

"Challenging the Politics of Iconoclasm: Reflections, Artists from the Asir and the Subversive Potential of Contemporary Art in Saudi Arabia"

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"Thou shalt not make unto thee any graven image, or any likeness of any thing that is in heaven above or that is in the earth beneath, or that is in the water under earth" (Exodus 20: 3-5)

"Every picture maker will be in Hellfire, every picture they make will be revived by Allah to torment them in Hellfire" (Fatwa No. 2036)

Figure 1: "Magnetism photogravure III", 2012

If the phrasing of the *Exodus* is slightly fancier than that of the recently issued Fatwa No 2036ⁱ, their message is however the same. Iconoclasm has indeed been a cardinal rule in the History of the two monotheists, while Christianity has banned only idolatry. A largely shared definition of iconoclasm is the act of destruction of an idol, 'icon' and 'idol' being conflated into a wider notion of "image, statue or symbol of a false god" (Besançon, 2000: 65). Yet, iconoclasm literally means the breaking (*klastes*) of images (*eikon*) and not of idols as such. Hence, if icons and images share the same etymology, idol, in that it refers to the Divine, has a very different meaning. Because those three notions are widely equated, this essay will thus understand iconoclasm as the destruction of any image.

Noyes' Politics of Iconoclasm' (2013) hold as a premise that the politics of destruction of images has been met by the creation of the modern State. The Saudi-Wahhabi establishment would hence be the product and initiator of Politics of Iconoclasm. Noyes defines the latter as the "relationship between attacks on images, the construction of the visual domination of the State, and the emergence of self-fashioned, charged labels" (Noyes, 2013: 166). Hence, tackling the visual predominance of the established power would presumably adopt the traits of a counter-production of images, as a "new visual vocabulary"(Tripp, 2013: 259). Yet, against this idea of a clash of images, what Latour coined *Iconoclash* (2002), this essay will understand the challenge of power not through the production of *images* but through that of *reflections*.

This paper aims to question the pre-established idea of an intrinsic subversive nature in contemporary art, hence trying to draw a more faithful picture of the current 'state of the arts' in Saudi Arabia. More specifically, this essay will fathom the interconnectedness between artists from the supposedly revolutionary region of Asir, namely Ahmed Mater, Arwa Al-Neami and Abdulnasser Gharem, and the Saudi-Wahhabi apparatus.

This essay will show that Saudi contemporary art seems to be producing *mirrors* reflecting the Saudi society, hence less tangible and less breakable than *images*. Challenging the Politics of Iconoclasm means shifting from a paradigm of representation to that of reflection. By breaking the logics of the rule of images, Asiri artists have deprived the State's discretion to crush them and have decided to accommodate with it rather than frontally confronting it.

ICONOCLASM AS A "UNIFYING VORTEX": THE REJECTION OF MULTIPLICITY

The Saudi-Wahhabi alliance concluded in 1744 between the preacher Muhammad Ibn Abd Al-Wahhab and the Saudi rulers of the Najd sought to establish its authority over a single, continuous territory. This "unifying vortex" (Al-Azmeh, 1993: 106), while it triggered some tangible political implications, found its roots primarily in religion and more specifically in the Islamic notion of *tawhid*, referring to the oneness of God. Hence iconoclasm was a means by which one could "bridg[e] the principles of theological and political unity" (Noyes, 2013:61).

Hence, in his *Kitab al-Tawhid*, Al-Wahhab justified the destruction of Islamic shrines and pagan statues using the very notion of *tawhid*. God being one, no substitute of the Divine could be allowed. Hence, sacred domes were destroyed during the invasions of Mecca and Medina in 1803 and 1805, including that of Fatimah, Muhammad's daughter. It is only because the Prophet's shrine dome was too high that the soldiers renounced destroying it.

Moreover, *tawhid* is in sharp opposition with the idea of the multiplicity of local customs. A particularly telling example is the fate of the Asir region, now known to be the cradle of contemporary art in Saudi Arabia. Considered as the heart of the ancient Arab civilization with Hijaz and Yemen, Asir was part of what the Romans called 'Arabia Felix', for it was the sole area of the arid peninsula that received sufficient rain to allow for the development of civilization and a settled population (Kluijver, 2013: 30). The early State of Asir (1906-1934) was the creation of an Al-Azhar educated Asiri named Muhammed al-Adrisi, who proclaimed himself Imam of Asir in 1908. On the wake of the First World War, Britain was eager to conclude alliances with local tribes, especially since the Imam of Sanaa seemed to be willing to stay faithful to the Sublime Porte. Hence, HMG found a valuable ally in the person of Al-Idrisi, and by 1915, a Treaty of Friendship and Goodwill was signed, making Al-Idrisi the first Arab leader to join the British cause against the Ottomans. Yet at the end of the war, it became clear that Britain would be unable to honour all her pledges. This would effectively lead to the fall of the Idrisi state in the hands of Ibn Saud.

History would hence place the Asiri people on its right side by casting them as victims, if the mountain tribes of Asir were not well known to similarly have embraced Wahhabism. In 1920, Ibn Saud sent its tribal militia *Ikhwan* to relieve the tribes from the Ottoman appointed ruler of the region. It followed a treaty between Al-Idrisi and Ibn Saud over the division of Asir. Yet in 1924, Al-Idrisi died, leaving behind him rivalry among his direct and indirect heirs. Threatened by the Imam of Sanaa to the East and the Sheikh of Mecca to the North, Ibn Saud agreed to offer his protection to Asir against its subsequent absorption within his Kingdom. Further, to prevent a Saudi-Yemeni war over

Asir, Ibn Saud annexed the region in 1930. Saudi historiography still maintains that this was made at the request of Hassan, the then ruler of Asir, but it remains unclear whether this was not the result of an ultimatum set by Riyadh. In 1934, Ibn Saud, by then known as Bismarck of Arabiaⁱⁱ in the Western press, and Imam Yahya of Yemen, signed the treaty of Taif, whereby Asir was finally fully incorporated into the modern Saudi state.

Hence, it is difficult to assess whether Asir was genuinely representative of the multiplicity the Saudi-Wahhabi establishment loathed. Indeed, most travellers' accounts of the rule of Al-Idrisi depicted a strongly puritan society where cafés, smoking and dancing were forbidden. (Forbes, 1923: 272). Therefore, the peculiar identity of the Asiri region seems to primarily stem from its short-lived *de facto* independence rather than from its intrinsic anti Saudi stance.

Yet, Ahmed Mater, born in the small Asiri village of Rijal Alma, has repeatedly highlighted the peculiarity of his origins. On his website, he explains that Asir literally translates as 'difficult', "which not only reflects the landscape, but also the independent spirit of its inhabitants."ⁱⁱⁱ Indeed, a traditional tribal society providing a breeding ground for contemporary artists is no usual phenomenon. More specifically, Asir's capital, Abha, has been the heart of contemporary art activity in the country since the 1990s. Under the patronage of Prince Khaled Al-Faisal, the small mountain town saw the opening of the Al-Meftaha art village, providing studios for artists to work and meet. Although closed in 2011, it fostered encounters and initiatives, leading to the creation in 2003 of the platform *Edge of Arabia* by Ahmed Mater and Stephen Stapleton, a British-Norwegian artist and curator. After coming across a largely stereotypical *National Geographic* article entitled "A Kingdom on the Edge" they endeavoured to use this word in a positive sense.

"Being in Abha, we were on the edge of the country. Contemporary art was at the periphery, or edge, of what you would expect to read about from Saudi Arabia, and so Edge of Arabia seemed to encapsulate what we wanted to do by raising the profile of Saudi contemporary art. (...)[After9/11], we were interested in the idea that voices from the periphery at that time might become voices at the center. And that centers of energy and history were shifting and being replaced by places that used to be on the edge."

After several world tours^v, they presented "We need to talk" in Jeddah in 2012. This initiative was a real starting point in the recognition of the collective by the Saudi society. Indeed, while Mater admits the primary audience were the artists themselves, as they did not necessarily think it could interest anyone else, 300'000 people came to the exhibitions and education programmes. Yet, the initiative reached a much more diverse audience through the Internet, hence Mater and his fellow

artists trying to balance between virtual archives and physical events, as a means to built what he calls a "storytelling democracy."^{vi} Free from government funding, the platform's aim is to "challenge the collusion" ^{vii} both in the Gulf and the West between market forces, elite groups artists and governments.

I have tried to depict how the Saudi-Wahhabi establishment has sought to impose a unified conception of religion and politics, merging the building of a modern State with a single conception of Islam. Yet, this drive towards *tawhid* has been de facto deviated by the vibrant cultural activity of the periphery illustrated by the example of Asir. While one has to relativize the fact that the region has always been at the forefront of resistance against the Saudi hegemony, local leaders and artists have seem to harmoniously accommodate rather than clash. In fact, *tawhid* has been more of a conceptual tool to frame Wahhabi's own identity than to repress artistic activity in the periphery.

ICONOCLASM AS IDENTITY: REJECTION OF REPRESENTATION

Iconoclasm understood as a culture of image-breaking helped the Saudi-Wahhabi establishment define itself against the Other. Indeed, as Noyes puts it, iconoclasm is a "formative feature" of Islam (2013: 4). This ontological identity of iconoclasm originates in the 'Golden Calf' episode of the *Exodus*. The Jews who built the idol in defiance of Moses's Covenant were to be punished by the "Jealous God".vⁱⁱⁱ Yet, only the early Prophet's intercession permitted that three thousand of those who worshipped the calf were killed instead of the annihilation of the whole Jewish people. It is precisely Moses' moment of intercession that is "at the heart of the difference between Muslim and Jew" (Noyes, 2013: 4). To the Jews, it introduced the continuation of the journey towards the 'Promised Land', whilst for the Muslims, it marked the collapse of the first Covenant and the foundation of Islam as a nation in opposition to those who associated (*shirk*) an image to God, the *mushrikum*. The first episode of idolatry was thus a seminal moment that triggered tribal consequences in the creation of Islam as the chosen people, representing the fulfilment of God's Covenant through preserving His unity.

While nothing prevents as such the representation of human beings in the Quran, the *hadith* have regularly prohibited such acts. Wahhabism being the strictest school of interpretation in Islam, it embraced this conception to the extreme, forbidding any representation of sentient beings. This in turn begs the question of the possibility of artistic representation.



Figure 2: "Yellow Cow", The Yellow Cow performance, 2007

In fact, figurative art does exist in Saudi Arabia, (see the very figurative work of Safiya bin Zagr on this matter) questioning the absoluteness of Wahhabi interdictions. Ahmed Mater, a doctor aside of his artistic activities, has powerfully circumvented this rule. His **"Illuminations"** (Figure 3) series take the form of ornaments of sacred texts, not unlike Safavid and Ottoman depictions of *Al-Jinnah* (Heaven in Islam), *Houris* (sacred virgins awaiting martyrs in Heaven) and the Prophet. At the same time, they are representations of what human beings are in the inside: X-rays being part of the GP's universe, the images are illuminated, as if they were enlightened by Divine light.

In **"Yellow Cow"** (Figure 2), Mater dyed the animal with saffron and manufactured dairy products from its milk, representing the idol facing the camera, thereby exhibiting its innocuous looks and de-sacralising the very idea of idol. Additionaly, it drove home the point that brand-centered consumer capitalism is the contemporary form of idolatry 'worshipping the golden calf'.

The **"Desert of Pharan"** (Figure 4) project is focusing on the unofficial stories behind the hidden transformation of Mecca, as the illustration of modern Wahhabi iconoclasm. As I have previously shown, the destruction of Islamic monuments is no novel a phenomenon in Wahhabism. Yet, the present-day annihilation of Islamic history is a more discreet phenomenon. "After blue markings appear on sites mentioned in Islamic histories, the bulldozers come –often in the dead of night. (...) By the next day in the morning, the monument is gone."^{ix} Saudi poet and photographer Nimah Nawwab told the *Time*.

Illustrations of this destruction/modernization craze are the building of the Mecca Hilton over the house of Abu Bakr, the Prophet's closest companion and first caliph, or a block of public toilets

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over that of the Prophet's first wife Khadijah. This participates in turning Mecca, according to Sardar, into "an amalgam of Disneyland and Las Vegas."^x



Figure 3: "Illuminations XV & XVI", Illuminations series, 2010

All the while, this has been partially tolerated by the international community, contrasting with the general condemnation of Palmyre's destruction by the terrorist organization Daesh. "When it comes to Mecca, as far as we are concerned it's a Saudi question," ^{xi} explains Roni Amelan, spokesman for UNESCO, referring to the United Nations' respect for every nation's sovereignty. Mecca is seen as Islamic heritage, not as world heritage, and as long as the Muslim community does not explicitly protest, neither will the 'international community' who has no access to the city. Besides, Saudi Arabia being a staunch ally of the West, it is particularly cautious about criticizing it.

Another aspect of modern Wahhabi iconoclasm is the crafting of Mecca into a symbol of capitalism, ironically reminding one's of the rationale behind the destruction of the Twin Towers, that some like Habermas have also coined icons (Noyes, 2013: 171). In fact, Weber powerfully highlighted the paradoxical relation between destruction of idols and the advent of modernization and capitalism.

"That powerful tendency toward uniformity of life, which today immensely aids the capitalist interest in the standardization of production, had its ideal foundations in the repudiation of all idealary of the flesh." (Weber, 1958: 114)

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On that matter, the Abraj Al-Bait complex of hotels and shopping malls, with the world's second-tallest tower standing some two hundred metres away from the Ka'ba is a telling illustration. Sardar explains the logics behind it:

"The Saudis know the oil is going to run out (...) Hajj is already their second major source of income (...). They look at Dubai, and Qatar, and ask 'what are we going to do?' And they say, 'we have Hajj, and we're going to exploit it to the max."^{xii}



Figure 4: "Artificial light", Desert of Pharan, 2012

Ahmed Mater likewise empowered himself with yet another paradox of the Hajj, albeit perhaps unconsciously. In an interview with British journalist David Batty, he comments:

"Many think the only icon should be Ka'ba. They think the towers are a distraction. When you are in Mecca you see all the iPhones click, click, click in the sight of the clock towers. It's become this capitalist city."

Hence, whilst denouncing the new iconic status of the towers, he acknowledged the similar position of the Ka'ba. His work **"Magnetism"** (Figure 1) seems to point at this contradiction. In itself, the magnet installation embodies the contradictory pressure of attraction/repulsion, for the Ka'ba indeed encapsulates the ambiguous tension between iconoclasm and veneration. For the pilgrimage makes tangible the charisma of the Divine, Mater seems to challenge Wahhabism' own contradictions.

Clay coins this apparent contradiction 'the semiotic turn' (2007). For him, Politics of Iconoclasm make a distinction between what can remain and what cannot. This is done through a mere political decision, often to preserve the State's interests (here, the economic, cultural and political legitimation associated with the Hajj). "In each of the cases" Noyes adds, "the ruin and the broken image is subject to the discourse and the force of the State – a process of self-fashioning within which the politics of iconoclasm claims as its own the identity of the contested objects" (Noyes, 2013: 183-184).

I have endeavoured to show the Wahhabi contradictions concerning both representation and idol worshipping. Drawing on the Catholic counter example, Noyes defines the icon as linking "image, creation and creativity". (Noyes, 2013:9). Pope John Paul II justified the icon as encapsulating "the Mystery of the World made flesh (...) and man – the author and at the same time participant – is gladdened by the sight of the Invisible"xiv. In this conception, the artist seems to be competing with God, the "Supreme Artist' (Noyes, 2013:9), through the very act of creation. This seems to be, even more than mere representation, the ultimate bone of contention in Wahhabi's rejection of images.

ICONOCLASM AS STATUS-QUO: THE REJECTION OF CREATION

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As it has been noted earlier, it is complex to draw the line between the icon, the idol and the image. Noyes does not address this issue and conflates the three terms in one (2013: 3). This is perhaps because Wahhabi clerics do indeed mix the three. Hence for them, any image is a potential idol. More, it thrives to mimic the Divine, hence jeopardizing the mere possibility of artistic creation in Saudi Arabia. Yet, as I have already shown, the Saudi artistic scene is far from being inexistent. In fact, artists are not but fully integrated in society. This again brings some nuance to the absoluteness of Wahhabi Politics of Iconoclasm and tells of the accommodation between artists and the Saudi-Wahhabi establishment.

A rather odd phenomenon illustrating this accommodation is the low level of revolutionary tropes in artists' discourses. Arwa Al-Neami, the young partner of Ahmed Mater and a rising Asiri artist, has worked on the condition of women in Saudi society. Her video work "Never Never Land II"xv (Figure 5) captures the stifled screams of women driving bumper cars in a theme park in Abha. These restricted sounds are the result of signs prohibiting women to scream loudly in the cars. The video immediately makes one reflects on this absurd and contained entertainment. Al-Neami yet warns that her intention is not to break the rules, but that she is "just reflecting society back on itself."xvi



Figure 5: "Never Never Land II", Never Never Land, 2014

Mr. Hafiz, the curator of the 2012 exhibition "We need to talk" stated how the purpose of such events was to foster dialogue between artists and local communities. "It builds on the theme of dialogue launched by King Abdullah," he adds, actively linking the Al-Saud family to the enterprise. Hence, it is interesting to note that the State is not directly criticized. While one could explain this by the fear of censorship, the Ministry of Culture and Information having to approve all art creations, interviews with other artists lead one to think otherwise.

Abdulnasser Gharem, born in Khamis Mushait, a small village near Abha, seems to join Al-Neami when he says, replying to a British journalist: "Why do you say I am critical of the system? I am trying to help the system"xvii. His 3 feet tall **"The Stamp"** (Figure 5), criticizes the rule of bureaucracy by confronting the Saudi society to its own weaknesses, crystallized in the "fatalistic" expression "Inch' Allah". Indeed, he denounces the fact that every action must be stamped to be accepted, and thinks that it is precisely through this process that the dreams of younger generations are broken. His stamps therefore directly invite people to "have a bit of commitment" i.e to empower themselves. At the same time, he acknowledges that as a Lieutenant Colonel in the army, he is also part of the system and the primary user of these stamps in his office.

This sense of inclusiveness in the Saudi society (Gharem is a Lieutenant, Mater a GP) is paramount in the understanding of the 'Challenged Politics of Iconoclasm'. These artists do not frontally call for the end of Saudi establishment but are trying to make the society, including themselves, reflect and evolve.

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Furthermore, Saudi artists are not short of critics concerning the West and the sandy/flowery imagery it tries to impose on them (see most of the titles of Western journalists' articles cited in this paper). "They turn artists into race horses."^{xviii} says Aarnout Helb, founder of the *Greenbox* Museum in Amsterdam.



Figure 5: "The Stamp", Moujaz, 2013

"We need to work together towards an environment in which we can develop a collective memory" adds Ahmed Mater, "not a collective voice. It is artists' job to not have a collective voice but to offer multiple perspectives. Without conflict. To build our authentic voice and then to test these ideas against society."xix Hence, creating a collective memory, what Tripp calls giving the population "the sense of themselves" (2013: 314), seems more important than to "resist" as Tripp understands it. If indeed, artists create a space for dialogue, hence challenging the status quo of the 'static' State, by "unsettl[ing], the complacency of established power", it is more so in an inclusive than in an exclusive manner and more so through *accommodation* than *resistance*. On censorship, Mater says:

"[We], negotiate it with creativity and patience and more negotiation. (...) Democracy is not our aspiration. (...) We are looking for something else. (...) This is an American project. And it has not **negotiated**^{××} with the societies where it is trying to implement this. (...) Artists should be involved in the opportunity to shape change. Not just to be critical of it."^{××i}

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CONCLUDING NOTES

Drawing on the works of three Asiri artists, this essay has shown how they were directly challenging the Politics of Iconoclasm. As such, I have divided the politics of Wahhabi iconoclasm into three broad oppositions, that of the rejection of multiplicity, the rejection of representation and the rejection of creation. While one could assume that their local origin and marginal status would automatically have led them to resist the Saudi-Wahhabi impetus, rather, I have tried to analyse how in those three domains, the artists accommodated with it rather than rejected it. Likewise, I have tried to show, in each of these parts, the politics of Wahhabi iconoclasm's own contradictions and weaknesses. Hence, there is a need for historicization and deconstruction of the 'Wahhabi label' (Noyes, 2013) so as not to consider it as a "pathologica[]] Muslim response to the image" (Flood, 2002: 641). Yet, the most potent action of the artists has been to create what I would call *mirrors* rather than *images*. By preferring the bilateral move of reflection to the unilateral move of devotion/contemplation, Saudi artists have embraced society and have rejected the logics of the war of images.



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ⁱⁱ "Who shall be Lord of Arabia ?", The Courier Mail, Brisbane, 9 May 1934.

iii "Ibn Aseer".

^{iv} Scarborough, J. "A conversation with Ahmed Mater", *<u>Huffingtonpost</u>*, 20 September 2014.

^v "Egde of Arabia" in London in 2008, "Grey Borders/Grey Frontiers," in Berlin in 2010, "TRANSiTION," in

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^{vii} Ibid.

viii Exodus 20: 3-5.

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^{xii} Ibid.

xiii Batty, D. "Contemporary Saudi artists break down old 'safety' barriers", *The Guardian*, 4 October 2012.

^{xiv} John Paul II, "Celebration of the Unveiling of the Restoration of Michelangelo's Frescoes in the Sistine Chapel" Vatican Homilies, 1994.

^{xv} Al-Neami, A. "Never Never Land II", <u>https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BjFv07tkWfM</u>.

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^{xvii} Whitworth, D. "Flowering in the sand", *<u>The Times</u>*, 24 January 2012.

^{xviii} Carrington, D., "More 'likes' than the Louvre: Tiny museum shows rise of Saudi art", <u>CNN</u>, 9 May 2013. ^{xix} *Ibid*, iv.

^{xx} Emphasis added.

^{xxi} Ibid, iv.