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Showcasing Saudi Scene

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Naila Art Gallery Executive Director Wided Khadraoui addresses media at the Emerge Art Fair. —
Courtesy photos

Riyadh-based art gallery first to exhibit emerging Saudi artists in Washington

“THIS is is really incredible, we had no idea Saudi Arabia had an art scene, and we could not have imagined the talent that exists there.” This was the oft-repeated remark of Washingtonians who attended the three-day Naila Art Gallery show in Washington DC.

Naila Art Gallery, based in Riyadh, became the first art gallery from the Kingdom to showcase three Saudi artists at the Emerge Art Fair. Over 80 people attended the gallery’s closing event.

Among those in attendance were Prince Abdulaziz Bin Talal and Princess Sora Bint Saud, representatives from the Royal Embassy of Saudi Arabia; the former US Ambassador to Saudi Arabia Walter Cutler, the former US Ambassador to Qatar Susan Ziadeh; representatives from Secretary of State John Kerry’s office and members of media.

The visitors’ encouragement was evident in their discussions and conversation, over three days, that touched on the stunning images of the Saudi Arabian artists that were on display, while many stressed that this was as a true medium of communication as art knows no bounds.

The exhibition went a long way in breaking down stereotypes of Saudi Arabia and Islam. In her remarks to those attending the closing event, Naila Art Gallery’s executive director Wided Khadraoui said, “It’s often hard for people to see another side of Saudi Arabia. We are so happy that we were able to bring this creative side of the Kingdom to them. The art world is thriving in Saudi Arabia, and we are glad to be a leading voice for them.”

The work of these three emerging Saudi artists gave all those in attendance lots to talk about and remember. It also gave people a chance to see the creativity that exists in Saudi Arabia, while firmly putting the country on the map as a state where art and talent is embraced.

Journalists, diplomats, art critics and art collectors were some of the hundreds of people who traveled from all over the world to attend the art fair. Held at the Capitol Skyline Hotel in the shadow of the US Capitol Building, Naila Art Gallery’s exhibit of 15 paintings by artists Ayman Zedani, Marwah Al Mugait and Fahad Al-Niyamah quickly drew attendees to their booth.

It was easy to see why. On one wall the vibrant colors of Fahad Al-Niyamah’s series of paintings of different human faces was placed. On another wall Marwah Al Mugait’s series of four dramatic blue and white prints taken from a video installation of a woman underwater, meant to symbolize the memory of childhood, dominated.

The last wall in the room had four largely black and white minimal photographs by Ayman Zedani, who became an artist after a lifelong interest in experimenting with photo processing, digital art and geometric forms.

Naila Art Gallery's participation came after four intense months of planning at their office in Riyadh. Khadraoui explained, "The exhibition in Washington DC is really the leading one of its kind to showcase emerging artists. We know Washington DC is a political town, but we wanted to be here to show something really positive and creative. People who have stopped by to see our artists have been really impressed at the level of creative talent we have coming out of the Kingdom."

Other countries representing their artwork included, France, Venezuela, Ghana, Holland, and the United States. Established in 2012, Naila Art Gallery represents a number of contemporary and emerging Saudi and international artists. Since its opening the gallery has also launched various education programs, symposiums and workshops with the intention to bridge the gap between a traditional gallery and a cultural hub.

Khadraoui added, "Everyone here has been so supportive and so surprised by Naila's artists. They were surprised that we could show faces in our artwork. They were surprised we were from Saudi Arabia, but we are happy that art has helped changed images of the Kingdom and we look forward to many more international exhibitions ahead."