in. (149.9 x 119.4 cm)

2012

Signed in graphite in English and Arabic, titled and numbered 10/25

Edition 25, hand printed at Coriander Studios, London

PROVENANCE

Edge of Arabia, London
Private collection, Istanbul

LITERATURE

Edward Booth-Clibborn & Stephen Stapleton, Abdulnasser Ghareem, *Art of Survival*, 2011, United Kingdom, Booth-Clibborn Editions, Illustrated in color, p.12

Canvas magazine, November/December 2011 edition, cover and pp. 116-123

EXHIBITED

Disruptive selection, Fall 2019, Popcorn Gallery Akim Monet Fine Arts, Los Angeles

NOTES

The editor's note regarding the choice of this piece for the cover of Canvas magazine reads: "The cover of our seven-year anniversary issue features *The Stamp (Amen)*, an embossed impression of an oversized rubber stamp by Saudi artist Abdunasser Gharem. In both hope and irony, the stamp's print reads "Have a bit of Commitment" in English and Arabic. The work was chosen for its powerful message, particularly during the region's current tumultuous times. Indeed, we must all have a bit of commitment - and Amen to that."

Source: <http://www.canvas-magazine.com/news/nov-dec-2011/default.htm>



PROFILE

E

arlier this year, in Dubai, a strange thing happened.

A work of art by a Saudi Arabian soldier, who had almost no history of auction sales, fetched \$842,500 at the Christie's Dubai sale of *Modern and Contemporary Arab, Iranian and Turkish Art*. In the space of seven minutes, Lieutenant-Colonel Abdulnasser Gharem of the Saudi Arabian Army became one of the most expensive Arab artists alive.

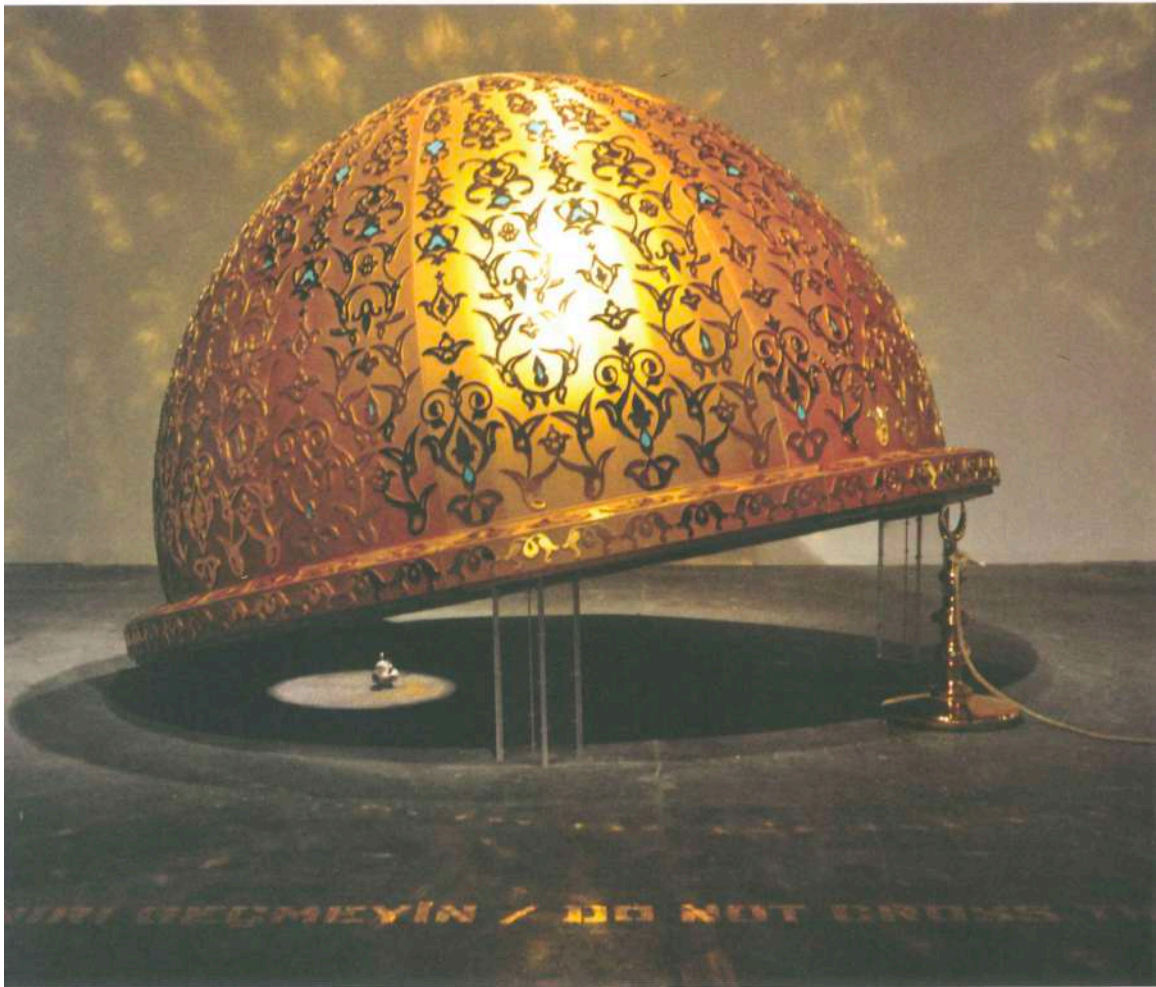
It's safe to say that nobody predicted this. Least of all Gharem. During the days leading up to the sale, he was thinking only about how much money he might lose, having sold his car to finance the construction of this piece, *Message/Messenger*, a sculptural installation dominated by a three-metre-wide golden dome modelled loosely on the Dome of the Rock. Its surface is covered in sprawling Arabesques while the dome is propped up by a *hilal* (crescent) so it resembles a crude animal trap. Beneath this lustrous hemisphere is a taxidermy white dove – not so much the victim, but the bait. The viewer is drawn in by the promise of peace and spiritual salvation, but when you least expect it – BANG! – you are trapped. "But this is not about all organised religion," Gharem explains. He has broad shoulders and amber-coloured eyes, and at 38 is younger than most lieutenant-colonels. "It is about how these structures can be used as a trap."

ONLINE ACCESS

We are in a deserted café in west London. Gharem is in town to inspect the proofs of his forthcoming monograph, *Abdulnasser Gharem: Art of Survival*, published in October 2011 by Booth-Clibborn Editions (page XX). Soon he will head back to Saudi and his life as a senior officer. Following the record-breaking sale of *Message/Messenger*, one would assume he could set aside his military career to concentrate on producing art. But even if he wanted it, this is not an option. On that balmy night in the Gulf, Gharem made almost no money. Along with five other Saudi artists, including Manal Al-Dowayan (*Canvas 2.4*) and Ayman Yossri Daydban, Gharem had agreed to donate the proceeds of this sale to the educational charity Edge of Arabia to help nurture the next generation of Saudi artists and curators. Here we can begin to see the outline of Gharem's artistic

Opening spread: *In Truist II*, 2010. Ink and industrial lacquer print on rubber stamps (on nine-millimetre Indonesian plywood), 160 x 200 cm.

Facing page: *Message/Messenger*, 2010. Installation, 200 x 300 cm. Image courtesy Christie's.



**"I began to see that art could be about society
and that in Saudi Arabia there may be things
you can say as an artist that you cannot
as a journalist."**

117

Canvas magazine, November/December 2011 edition, p. 117

PROFILE

philosophy. "I don't want the next generation to make the mistakes I made. They should have a different experience. When I started, my feeling was that the artist should be detached from society," he explains.

That changed in the late 1990s when Khamis Mushait, the town in southern Saudi Arabia where Gharem continues to live, became connected to the Internet. It was a revelation. Access to the Internet enabled Gharem to transform his perception of the possibilities of artistic expression and the social potential of the artist. Along with four other local artists – including the trainee doctor Ahmed Mater (*Canvas* 7.1)

– Gharem established what was, effectively, a D-I-Y art college. Using information drawn from the Internet and their burgeoning collection of books, the five artists worked through the dominant strategies of Western Contemporary art and on most evenings they ended up at Gharem's house to talk long into the night. "I began to see that art could be about society and that in Saudi Arabia there may be things you can say as an artist that you cannot as a journalist. With my work now I am asking the people to question some of their customs and the way they do things," he explains. "I donated the money from *Message/Messenger* because I don't want the

Not only does his work engage with contemporary social issues, but its development has become intrinsically sociable.



118

Canvas magazine, November/December 2011 edition, p. 118



next generation to take 10 years to get to this stage. We need a new generation of artists like Hala Ali and Sami Al-Turki to ask people to think about what they are doing. With curators and collectors like Abdullah Al-Turki, Fady Jameel, Basma Al-Sulaiman, Hamza Serafi and Mohammed Hafiz, I think it is becoming easier now for Saudi artists to do this. But still, really, it is a challenge. More than most, Ghareem knows just how hard it can be, and what it is like to find yourself on the wrong side of silent disapproval.

FIRST FORAYS

In 2008 Ghareem was due to take part in the first international group exhibition of Contemporary art from Saudi Arabia, called *Edge of Arabia*. It had been organised by Stephen Stapleton and others, and would be held in the Brunei Gallery, part of London's School of African and Oriental Studies. During the previous five years, Ghareem had made a series of interventions in and around Khamis Mushait including *Siraat (The Path)* a piece he put forward for the show. For *Siraat*, Ghareem had travelled to the remains of a road-bridge that had been washed away years before in a flash flood. Tragically, a group of villagers who had taken shelter on this bridge lost their

lives. This story was not reported. Ghareem wanted to document and commemorate what had happened, so he and his helpers sprayed onto the bridge thousands of times the word *siraat*, in Arabic roughly meaning 'the path' or 'the bridge'.

The organisers of *Edge of Arabia* liked the resulting photographs so much they chose to use one on their press release. Unfortunately they made a mistake in their caption. It implied that Ghareem had reproduced a Qur'anic *aya* (verse) on the bridge. He had not. The error was corrected, but the rumour persisted and word soon spread that Ghareem's piece was religiously risqué. The pressure mounted on the curators to remove this piece from the exhibition, in spite of its actual content, and ultimately they acquiesced. "2008 was a bad time," Ghareem explains. "My art was causing me trouble. I was losing money on it. My family was worried. But the most difficult part was that I could not negotiate or have a conversation about this piece."

Ghareem is often at his best in adversity. Having *Siraat* removed from *Edge of Arabia* presented him with the germ of an idea. As an army major, he spent much of his time stamping forms and approving or disapproving applications. In a similar sense, his application to show *Siraat* had been denied. With just a few weeks

Facing page:
Left: *The Stamp (Arwa) II*, 2010.
Rubber on oversized wooden stamp.
95 x 95 x 50 cm. Right: *The Stamp (Arwa)*, 2010. Silkscreen print.
Variable dimensions.

This page: *Flora & Fauna*, 2007.
Photographic print. 60 x 85 cm.



"As an artist, I don't want to be like a philosopher talking about metaphysics ... because the ideas I'm talking about are not abstract. They exist in the real world."

Above: (Detail) Street (The Path), 2007. Photographic print, 110 x 175 cm.

Facing page: Manzoa, 2007. Photographic print, 60 x 85 cm.

All images courtesy the artist and Edge of Arabia.

to go before *Edge of Arabia* opened, Gharem commissioned an oversized replica of a stamp that he used regularly in the military. On its underside he would have the words 'have a bit of commitment' in English and Arabic, followed by 'Amen'. Next he got to work on his first two stamp paintings. He created two beds made up of thousands of rubber stamps, and onto one he stencilled shapes that echoed elements of the road in *Street* and the silhouette of the World Trade Centre.

Both pieces made it to London in time, but the day before the public opening the curators were asked to remove Gharem's stamp paint-

ing showing the World Trade Centre. By now he was in London. When he heard about what had happened, he offered to add a third rectangle to the piece and rename it *Pedestrian Crossing*. It remained in the exhibition, but he was not out of the woods yet. The night before the show opened, Gharem's other contribution to the show mysteriously disappeared. This comprised photographic documentation of his performance *Manzoa*, which had taken place in a partially destroyed slum in southern Saudi Arabia. For some, it seemed that these images might tarnish the nation's reputation. On the opening day the photographs were rescued from a neighbouring installation where they had been hidden. "When I heard about what had happened with *Manzoa*, I was happy," says Gharem. "Really, I knew that this piece had worked. It had created a reaction."

Once the show had been formally opened, Gharem produced his oversized rubber stamp, inked it up, and with the help of two assistants, stamped the walls of the gallery. Gharem had authorised the exhibition. For once, the author of the authorising authority was the artist. Gharem had appropriated the power



of the stamp, and at the same time rendered it absurd with its scale and the message 'have a bit of commitment' followed by 'Amer'.

A TURNING TIDE


Following his artistic nadir during the run-up to *Edge of Arabia*, London, in 2009 Gharem's star was in the ascendant. As well as having his work acquired by the Los Angeles Museum of Contemporary Art, and a joint collection run by the British Museum and the V&A, Gharem began to use elements of the media to challenge the boundaries of what it was possible to display in Saudi Arabia. By having *Siraat* reproduced in newspapers and magazines, and demonstrating the lack of outrage it inspired, the parameters of what one could make or show as a Saudi artist began to shift.

Today he directs his practice towards an open and at times critical dialogue that requires his audience to engage with their surroundings and in particular their religion, bureaucracy and traditions. No longer sequestered in a studio, today Gharem makes regular appearances on television to discuss the ideas behind his

work. He tweets, he posts videos on YouTube and, when developing an idea, he presents images of the proposed work on Facebook in order to gauge reactions from the hundreds of comments that follow. Gharem has become a social artist twice over. Not only does his work engage with contemporary social issues but its development has become intrinsically sociable.

The best example of this is yet to come. His next body of work is entitled *Utopia* and is inspired both by the new 'economic cities' being built across Saudi Arabia and Gharem's reading of Utopian literature, including Plato's *Republic* or Abu Nasr Al-Farabi and later Ibn Khaldun's renderings of *Al-Madinat Al-Fadilah*. "Nowadays in most ministries you see models or maquettes of these new cities," he says, "but most are designed by foreign companies. They are not built on the historical and intellectual foundations of our society. With *Utopia* I will make maquettes of a different ideal city. I am not saying, 'these economic cities are wrong.' Instead I'm presenting a different way of seeing this. I'm doing so in a language that everyone understands, the maquette, then I'm asking people: 'what do you think?'"

The mosque in Gharem's *Utopia* will have a hybrid design: half for the Sunnis; half for the Shi'ites. The palace in *Utopia* will be at the heart of the city next to a public square where people can gather to air grievances or celebrate. Crucially, in this ideal metropolis, important buildings will not be surrounded by concrete barriers. "We must not put our faith in concrete," Gharem says, using one of his favourite maxims. "Believe me, without these barriers, these buildings and the people in them are going to be safer."

As well as a physical maquette, Gharem will produce a three-dimensional virtual *Utopia* that can be explored online. Again, we can see him flattening his means of communication. "As an artist, I don't want to be like a philosopher talking about metaphysics. I must communicate with people through the gallery as well as the computer desktop, the television or the book, because the ideas I'm talking about are not abstract. They exist in the real world." 

For more information visit www.viatraffic.org, www.edgeofarabia.com and www.abdulnassergharem.com