

Symbolic Manifestation of Saudi Women

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Abstract:

The use of symbols in visual art is a technique which has been handed down over generations. In contemporary art, it has had a particular resonance, particularly in societies where limits are imposed on a particular demographic, within legal regimes which do not guarantee the right to free expression, or under censorship. But the political and social movements, indeed, the changes which have taken place in the religious sphere with regard to women in Saudi Arabia over the last ten years, have made their struggle itself into a symbol, and its artistic expression through symbols into a rich source for analytic readings.

The current study discusses the use of symbols in Saudi art in general through examples of Saudi women artists who depict either directly or through symbols the Saudi women's issues, either as individuals in the community or through personal expression within social, familial or even personal restrictions. It focuses on the experiences of the Saudi artist Manal al-Dowayan and two young artists who graduated from the Visual Arts Department at the College of Art and Design at Princess Noura Bint Abdulrahman University, one of the largest women's universities in the world, whose work was prepared under the supervision of the arts program at the university. The pieces move beyond the artistic monotony of two-dimensional work to multi-dimensional work making use of a range of materials and techniques, which discuss social issues or issues relating to women in particular without fear of educational, social or political censorship through the use of symbolism. They cast light on the importance of the use of symbols as an artistic means of expression in societies subject to limitations on freedom of that expression, or for artists with anti-social characters, and on the role of symbolic style in extending the freedom of artists to be creative through symbols instead of being trapped intellectually within social limits.

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Introduction

The rights of women in Saudi Arabia is a topic often discussed in the media, especially international media, when it evaluates the situation in Saudi Arabia and its policies on women. It is worth noting that in the visual arts, Saudi women have been given rights which men have not – the first Art and Design Faculty was opened in 2010 at Princess Noura Bint Abdelrahman Universityⁱ exclusively for women, after a period when teaching and research were monopolized by men.ⁱⁱ

Even at a government institution like this one, artistic practice has been limited in comparison with its equivalents in the West, in accordance with what is known as the “particularity” Saudi Arabia. The university has not been able to move beyond the government mechanism for dealing with freedom of expression. This has encouraged the use of symbols in the visual arts, which have resonated broadly in Saudi art because of the restrictions and censorship.

This symbolism is perhaps at its most symbolic

and its deepest among the Saudi artists who depict either directly or through symbols Saudi women's issues, either as individuals in the community or through personal expression within social, familial or even personal restrictions. This study will discuss the use of symbols in visual art from two perspectives. The first is an analytical discussion of exemplary works by a Saudi woman who has been a professional artist for several years and whose art has been displayed at a number of international exhibitions. The second perspective is more tightly bound by social and bureaucratic restrictions: the study will analyse the work of two young artists who graduated from the Visual Arts Department at the College of Art and Design at Princess Noura Bint Abdulrahman University, one of the largest women's universities in the world, which was prepared under the supervision of the arts programme at the university. The pieces move beyond the artistic monotony of two-dimensional work to multi-dimensional work making use of a range of materials and techniques, which discuss social issues or issues relating to women in particular without fear of educational, social or political censorship through the use of symbolism. They cast light on the importance of the use of symbols as an artistic means of expression in societies subject to limitations on freedom of expression, or for artists with anti-social characters, and on the role of symbolic style in extending the freedom of artists to be creative through symbols instead of being trapped intellectually within social limits.

Symbols and symbolism in Saudi art

Symbols in Saudi art can be considered similar to those found in other Gulf countries, or indeed in other Arab countries or countries of the region which fell behind the European and American civilisation that followed them, and where artistic development stopped or perhaps more accurately went more slowly. Art practices in Saudi Arabia did not go beyond handicrafts until the last third of the 20th centuryⁱⁱⁱ, represented by traditional products which were not devoid of symbolism. The presence of symbolism in engraving became clear as it spread across the Arabian Peninsula^{iv}, and the period of states witnessed the spread of images and symbols connected to Pagan religious thought. Indeed, the Arabian Peninsula was a melting pot of Abrahamic religions and Greek and Hellenistic-Roman concepts and legends, as well as influences from neighbouring civilisations. As such, its art was filled with symbols as diverse as its religious thought.^v After the emergence of Islam and changes affecting the reasons motivating the use of old-style symbols and

carvings because of their association with paganism, art – especially outside the Arabian Peninsula – moved towards architecture, applied arts and Arabic calligraphy. At the same time, geometric (*muzakhrif*) handicrafts reflect another kind of symbolism which we find in the weave of prayer-rugs and tents with geometric tribal patterns^{vi}, as well as the geometric patterns drawn in henna on women's hands.^{vii} Perhaps the best example of the symbolism of elements used in traditional art is the decoration of walls with colours for which Asir in southern Saudi Arabia is famous.^{viii} Tattoos were also used by tribes to mark camels and livestock to indicate their ownership, a widespread artistic practice with social and political associations which continues to this day.^{ix}

It is possible to say that fine art in the Western sense in Saudi Arabia is still a new phenomenon. The first features of artistic practice began to emerge in the mid-20th century. The first exhibitions were held in schools during the 1950s and 60s, followed by joint and individual exhibitions.^x Art's beginnings, however, were hampered by the spread of *fatwas* forbidding images of "creatures with souls"^{xi}, and therefore the inability of artists to depict living beings or even much of the time parts of the body. This was as a result of the *Sahwa* movement of the 1980s, which sought to popularize extreme religious views within the community, and was able to influence an entire generation of Saudi youth thanks to the support of state institutions.^{xii}

As a result, we find that when exhibitions and competitions of Saudi visual art began to become widespread, some styles like symbolic, abstract and surrealist art met with acceptance from artists, who adopted them for different reasons, perhaps most importantly in order to avoid drawing complete living beings. Abstraction was a general style for art pieces. Use of symbolism through specific elements or icons, or using surrealism to create an unrealistic composition allowed artists to express themselves by using partially-depicted living beings and removing facial features or paring them down.^{xiii xiv xv} Abstraction became very common in Saudi art. Al-Rasees^{xvi} considers the early Saudi work to be technically weak and lacking in knowledge, but the accumulation of experience and knowledge by artists have given it an increasing variety and seriousness in the last two decades. Despite the fact that surrealism officially ended when the Second World War began in 1944, generations of world artists including some Saudis have reinvigorated it, and the influence of by the surrealist symbolism on a

number of artists from Ahsa and Qatif in the eastern region of Saudi Arabia since the mid-1970s may have other reasons beside the religious factor. Suleiman^{xvii} notes that surrealism has become noticeably prominent in the work of the artist Abdulhamid al-Baqshi from Ahsa, but this style became widespread in a number of Saudi cities during the 1970s and 80s and indeed the beginning of the 90s. Its largest presence, however, can be found among the artists of Ahsa and Qatif, like Munir al-Hajji, Ali al-Safar, Khalid al-Amir, Mona al-Mrohen, Khuloud Al Salim, Hummeida al-Senan and Abduladheem Shili.

Artistic activity has increased further in Saudi Arabia in the new millennium. Opportunities to make professional contacts and exhibit works abroad have helped a large group of artists emerge whose work bears a contemporary stamp, leaving behind the traditional styles dominant until the mid-1990s. With the continuing influence of the *Sahwa*, Saudi artists have become more interested in template work, installation art, photography and film to avoid misinterpretation and bans. At the same time, however, they have been able to discuss political issues, previously absent from the work of Saudi artists, with greater freedom, as well as depicting social problems without clashing directly with society or Shari'a.

Manal al-Dowayan: Personal suffering and experience as a symbol for the issues of the women of the world

One of the third generation of modern Saudi artists, and one of the few to resign from government work and devote herself entirely to art^{xviii} after coming to artistic maturity and become a fully professional artist. In her first contributions she worked with expressionist photography, but as she matured as an artist and participated in modern art festivals across the region, she moved beyond the framework of images into other modes like installation pieces and interactive artwork. In her work she discusses various social issues related to her own personal experiences, with women's issues daringly predominant in her social artwork. Women are the main subject because this reflects her own personal experiences.^{xix} Manal says that her work is a direct reflection of her own life and the upheavals it has contained, and so although it is possible to identify the experiences of Saudi women as the main focus of her work, in some collections the focus is in fact on personal issues.^{xx} By presenting, analysing and connecting together some of her work and collections, it is possible to trace that relationship and reflection through the imagery and symbolism which is almost direct in some of her pieces. She has succeeded in visual

and symbolic portrayal of social issues without having attracted attention as a rights activist, like other women in the region calling for equal rights for women.

A series of photographs was one of Manal al-Dowayan's first experiences in exhibiting art. In the series *Choice (Ikhtiyar)* she dealt with the boundaries imposed on Arab women in general and Saudi women in particular as a result of local traditions which have become tied up with religion and identity in the shadow of accelerating social change, and the social struggle between confinement to tradition as a safe refuge of belonging and keeping pace with global development. She believes that women represent half of the totality of local societies, that their possibilities and their energies are valuable resources for a healthy society, and that the use of tradition as a tool to oppress them will transform our society into a crippled society without full use of their intellectual and professional energies.^{xxi} Her work *I (Ana)* consists of a series of pictures featuring Saudi women working as doctors, engineers, producers, divers, architects and interior designers, all photographed in the same position. It focuses on equality of opportunity in employment between men and women in Saudi Arabia by attempting a visual demonstration of the ability of Saudi women to work through a portrait bringing together the symbolism of tradition and women's ability to do jobs. Dowayan does not attempt to discuss the subject of religion directly through her work, but instead deals with the main issues that she believes the state should find solutions for in response to the mounting demands of activists, such as male guardianship over women and permission to drive cars. Her pieces are a reflection of her experiences and her personality, which she describes as both optimistic and patient.^{xxii}

Al-Dowayan presents a model of this peaceful demand for women to be allowed to drive by way of example^{xxiii} through a number of photographs. Perhaps the most moving of these is shown in Figure 1, which includes symbolism of the ban on women driving on the one hand and a symbol of the secret leading (or driving) role of the woman in society on the other. For a culture more familiar with oral or written culture, only recently introduced to visual culture, these pictures were widely circulated and used as slogans on social media sites in campaigns demanding the right to drive for women. Nonetheless, exhibitions did react to Manal as an artist in the same way as the demands from female activists were received on social media generally.



Figure 1: Manal Al Dowayan, *The Choice*, 2005-2008, photograph, silver gelatine print, 40.64cm x 50.8cm

Figure 2 depicts an oil engineer who has covered her face with a traditional jewelled *burqu'*. Manal al-Dowayan is commenting here on the professions practised by Saudi women. There is a great controversy in the country over the employment of women: some people believe that

women should only be employed in jobs "suited to their nature." Al-Dowayan considers this to be entirely unreasonable – who is it that decides what women's nature is? She began to photograph women who work in a variety of fields to refute this justification.^{xxiv}



Figure 2: Manal Al Dowayan, *I Am a Petroleum Engineer*, 2005-2007, photograph, silver gelatin print, 50.8 x 40.8cm

Manal al-Dowayan: “I took inspiration for this collection from a speech given by King Abdullah Al Saud when he took the throne. He called for all Saudis to unite and come together in building the Kingdom, and in particular mentioned the importance of women’s participation. It was a beautiful moment which gave us a great and stirring hope throughout the Kingdom. This was what first raised the question: What are the types of work which women will be allowed to do? Later on the press and opinion leaders explained the King’s speech as meaning that women were to participate only in jobs “suited to their nature.” Then I asked myself, “what suits my nature as a woman? Who decides that?” And that was when the idea of producing the *I* series began. I invited women who work in a variety of different jobs in Saudi Arabia – from engineers to mothers, scientists to designers – to produce a statement of their existence for me, and as a source of inspiration for other women.^{xxv}

Manal makes use of other elements as symbols for expression, thereby creating visual signs within an artistic composition characterized by colour variation with focus on the black in the background in her first 2005 collection *Choice*.^{xxvi}

The juxtaposition of contradictory colours provides simplicity, and simplicity depth and drama. I could use black and white photography because it is a means which gives me total control over the process to produce the right visual effect that I want, with clear transmission of my ideas and no barrier.

My Name (*Esmi*)

Al-Dowayan is a daring artist who deals with sensitive themes like the situation of women in Saudi Arabia. While dealing with these sensitive

themes she considers the idea of the two genders in the Kingdom, as she seeks to artistically remove social barriers. In one of her pieces, *My Name*, she wanted to break a Saudi taboo on saying women’s names openly. The artist considers other issues related to Saudi women’s position, like travelling and certain careers, which are generally restricted to men in Saudi Arabia.

In this work, *My Name*, seen in Figure 3, al-Dowayan asked hundreds of women to write their name on wooden beads, which she then gathered together in the shape of huge strings of prayer beads and attached to the ceiling. She organized several workshops for these women in Khobar, Riyadh and Jeddah. They included government employees, teachers, artists, mothers and grandmothers as well as children’s names written by their parents. This is how she broke the taboo forbidding men from saying the names of women openly, highlighting the unique position of Saudi society towards the names of women: Saudi men believe it is vulgar to mention the names of women in their lives and force women to hide their identities to avoid insulting members of the family. This custom exists only in Saudi Arabia, and has no basis in religion. Despite this work being controversial, it met with few negative responses, and participants had a positive experience because their names may now be remembered through the work. It was an experience that permitted them to produce a statement expressing their unanimous feeling: “Our names will be preserved, and we will not allow anyone to erase or change the names of Saudi women or to look at them as shameful or dishonourable.” Identity is closely connected to an individual’s personality.^{xxvii}



Figure 3: *Esmi (My Name)*, 2012 - Manal Al Dowayan

Manal deals with visual memory and archiving forgotten culture in society^{xxviii} in order to record unrecorded elements of visual culture that are not important in the eyes of society or political history. She has also worked on artistic projects which depend on documenting and archiving women's history, including *My Name*.^{xxix}

This idea came to her during her Hajj pilgrimage to Mecca, when she discussed issues related to the two genders in Saudi Arabia with other women at the pilgrims' camp. Al-Dowayan narrates a *hadith* of the Prophet Muhammad which explains the idea: Amr ibn al-As relates that the Prophet (PBUH) was asked, "O Prophet of God, who among the people do you love most dearly?" And he said, "Aisha" (his wife). Al-Dowayan believes that men should learn a lesson from this, because both the Prophet and the Qur'an mention the names of women, which is evidence that women's names are not connected whatsoever with shame or dishonour and are not something which should remain hidden.^{xxx}

Suspended Together

AJ+^{xxxi} has produced a one and a half minute video discussing one of Manal al-Dowayan's works, *Suspended Together*. This work produced great controversy on Twitter, where some of those opposed to the work asserted that it was not in fact of Saudi origin, ignoring the main point of

discussion and the purpose of the work. Some of the responses included:

One Twitter user saying "Manal al-Dowayan's mother is Syrian"^{xxxii}

And another saying, "Saudi women are honoured and loved in our country and permitted to do everything. This sort are rare and most of them are not native Saudis."

Manal al-Dowayan produced a work titled *Suspended Together* (Figure 4) made up of 200 doves made from fibreglass. Every dove carries a travel permit which allow women to travel alone if they receive a signature from a man, because men are their legal guardians. The issue of the women's driving ban is currently under discussion in Saudi Arabia, and last year, Manal al-Shareef – who launched a campaign on the internet to convince Saudi women to resist the driving ban, stirring up much controversy – was arrested after uploading a video onto YouTube of her holding onto the steering wheel of a car. Viewing the work from afar gives an impression of freedom and movement, but when looked at more closely, the viewer sees that the doves are static, suspended, without the slightest hope of flying. These permits were donated by a huge number of journalists, scientists, artists and others representing Saudi society.^{xxxiii}



Figure 4: Suspended together (in 200 parts), fibreglass w/laminate coating, Manal al-Dowayan

In an interview with Manal al-Dowayan on her art pieces related to Saudi Arabia, she discussed some of her previous works, saying the following:

Haupt and Binder: How would you summarize the main idea behind the artistic method you use to those who aren't familiar with your work?

Haupt and Binder: At the *Edge of Arabia: Terminal* exhibition, alongside your LED photographs, you had a conceptual work titled *Suspended Together* – currently being exhibited at the Venice Biennale – in which you drew attention to the situation of women in Saudi Arabia, who have to get permission and a travel permit if they

want or need to travel. How did the idea of this work come to you? Does 3D conceptual work take you in a different expressive direction from the pictures and lens methods which you have used in previous years?^{xxxiv}

Manal al-Dowayan: *Suspended Together* is a huge conceptual work, an installation piece, which was the crowning work of several with the same subject from the last few years. Doves appeared in my work for the first time in 2009 in *Landscapes of the Mind*, and later fluttered around the *And We Had No Shared Dreams* series in 2010. I also included a 3D dove in *Edge of Arabia: Terminal*.

In all of these works the dove symbolizes movement and the imposition of guardianship on women in Saudi Arabia.^{xxxv}

All women in my country require a document, a permit issued by a specific legal guardian when they want to travel, so I used those documents on doves' bodies. I asked a large number of prominent women in Saudi Arabia (scientists, engineers, artists, etc.) to donate travel permits for this project. The result was a flock of doves which seem to be flying but in fact have been suspended, stopped, and cannot move.^{xxxvi}

This conceptual work was a new experience for me. It made me discover a new way to express myself, although pictures are still the basis of my work. I enjoyed trying out new methods and techniques.^{xxxvii}

Haupt and Binder: Do you expect the situation of women in Saudi Arabia to change?
There have been demands for women's rights in

Saudi Arabia for decades. Visual art has played a prominent role in the movement after a series of restrictions on women's rights, and one of the artists who participated in these demands was Manal al-Dowayan, who has produced symbolic pieces as a means to portray women's issues and rights.^{xxxviii} These pieces include *Collision (al-Sadma)*, in which she discussed car accidents affecting female teachers on their way to schools in distant Saudi villages, after which they become a number in the series of news reports.^{xxxix}

In *Collision* Al-Dowayan alludes to a number of issues affecting Saudi women, including some families' taboo on saying dead women's names^{xl} and the fact that because women are not allowed to drive and salaries are not sufficient to cover the cost of safe transport women are forced to travel in groups and place their lives in the hands of bus drivers who they cannot depend on.^{xli}



Figure 3: Collision, 2014 – Manal al-Dowayan^{xliii} Graduates of Princess Noura Bint Abdulrahman University Personal styles in use of symbols in artistic work

The first case is Fatima Al-Isa, who puts some of her intentions in code in order to put across her ideas to society in a way that accords with its culture. Fatima began by using visual symbols borrowed from language but different from the Arabic alphabet (Figure 5). She encoded Arabic letters in shapes closer to engineering symbols difficult to understand. By doing so she was able

to put her thoughts on paper without causing a collision with her small community. She then decided to integrate these symbols into her artwork. She produced different elements and ascribed meaning to them which conformed to her way of thinking, which may be shocking to many members of society.

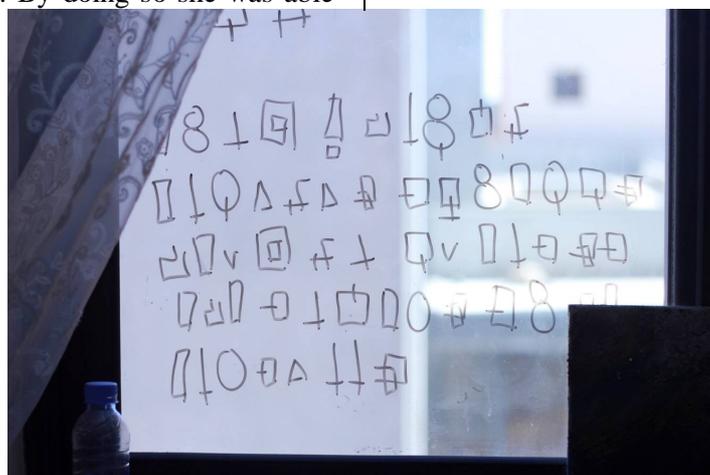


Figure 5^{xliii} First experience: Photography and the symbolism of fish

Fatima adopted fish as a symbol of human representation. She borrowed this symbolism from her readings on religion and ancient legends, in which the symbolism of fish was clear and important. The ancient Egyptians left behind fish mummies and considered the *Medjed* fish of Oxyrhynchus to be sacred during the Ptolemaic period. Greek legends associated fish with the goddess of love and beauty Aphrodite and the god of the sea, Poseidon. Fish were presented as sacrifices in Sumerian rituals to the goddess Ishtar. In Hinduism fish are considered to have been the first embodiment of the god Vishnu, who became the fish Matsya in order to rescue Manu from the Great Flood.^{xliv} In Christianity the fish represents the Messiah, Jesus, as a symbol for salvation.^{xlv} In Buddhism it represents the foot of the Buddha, alluding to his liberation from desires and ties.^{xlvii} On the principle of the use of symbols in modern art to embody ideas and present issues, Fatima has produced works of this kind in a photography and installation project.

Fish collection (Figures 6, 7, 8 and 9)

In photography, Fatima made fish into containers symbolizing people in general and then photographed them as a symbol of women (fish), as fish (*samaka*) in Arabic is feminine. Sometimes they symbolize herself and the other groups of people she deals with within this category (fish), with fish being people. In the pictures from this project presented here she connects fish with women, situations and issues they encounter in society. They are a symbol of women's rights and

freedom in "the sea," where they can breathe, move, and live!

In the first piece (Figure 6), *Fish And Plastic Bag*, the fish has been removed from its original environment, the sea – based on the principle that people are born free in all societies, cultures and religions. But some cultures, including Middle Eastern culture, treat women differently, considering them to be different from men and believing that families must keep their daughters safe through a kind of isolation. Sometimes it is educational institutions which deny women their freedom by spreading the patriarchal culture of the society contrary to the background and culture that girls bring with them thanks to their upbringing. The same applies to the guardianship of women, which moves from their fathers or brothers to their husbands and thereafter may even pass on to one of their sons if their husband dies or divorces them. Many people oppose abandoning guardianship in order to keep women safe, without realizing that denying people their freedom, even if all of the ingredients of life are there, resembles denying a fish air even as it sits in the water: freedom and air are both invisible things, but still a matter of life or death. Removing women from normal life and putting them in a managed environment does not mean that they are able to live normally there: there are requirements for life beyond those which some see as fundamental and sufficient. The idea that the life of a woman is her family's house, her husband's house and then the grave is widespread in society.



Figure 6, *Fish And Plastic Bag (Samaka wa-Kis Blastik)*, Fatima Al-Isa



Figure 7, *Fish And Metal Wire (Samaka wa-Silk Ma'dini)*, Fatima Al-Isa

There is a group in the community that resists in spite of obstacles and have no concern for the hurt that may come their way, only for reaching their goal.

Some families, even sometimes society, put many restrictions on women that almost prevent them from moving and bring down their morale, in particular when those limitations deny them their fundamental rights like the right to education, work, and marriage. Educating women, for some people, requires a non-mixed girls-only environment. Many families forbid their daughters from travelling abroad to continue their education or from work, as some husbands forbid their wives from working in mixed environments. All of this has denied some women opportunities to study or work even when they possess the requisite skills and talents, on the basis of a single reading of the religious text from a social perspective with a deep history shaped by traditions known as “custom.” This denial under the weight of such restrictions has a direct effect on the mental and psychological state of women. Women who challenge the restrictions society imposes face many obstacles related to society’s opinion or judgements on them, whether on their professional choices, way of dressing or maintaining modest dress, etc. They experience judgements whose consequences can be painful, as happened to those women who have chosen to work in mixed environments or studied medicine in spite of the difficulties imposed by work schedules and as a result sacrificed their prospects of marriage in a society in which traditional ideas on this issue predominate.



Figure 8, Fish And Glass Cup (Samaka wa-Ka’s Zujaj), Fatima Al-Isa

It is impossible to bring someone back to life when it is too late.

In a society where it is difficult for divorced women to find opportunities for a second marriage – while divorced men find repeated opportunities to remarry – women who have left their family home to marry for the first time may imagine the difficulty of returning to a state acceptable to society. This is a situation, and there are others like it, which Saudi women confront in this society where some individuals have not accepted change, even when their own practices in this regard are in opposition to the Shari’a which they believe in and which is rooted in the religion they are so proud of, i.e. Islam.



Figure 9, Fish and Gold Coin (Samaka wa-Umla min al-Dhahab), Fatima Al-Isa

There are people in society who do not see their internal ugliness and believe that material wealth will hide their hideousness – but corrupt intentions are always visible. It is possible to say that among women belonging to particular social classes, a blind eye is turned to what might be considered “ugly acts” by the community that might “hurt” the honour of women. Money and pomp have become a kind of covering disguising this ugliness, but the rotten smell has a stronger effect and is more easily able to reach the noses of people who are able to distinguish between good and bad. This misogynistic vision symbolizes women who put themselves in the ranks of the good against women who they consider to be bad.

Second experience: Installation work Trace (Athar), Figures 10 and 11



Figure 10

The space consists of a square in which white is predominant. Every element within the work is white, including the artist. The piece is categorized as installation or “process art”.^{xlviii}

The space consists of a room with white walls. The constituents of the installation are a chair and a table. On the table there is an egg, a teapot and cup, and a wooden hand covered in white. There is a white mirror and some frames placed on the floor. During the exhibition, the researcher took a brush and black paint and drew generic symbols

on the walls and floor. These symbols included the dove of peace, the symbols of Islam, Christianity and Judaism, the symbol of Nazism, some musical notes, and the famous drawing of Hanzala (the signature of the cartoonist Naji Al-Ali). She also added some symbols of her own design expressing comprehensible and legible words, some from other languages – which represent symbols for those who do not understand those languages. During the exhibition an egg fell and cracked, spreading black.



Figure 11

White represents purity. When a person is born they are like a blank (white) page; it is life that makes markings on them. Black represents these markings which are made on the life of the person. Some of them are negative and some positive. Some are impressions gained from their society – which are not necessarily true.

When the artist’s role in the performance was finished, she asked the audience to participate in adding words that had affected their lives, making

the art piece interactive. The researcher produced a video tape during the exhibition.^{xlix}

The artist summarized life in a dramatic artistic scene in black and white, alluding to variation, contradiction, monotony and life without colours. The woman here is the artist herself. The association was not gender-based or related precisely to the sex of the woman. The work discusses the experience of a woman, the artist, who attempted to summarize her twenty-

something years using symbols which she actively considers to be the greater part of her environment. She writes in symbols and speaks in symbols. She is a quiet woman who makes little use of vocal expression, discussing things only when asked about them. She is not much known by those around her because of the walls she builds around herself. For her graduation project she decided to express herself through this work. She redefined herself after four years at the Visual Arts department, and finally Fatima spoke – but now in the new language of symbols which had become multidimensional. She documented her journey through life. Her classmates also participated in this visual side of the work conducted in black – which we might say decorated her life, or stained her whiteness!

- The second case is Bilqees Al-Sultan (Figures 12, 13). The researcher concentrated on interactive art in her treatment of social issues, most important among them women's issues. Interactive art focuses on intellectual concepts and ideas, not on artistic aesthetic.¹ As a result, it contains a large amount of symbolism which makes the viewer stop in front of the work in an attempt to understand its most important symbols. One of the most important features of interactive art is the realisation of a kind of perfect connection between art and audience through conceptual activities.ⁱⁱ

First experience: *Guardian's Signature*

Description:

Two pieces of white paper and a golden frame,



Figure 12: *Guardian's Signature (Tawqi' Wali al-Amr)*, Bilqees Al-Sultan, installation piece, Riyadh 2017

Second experience: *Breadwinners and Guardians (Figure 13)*

Description:

A photograph, 9cm by 12cm, consisting of 12 women standing in front of a dining table. In between them is a sitting child.

Analysis:

The researcher engages here with the subject of Saudi women who become the breadwinners for their families, but whose male children may nonetheless be their legal guardian.

170cm by 70cm. Next to every piece is a box of pens: blue pens for men and white pens for women. Between the two pieces is a piece of wood on which "your signature" has been written – part of the artwork – and a camera to record.

Analysis:

The researcher asks viewers to sign the work. Men sign using different pens and in different sizes and styles of handwriting, but when women try to sign with the pens assigned to them, they are surprised to find that their signatures do not appear. The researcher alludes by this symbol to the fact that Saudi women's signatures are marginalized and that their personal affairs do not require their signature but their guardian's.

In response to the system that prevents women from carrying out a number of personal legal processes without receiving their guardian's permission, including receiving a passport, travelling or going abroad for study, working in some companies and hospitals, certain financial transactions – among many othersⁱⁱⁱ, the researcher made use of this issue in an interactive piece. She asked the audience to sign in the two main colours, one for women, one for men (Figure 12).

In this piece, Bilqees wanted to shock the viewer interactively when women tried to sign but were unable to because of the pen writing in white and thus leaving no mark on the paper.

The work attempts to make the audience and society angry about the fact that the position of women in society wipes out, in this fashion, the mark which they might have been able to make – because of the absence of the right to decide.



In homage to Leonardo Da Vinci's famous work *The Last Supper*, Bilqees attempts to draw society's attention through the representation of the child to the sacred position society has given to men and how society expects this position to be held by men in accordance with the proverb "men are the custodians of women." In some societies this has reached such a high degree that men and women no longer notice it, but Bilqees places herself in the role of the critic. She attacks this idea loudly through powerful, earnest, clear

symbols with which she strikes the viewer in her attempt to criticize society, attempts to change

things and demand rights for women or depict women's issues.



Figure 13, *Breadwinners and Guardians (I'ala wa-Wilaya)*, Bilqees Sultan, photograph, Riyadh 2017

Conclusion

It is possible to say that symbolism as a style – as opposed to Symbolism, the school of art popular in the 19th century – or the use of symbols in art continues to be an important tool used by artists to express themselves regardless of materials, dimensions, or field. The point of difference lies in the reasons motivating artists to use symbols in their creative work or to use symbolism as a style, whether personal, political, or related to fear about society's response, misinterpretations or religious judgements. We also cannot ignore the role of clients, sellers and exhibition spaces, which can try to affect the direction taken by artists in an attempt to stir up controversy around pieces in pursuit of a different aim, i.e. financial gain, and so encourage or direct artists indirectly to research subjects with a specific political or ideological bent which provokes public opinion or the viewer to be emotionally affected by the work and thus help spread it through different channels, which then leads to a rise in the price of the piece before the selling process begins – especially if it is expected to be sold at an auction house. When the motive is solely commercial, the effect will often be political-ideological and negative, especially in the Middle East and the Gulf since 9/11 and the beginning of “Middle Eastern terrorism” and Islamophobia, which have spread across the West since 2001.

Expression through symbols is not a discovery of modern or contemporary art but a human form of expression which has proved useful to people for the expression of ideas or concepts through images, either as abbreviation or as a kind of camouflage for particular ends. The use of symbols spread in the Arabian Peninsula through civilisation, coinciding with others elsewhere in

the world. Their use in modern art is the product of the modernity which accompanied development and the new openness to other cultures in Saudi Arabia in recent decades. When artists feel it is necessary to use symbols in art, they are able to dispense with direct expression. We have found that symbols appear at the same time as modern art and installation art in particular. Artists took to using symbolic elements in order to put across specific meanings. This gives viewers a greater role in understanding the piece in a way appropriate to their way of thinking, saving them from pre-established judgements and allowing them free expression without any responsibility.

Through the experience of the Saudi artist Manal al-Dowayan, it is possible to say that the *Choice* and *I* collections of 2005, as well as other works by the artist, are among the gentle attempts at producing change made by artists without the kind of direct confrontation with decision-makers or society made by human rights activists. Her work influenced the younger generation of artists who are studying at or have graduated from Princess Noura Bint Abdulrahman University (College of Art and Design) who have become familiar with this local model and the model of other feminist artists through academic study of Art History or through practical study, interviews or other opportunities available in study programs. Their own artistic expression was thus daringly honest and expressive of women's issues, but deep and not shocking, and may contribute to change in the future.

The work of Fatima Al-Isa contains unique secrets particular to the artist's personal vision. Many pieces are not explained directly by the artist, in order to maintain distance from the shock that these pieces may cause. Any attempt to discover

the symbolic meanings begins with intellectual curiosity that seeks to identify the aesthetic values which make up the piece. This applies to many Saudi and global artworks alike.

The work of Bilqees Al-Sultan is an earnest expression and a confrontation of the position of society towards women and the relationship that a large proportion of society sees as the natural relationship. Her work reflects this social stereotype in a way that calls on society to rethink it.

It is thus possible to say that some artists use symbols to try and provoke clashes with members of society, like those who use this style to pursue reform. Others use it to raise questions and doubts around different social issues. A number of Saudi artists have succeeded in casting light on some of these issues through their work by using a symbolism which has helped make this cultural product acceptable in a society which does not accept different or shocking points of view, in particular on women's issues or from women themselves.

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