

Art at the Oasis: Reflections on Art, Education and Culture in Muscat, Oman

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Introduction

This article will explore aspects of Art and Culture in Oman, which relate to my experiences living there in 2011-12. Working as both a Freelance Artist and as the Head of Fine Art at the principle art and design college in Muscat, The Scientific College of Design.

It will in two parts. PART ONE: Art and Culture in Oman, will look at Oman as a location, examples of cultural sites/places, art in the region and the art scene, as I saw it then, in Muscat. PART TWO: Teaching and Practicing Art in Muscat, will explore art culture in this location, my experiences of teaching in Muscat and student learning at The Scientific College of Design. PART TWO will also examine aspects of my art practice during this time.

In this article for want of a better word, when referring to the 'West' or 'Western' ideals or 'Western' art, it will be referring to 'beliefs' and 'art', which are apparent in: UK, USA and Europe, which have been the basis for my own education and life. These places where my learning took place, are predominantly non-Arabic or non-Muslim and have some different attitudes to art and life. These will be looked at here and this article will pay witness to some of my experiences and dissimilarities, which at times, were interesting and inspirational, and at other times frustrating, confusing and sometimes so subtle that they were difficult or impossible to understand. It must also be stated that this article is not suggesting that 'Western' ways or 'Western Art' is better, only that certain aspects can perhaps contribute to new methods of creative and cultural understanding that could be beneficial.

PART ONE: Art and Culture in Oman

'Beyond the fence
you can still see the palm trees,
like bewildered spirits colliding with minarets,
like ships lowering their sails
in misty seas,
and amid their somnolence and green dreams
lurks the evening's next soirée.'

Saif Al Rahbi, Except from 'Our Old House'
Translated by Abdulla al-Harrasi

As in Saif Al Rahbi poem (Al Rahbi, S, 2016), Oman itself is a desert land, lined by a sea, with 'bewildered' Palm trees, which one can identify with when one arrives! The word 'somnolence' here is also a good descriptive word for this sandy place. But make no mistake, Oman, with Muscat as its capital is slowly awaking from a dreamy state and is fast becoming a modern city, with its many international cultural events, which are increasing each year.

In this location, Muslim values are now meeting and mixing with cultural ideas and ways of life derived from the west and this makes it a fascinating place to experience and examine. Oman is full of remarkable cultural places of interest and Muscat's surroundings exude vast natural beauty. In Muscat, one can't fail to miss the grand and sumptuous Royal Opera House or the Grand Mosque or to wonder through the historic central Souk where you will see Omani swords, carpets, silks and one can also peruse the impressive and beautiful local jewelry.

Also when there, one should relax on the beach at Al Qurum, especially during the glorious sunsets. Swimming in the warm sea here, will not only wash away the cobwebs, but you will be treated to a wonderful vista of colours and as you walk along the beach as the sun goes down, you can't fail to be charmed by local fishermen and families sitting around barbecues, with music on portable radios and children playing, engaging with various games.

In fact in this respect Muscat is a paradise and is a popular holiday destination, which compares, I'm sure, with tropical holiday spots such as Barbados in the West Indies or Bali in Indonesia. Along the beach there are many 5 star hotels with drinking dens full of expats, whose demographic comprises of an interesting mix of English Teachers, Canadian Musicians, Oil Workers, Engineers, Ex-Army Mercenaries (who patrol the coast for pirates) and some Omanis, whom, because they are Muslim possibly shouldn't really be drinking.

Further afield one can explore magical places such as 'Sur' in the east or the Al Sawadi Beaches in the west, whose shores offer up a host of amazing shells, clear waters, beautiful seascapes and jaw dropping tropical sea-life.

Alternatively you can venture inland and visit The Al Thowarah hot springs and the Nakal Fort. These will take you back in time, to a place where strongholds were built with mud-formed architecture, and warm baths could be had in the nearby natural springs, long before the luxury of modern central heating arrived here. This particular fort is a very large fortification rebuilt in the 17th Century and houses, a museum, historic guns and also hosts a weekly goat market.

A new creative oasis

In an article the New York Times (Ouroussoff, N, 2010), Nicolai Ouroussoff talks about new art galleries in the Middle East and exciting new developments in Abu Dhabi and Doha.

ABU DHABI, United Arab Emirates — It is an audacious experiment: two small, oil-rich countries in the Middle East are using architecture and art to reshape their national identities virtually overnight, and in the process to redeem the tarnished image of Arabs abroad while showing the way toward a modern society within the boundaries of Islam.

Here, on a barren island on the outskirts of Abu Dhabi, workers have dug the foundations for three colossal museums: an \$800 million Frank Gehry-designed branch of the Guggenheim 12 times the size of its New York flagship; a half-billion-dollar outpost of the Louvre by Jean Nouvel; and a showcase for national history by Foster & Partners, the design for which was unveiled on Thursday. And plans are moving ahead for yet another museum, about maritime history, to be designed by Tadao Ando.

Nearly 200 miles across the Persian Gulf, Doha, the capital of Qatar, has been mapping out its own extravagant cultural vision. A Museum of Islamic Art, a bone-white I. M. Pei-designed temple, opened in 2008 and dazzled the international museum establishment. In December the government will open a museum of modern Arab art with a collection that spans the mid-19th-century to the present. Construction has just begun on a museum of Qatari history, also by Mr. Nouvel, and the design for a museum of Orientalist art by the Swiss firm Herzog & de Meuron is to be made public next year.

(Ouroussoff, N, 2010)

It is wonderful to see that creative leaders in these countries of the Middle East think that art is extremely important. By spending hundreds of millions of dollars to house and transport large and important collections of western and Arabic art to the region. A new Guggenheim and a Louvre museum here will open up so many possibilities for viewing art for Arabic people and creative practitioners. Of course these countries are very close to Oman, so this will allow people here to travel a short distance to engage with this work. However one has to say it's a shame that Oman (also a rich country) doesn't have this same ambition. But despite this there are some interesting art spaces in

Muscat and it is encouraging that new galleries are also appearing since my departure.

During my time there, In my opinion, the most interesting gallery space in Muscat was the Al Zubair Museum; here I was some thought-provoking and interesting work. In 2012 there were many lively conversations to be had with late Sarah White. As the Artist/Curator there, she was an important artistic force in Muscat and was part of a new breed of Omani-centred artists.



Fig. 12, Ayman Humaira, The Dun 2, 2012, Image Courtesy of the Artist

At these shows there were some exciting art pieces to be seen, such as the digital works of Ayman Humaira inspired by Arabic writing (See Fig. 12), and the rich colorful work by Sarah (See Fig 13) and her Contemporaries, like Radhika Hamlai (see Fig 14) and Mohammad Al Zubair (See Fig. 15). Many of these abstract paintings were surprisingly brash and lively and used a lot of symbolic imagery of the region. This reminded me of painterly and playful qualities of artists like Alan Davie, but with an Arabesque sensibility, that was unfamiliar to me.



Fig. 13 Sarah White, Oil on canvas, 2010, Retrieved from Bait Al Zubair Website, <http://www.baitalzubair.com/?lang=en>



Fig. 14 Radhika Hamalai, Oil on canvas Year, 2011, Retrieved from Bait Al Zubair Website, <http://www.baitalzubair.com/?lang=en>

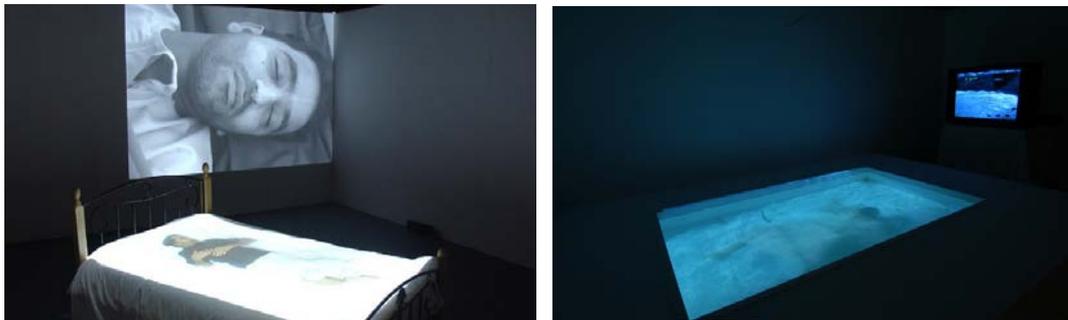


Fig. 15 Mohammad Al Zubair, 2011, Retrieved from Bait Al Zubair Website, <http://www.baitalzubair.com/?lang=en>

Also, I was intrigued then that some works like Al Zubair's work touched on the political unrest. However it was disappointing that alongside some of these rousing works, this gallery had many stiffly painted and twee images, featuring impressionist chocolate-boxy style Arabic scenes and subjects.

It would be nice to think in years to come that these kinds of works will be replaced with more exciting contemporary works by the new up and coming Omani artists and students from the Scientific College of Design and one has to acknowledge, the Dean here, Dr Mona Ismail for her strong leadership and forward thinking in this respect and for hiring *mavericks* like myself, to teach new progressive and creative ideas.

In Oman, one also has to be thankful to curators such as Sarah White, who dedicated her life to modernizing the art-world in Muscat and It is pleasing to see that the Al Zubair Museum, where she worked in Muscat, has built a new purpose built 'Sarah White' contemporary art space in her name, which will I'm sure inspire artist in Muscat. Also in recent times it's exciting to see international Omani Artists, whom have studied and worked abroad, returning to Muscat to live and work, such as Hassan Meer. Meer makes new media work and installations (See Fig. 16) and is responsible for organising several media based art festivals in Muscat and he has just opened a new arts space in Muscat called Stal Gallery. (See Fig. 17)



Hassan Meer, *The Dream & Under the Water*, Installation Works. Retrieved from Bait Al Zubair Website, <http://www.hassanmeer.com/site>



Fig. 17 Paintings done by Iraqi painter Sinan Hussein featured at the Stal Gallery: Retrieved from GMH Journeys Website, <http://www.ghmhotels.com/ghmjournneys/omans-artful-beginnings/>

Meer says in a recent article in about his gallery,

We still need to focus on building the art culture in Oman. I think it becomes increasingly important to focus on art in the schools and with the youth — that's where the future is. We've made a great start, we're only a 50-year-old community, but we're here, and we're growing, and that's the important part. The other exciting aspect is that people are enjoying it. People enjoy seeing the art and learning about the art, and with that positive social response, I think the only place we can go is up.

(GMH Journeys, 2015)

Meer, an International Artist, (Hassen Meer 2016) has exhibited in many public and private spaces in Oman and Abroad. He has also participated on one of the UK's most prestigious residency programmes, at the Delfina Foundation in London, and It is exciting that artists of this calibre are now bringing their experience to Muscat and are also interested in developing education in the region. He says himself, and I agree, that there needs to be a focus on schools and the youth. In particular in my view it is important that young people learn more about art and art movements, so they have a broader knowledge before they go on to study at university level. Consequently, I also think there needs to be more of a focus on student led learning in higher education, which I will talk about in Part 2, and students need to learn how to think conceptually as well as learning intrinsic skills.

PART 2: Teaching and practicing art in Muscat

Hide and Seek: Where is the Counter Culture?

‘The art of the counterculture is the process, product, and remainder of endeavours to reimagine something no less than modern society at large. It is a series of attempts to recast current understandings of the relationship between art and life, work and leisure, individual and society, material and spirit.

(Auther, E and Lerner, A, 2012)

Oman is one of the hottest places on the earth, so, literally, you have to *take your time* to examine this rich and colourful place or very quickly the immense heat saps away your energy. It’s a slow and calm place that feels old fashioned and very Arabic, mainly because it has held on to its local culture despite the huge modernization of roads and infrastructure.

Most of the houses are built in an Arabic style and one can hear the delightful calls to prayer, wherever one is in the Muscat. Of course one can marvel in this allure, but how do these old fashioned qualities affect the art culture here? Well one has to say artists here, (despite some very interesting artists represented by the Al Zubair Museum and Stal Gallery), are still largely attached to traditional ways of working. There is also a distinct lack of counter cultural elements like street art, and one finds mainly traditional paintings, depicting local beauty spots, portraits of people in local dress (women wearing local dress and men with big beards and Omani hats) and a great deal of retinal art which relates to traditional Arabic life.

Coming from a contemporary western background, I was surprised and a little disappointed by the traditionalist nature of art in Muscat, and there is very little to be shocked by. Perhaps this was because, I had seen works in exhibitions, with vanguard Middle Eastern artists and I guess I expected to see more of this kind of work. One such exhibition I want to mention is ‘Unveiled’, at the Saatchi Gallery in London (2009). The show included works that address countercultural and contentious issues involving Arab or Muslim culture. Amongst the works on show here was an installation by Kader Attia called Ghost with many bodiless Muslim women (See Fig.7) and Ahmed Alsoudani paintings, where he depicts the political unrest and violence he experienced first hand in Baghdad, Iraq. (See Fig.8). Interestingly, his paintings I feel has some similarities to Mohammad Al Zubair’s work (Fig.4), which I mentioned in PART 1, but these works, which I saw at the Saatchi Gallery are much less abstract and more politically direct.



Fig.1 Kader Attia, Ghost, 2007, Aluminium foil, Dimensions variable, Retrieved from Saatchi Gallery Website, <http://www.saatchigallery.com/>



Fig.2 Baghdad I, 2008, Acrylic on canvas, 210 x 370 cm, Retrieved from Saatchi Gallery Website, <http://www.saatchigallery.com/>

Also in the UK I was aware of young artists such as Sarah Maple, (Born from an Iranian Muslim mother and English Christian father) whose makes works which, would offend conservative Muslim tastes. Maple often uses, obscene language or imagery, and creates satirical scenes where she explores feminist themes and what it means, to be a women with Muslim ties living in the UK. (See Fig. 3)



Fig.3 Sarah Maple, Retrieved from Sarah Maple Website, <http://www.sarahmaple.com/>

Oman is somewhat different from western cities such as Berlin, London, New York, Paris etc.... where you can see a counter cultural influences everywhere in the graffiti or in galleries here, inspired by Punk, Dada and Fluxus, featuring satirical, anarchic, dark humor and contentious imagery.

Of course, as Oman is a Muslim country, it is steeped in it's own traditional values, which align themselves with this faith. As such, it is very conservative by nature and its also very law abiding and this, I guess, is why that I didn't see a lot of outrageous artworks here. Also because many Omanis would consider them be rude or inappropriate. But despite knowing this, I was surprised that whilst working the Scientific College of Design as Head of Art, I was advised by the leadership, that one shouldn't (within the workshops), encourage the production of work about politics, religion or sexuality. This was so as not to offend both the College's, and the nation's, mainly Muslim values.

From my past experience, I was shocked by this, as these three topics are mainstream themes addressed and taught in Western higher education, and of course these are important aspects of major countercultural art movements such as Punk, Dada and Fluxus. In fact within contemporary art in the west these topics are central to understanding contemporary western art itself. So regarding my leading a course here and working here, there was a difficult decision to make and an important question to wrestle with. How does one work in this college where the governance controls what can be shown or made?

At this time I had just read Auther and Lerner book, *West of Centre Art and Counterculture, Experiment in America 1965-1977*, here it says '*the art of the counterculture reimagines something no less than modern society at large. To create a modern society, an essential condition of its art, is that it incorporates counter cultural forces.*' At this time, I was inspired by this sentiment, and I thought that there possibly needed to be a counter cultural influence at SCD. So after a lot of careful thought I reasoned that I needed a way to teach the

spirit of *politics, religion and sexuality*, without seriously offending anyone and this was important for several reasons.

However some things that were politically sensitive were definitely *off the table*. E.g. if I suggested to a student that they should make fun of the leader of the country 'The Sultan of Oman' or of aspects of Muslim culture in an artwork, one would of course be sacked or maybe put in prison. Or (and this is said with all honesty) put one's life at risk. Therefore, without a doubt it was essential to be very careful and respect the culture one was within and not be too directly countercultural.

After a lot of soul searching, I reasoned that to turn this negative and stultifying situation around I realized that I had to change my perspective about the banned themes. E.g. For 'politics', work could instead be about 'power'. Instead of 'religion', 'belief' and instead of 'sexuality', 'sensuality'. These *new* key themes were talked about instead, as they are softer and slightly less contentious versions and had similarities. Also I understood, that other things could be taught that were exciting to me, and this inspired me to continue to work at SCD despite my initial apprehensions about *censorship*. Such as encouraging students to make a synthesis of works: inspired by the Arabic/Muslim world and Abstraction, Minimalism and Conceptualism. So a focus was also put into these areas for facilitation.

Teaching in an unfamiliar environment

How do you teach somebody something if they are different to you? Perhaps you speak a different language, or you have a different cultural awareness, or you are different ages. These factors can all effect how a person understands something that is being taught.

As head of Fine Art at the Scientific College of Design this was also one of the most interesting and rewarding challenges. Students at the school (mainly female, with traditional dress) were wide-eyed and desperate to find out about the world outside of the Middle East. But as a foreign teacher this had its problems. Some of the students were from small villages, spoke limited English and were half my age. So there were many instances where I would show them things, that they would have no cultural reference for.



Fig.4 Peter Blake Image, Sources of Pop art Vi, 2007: Retrieved from, CCA Galleries Website, <http://www.ccagalleries.com/artists/peter-blake/sources-of-pop-art-vi.html>

E.g. When students were shown a POP art image featuring the iconic 50's singer Elvis Presley. I was surprised that most of the students did not know what POP art was and who Elvis Presley was - even though Pop Art and Presley are very well known in the West. Of course, one can argue: Why would/should these students know this information? As, I'm quite sure if someone were to show me a picture of a famous vintage Arabic singer, I would also be baffled as to who this was. However what was important to me here was that the students should at this stage knew what *POP art* was, because of its overwhelming influence and importance on art today.

I later realised that the reason that they didn't know what *POP art* was, was that many of the students here had started the BA course without any prior art education and in Oman there is a lack of art books to be found. Also in Oman much of the internet and media, isn't as broadly open as it is in the west. This means many of the students couldn't self learn or find many (or any) books on contemporary art or watch many (or any) documentaries about artists and art movements. Also, and this alarmed me, *even in the library at the college* there were very few books about art and there was also no bookstore in the whole of Muscat where one could buy art books.

As such, it was clear to me that there was a need at SCD to devise various ways to show students more images from the history of art and of contemporary works, from far and wide, and to begin to introduce them to new contemporary ideas and increase their knowledge of Conceptualism, Abstraction and Minimalism. This was difficult at first because the focus at this school, before my arrival was wholly on Figuration.

Luckily the staff at SCD, were very open to change to explore new ideas and there was also a lot of encouragement from the American University of Beirut (whom accredited the courses) to do this. The head of art here, Roshad Bohsali, made several visits whilst I was there to oversee the progress in Muscat. He also suggested introducing electives, including installation and printmaking, which we both believed could be crucial for the students in the future.

Teaching different notions of what can art be?

Coined by Duchamp, the term "readymade" came to designate mass-produced everyday objects taken out of their usual context and promoted to the status of artworks by the mere choice of the artist. A performative act as much as a stylistic category, the readymade had far-reaching implications for what can legitimately be considered an object of art.
(Art Story, 2016)

"An ordinary object elevated to the dignity of a work of art by the mere choice of an artist."
(Breton A & Eluard, P, 1938)

As the new head of art, a dialogue with the staff and students was opened and concepts about Abstraction, Minimalism and Conceptualism were introduced into the curriculum. With the staff and students, discussions were also instigated about Duchamp's 'ready-mades' and what art could be? Duchamp's concept of the ready made, of course, allows anything to be art, and it gives students permission to consider using everyday objects in their work.

Also because of the lack of books, printed source materials were laboriously made (by myself) including hundreds of laminated print outs of artists works, with information about the artist on the reverse. These were displayed in the atrium of the fine art department space. This was incredibly useful because the staff could now easily describe attributes of various artists and their works within the workshop environments by showing students these information sheets and talking to them in the atrium.



Banksy, Street Artist

Banksy

Birth name	(unknown)
Born	c. early 1970s
Nationality	British
Field	Graffiti Street art Bristol underground scene Sculpture Social commentary
Awards	Toronto Film Critics Association Awards – Best First Feature 2010 Independent Spirit Award for Best Documentary Feature

Banksy's work was born out of the Bristol underground scene which involved collaborations between artists and musicians. According to author and graphic designer Tristan Manco and the book *Home Sweet Home*, Banksy "was born in 1974 and raised in Bristol, England. The son of a photocopy technician, he trained as a butcher but became involved in graffiti during the great Bristol aerosol boom of the late 1980s." Observers have noted that his style is similar to Blek le Rat, who began to work with stencils in 1981 in Paris and members of the anarcho-punk band Crass, which maintained a graffiti stencil campaign on the London Tube System in the late 1970s and early 1980s and is active today.



Jim Lambie, Coloured Tape, Contemporary

Jim Lambie



Detail of Lambie's installation at the Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden in Washington, D. C., showing typical use of colored tape.

James "Jim" Lambie (born 1964 in Glasgow, Scotland) is a contemporary visual artist, and was shortlisted for the 2005 Turner Prize with an installation called *Mental Oyster*.

A graduate of the Glasgow School of Art, he lives and works in Glasgow, and also operates as a musician and DJ. He once played in the popular Glaswegian band The Boy Hairdressers, which went on to become Teenage Fanelub.

Lambie specialises in colourful sculptural installations made from everyday modern materials including pop culture objects, such as posters and album covers, and household accessories.^{[1][4]} The other trademark theme in his artistic practice is using brightly coloured vinyl tape arranged into patterns around the floor of the gallery space, tracing the shape of the room to reveal the idiosyncrasies of its architecture.^[4]

Fig.5 Examples of Student Handouts

Also to drive a point home in my spare time, I built a giant abstract sculpture on the lawn outside SCD, made out of everyday objects, to demonstrate some Duchampian ideas and I facilitated the creation of a series of Graffiti-esque (See Fig. 6) on college walls and on outside spaces to create a more interesting and rebellious (countercultural-like) environment.

Visiting artists



Fig.6 Graffiti pieces, Natalie Dernaika, SCD Lecturer, SCD Graffiti & Dr Marwan Imran, SCD Lecturer, Trompe-l'œil Piece, 2012. Images Courtesy of the Artists

The New Zealand artist Matthew Cowan was invited to talk about his performance and filmmaking work (see fig. 7) and the UK artist Maggie Tran, who works in the field of horticulture, came to the college to explain to the students that even gardening can be art.



Fig.7 Matthew Cowan, Image Courtesy of the Artist

I thought that implementing lots of change at the college there would be a lot of resistance and problems, however I noticed that my new endeavours, worked very well alongside, what was excellent teaching from the existing staff that also continued teaching essential traditional skills in the fields of Painting, Sculpture and Ceramics and this made for a very happy marriage.

As a consequence, it wasn't long before I noticed changes in student thinking as they began to make more abstract and contemporary looking works. For example Soud Al-Alawi made some excellent *abstract* works based on Arabic floor patterns and one student, Asma Al-Balushi, made a surprising *conceptual* sculpture. A rather realistic looking melt-less 'snowman' sculpture that stood motionless on the grass in 50 Degree heat!



Fig.8 Student Work, Sa'ud Abdullah Rasid Al-Alawi, Abstract work, 2012



Fig.9. Student work, Asma Ali Mahmood Al-Balushi, Melt-less Snowman 2012

Student led learning?

I want to mention here how the students were learning at The Scientific College of Art (SCD) before and during my time there in terms of student-centred learning. These findings are based on *Brandes and Ginnis'* concepts of what student-centred learning is, in 'A Guide to Student-Centred Learning'. I observed at SCD, two aspects of student-led learning aspects that were not happening were that *the learners weren't taking full responsibility for their learning* and *the relationship between learners wasn't more equal to the facilitators - promoting growth, development.* (Brandes, D. and P. Ginnis 1986).

At SCD there was a strong focus of teacher-led study as if it were a scientific study, hence the name of the college was fitting. At SCD one also noticed the staff here were often venerated and students took very little responsibility in choosing what was made/created. Even to a point of asking the teacher, exactly what pictures they should copy from to make their paintings.

Many students at SCD had very little self-reliance and creative choice. In the UK most BA Fine Art modules are taught by setting projects, which are very

open. My experience with students in the UK by contrast, always had too many ideas and thoughts on what they could make and how they could make them. Consequently, In the UK one has to hold the student back and get them to focus. At SCD the opposite was true, one had to push the students forward, in terms of getting students to think for themselves. I believe this was due to the fact that nearly all the lessons were teacher led as opposed to student led. Regarding student led learner it is important that: *The learner should see themselves differently as a result of the learning experience* (Brandes, D. and P. Ginnis 1986) and this was heavily in doubt at SCD as the students were rarely: challenging themselves, taking responsibility for their actions or learning from their own risk taking. In fact there was very little experimentation in general.

I think that perhaps the situation Oman an SCD is somewhat similar to how art was taught in the UK 30+ years ago, in that, in the past in the UK there was more of a focus on learning skills and less on exploring ideas and conceptualism. However, In the UK now students have to be very adept in understanding conceptual and contemporary ideas in art and It seemed obvious that this was something that also needed pushing forward at SCD, as one has to embrace new ideas and ways of working. However, there has to be a balance where ideas and skills are given an equal footing, otherwise artwork will lack in ideas and become out-dated or conversely fail in terms of the application of skill.

In the UK students are set mainly open-ended projects and in their last year of the degree course the students have to devise their own projects and themes and the final year is almost entirely totally student led. From the lecturers: There is no suggested theme, no suggested material, size etc. Students have to take full responsibility of what they do and how they do it. Therefore, regarding these points, at SCD I wanted there to be more of a student led approach to their final 'senior study' work. Consequently, I made changes to the syllabus in this module, and although these weren't completely ideal, students were given more options in terms of choosing their own themes/projects and ways of working.

Another problem at SCD affecting independent choice was the students were given sets of materials and they had little mobility. They mostly lived and worked in the college grounds in student accommodation and many of them didn't have cars. Therefore, they only used materials, which were provided to them at the college. Also there were only canvases being used of certain very small sizes as they couldn't make their own. Consequently I arranged for larger and different kinds of canvases to be acquired and different types of materials were ordered to give them more options.

Incidentally: as the 'senior study' program became more open ended and students began building bigger and more ambitious work both inside and outside, this made a real difference to the feel of the fine art course in general and as a testament to this, the management at SCD were delighted. Mona Ismal, the Dean (who was then quality manager) remarked '*this feels like a real art college now.*'

An experimental abstract artwork created as a teaching aid



Fig.10 What is he building? Mixed Plastic Media, 2011-12

As stated before, I built a large *abstract* artwork as a teaching aid on the lawn of College in Muscat (see fig.10). This thought-provoking experiment was made from colourful plastic objects found in malls and small shops nearby. Including: plastic chairs, stools, funnels, string, hoses, boxes...

This unusual structure on the grass was created in my free time, between lessons and preparatory work. Gradually as it grew, many students and staff would come to view it outside. At first they didn't understand what it was and I explained to them that this was an *abstract* sculpture and they would respond by saying things like: 'But you can't build a sculpture out of plastic?', 'what is it supposed to be?', 'Is this art?' and 'I don't understand *abstract* art'. I found this to be useful at times as a teaching aid as it led to various conversations including talking to the staff about 'Duchamp's Ready-mades' and relating it (to students) to other abstract work made with non traditional materials by: Bill Woodrow, Tony Cragg, Sol Lewitt, Andy Goldsworthy etc. and I was also able to talk about the use of *experimentation* in art, as this itself was an experiment.

As I suppose, one would expect, many observers didn't and couldn't understand that this was a very measured activity. Working in a clear abstract tradition, which had its roots in artwork which uses found objects, by artists such as: Marcel Duchamp, Joseph Beuys and Robert Rauschenberg. However, the students and some staff didn't know who these artists were or about this tradition of working and so they saw my efforts as somewhat *crazy* as had no framework to understand it.

Making this artwork was at times hilarious and at others very difficult, because many viewers didn't have the same-shared knowledge that I had, because of this I also began to also question at times, my own faith in the activity and in making *art* itself. Of course it would of been easier to make something figurative, which everyone would have appreciated, but this would have defeated the purpose of this exercise, to open this dialogue that was needed, as this artwork had to be something new to it's viewers, something which would challenge the status quo.

It was also intriguing for me to build an educational artwork that was testing conventional boundaries of what art could be in a fairly remote Middle-eastern region and it fascinated me that I was working in a college where some of the students had grown up in very remote cloistered villages and had very little measure of any art whatsoever. In some ways, this is why a work like this was inevitably going to fail on many levels, as these students wouldn't be able to get a grasp what I was trying to do or say.

At the time, this added to a sense of unfamiliarity in myself. Pretending, despite an apparent vacuum, that one knew what one was doing, wasn't easy. However, one thing I knew was that the staff and students at least understood that, whatever was being done was fun, and anti- what they were used too. I also knew and found that this was certainly a kind of *countercultural* art that caused some very funny interactions. For example, the staff were unsure as to whether they could sit down on the chairs, which formed part of the sculpture and when they were given permission, this made them even less sure about whether this was *art* or *not!*

My own art practice: Invader 12/13

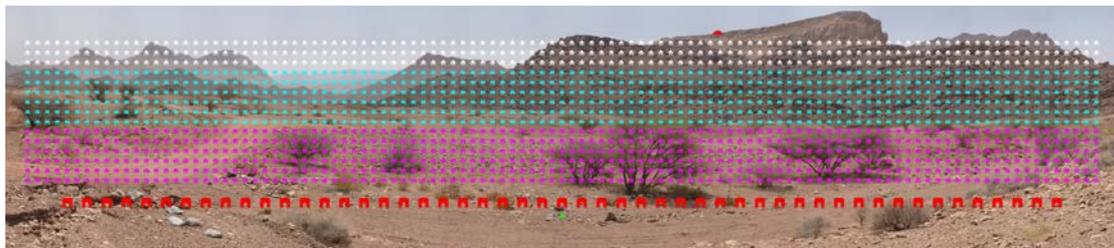


Figure 11, Invader, 2012-13 (Dimensions 4.5m x 1m)

As well as this teaching experiment, my interest in the 'Arab Spring', which was happening at the same time, influenced another work. A photographic collage, called 'Invader'. At this time the demonstrations in Tunisia, Egypt, Libya and Yemen were causing rulers to be deposed and whilst I was at SCD I was also stirred by reading: 'A History of the Middle East' by Nicholas Pelham, 'Seven Pillars of Wisdom: A Triumph' by T.E. Lawrence and 'Orientalism' by Edward W. Said. The feeling of Political change in the air mixed with this reading material led me to dwell on colonialism and its effect in the region.

Using a large photographic panoramic image of the nearby mountains in Muscat. I overlaid Nostalgic motifs of computer games and Space invaders used to suggest ideas about invasion. The aim of this piece was to express,

something of an idea of imperialism. The 'Arab spring' was taking place and it was hard not to think about this, and how past western interventions were effecting the present. Also, It was fascinating to be in this region at this time and to learn about upheavals from people I working with, who had first hand experience of these places. From: Iraq, Jordan, Syria, Egypt and Oman. Each had many stories and views relating to the recent troubles and different conflicts in the Middle East.

What was learnt?

My experiences in Oman led me have various views. I staunchly believe that it would be beneficial if more counter cultural and western influences were bought to Oman through the arts. One could argue that bringing these new creative views onto the region may be to impose a kind of cultural imperialism and one has to admit that this may be the true in some instances. However to my mind this is not so, as in my view artistic drives can be and often have independent agendas, which can simply help people understand their own identities and also how to think about the world critically.

I have also reasoned that vanguard artists and educators in the region don't necessarily need to behave in a disrespectful manner, which would offend Muslim tastes, or satirise Muslim sensibilities or state values in an irresponsible fashion. However, I think there is a need for a certain kind of anti-art or at least the freedom to express new modes of thinking and ideas, because It is important that artists should always aim to make analytical work, which questions the times they live in. There is no reason why this can't this can sit healthily along side Muslim values, which have always in more moderate Arabic nations encouraged inclusivity of other religions, philosophies and thoughtful discourses.

To my mind, it is essential for the government of Oman and its educational institutions to invest in acquiring important mainstream books on art and design for schools and colleges and also to begin opening up some of the restrictions on the access to Internet so students and young people can have more of a discourse with western views. Of course, things are already starting to change and the fact that the Scientific College of Design has hired someone from my background is a testament to this. I also think to boost the arts, the Omani Government can learn a lot form the UAE and Qatar, and invest money in building new world class arts museums. The country then would not only attract visitors interested in art but it will also allow local artist to see more and be enriched by leading contemporary and international art.

Considering my own teaching practice, essentially my aim was to empower students to make work, which expresses a larger context and understand themselves and their place in a global art world, and this is why it is important for students in Oman to understand and adopt more conceptual ideas and western perspectives of art. This means creating ways of challenging them to question what art can be, to take more risks and be more explorative. It is my belief that this can only happen if student led teaching is adopted more freely.

Regarding Oman, If I have one regret, It is having left Muscat after such a short time and that maybe my efforts to modernise the Fine Art Department at the Scientific College of Design were short lived and not fully realised. But one would like to think that somehow my effort 'got the ball rolling'. My memories of this country are also warm, and Omani people really surprised me, with their generosity of spirit and they taught me a great deal about Muslim values and their many beautiful ways of life, which were quite different to what I initially expected.

Also it is clear that there is a new generation of young people in Arab countries, whom are desperate for more openness and the Arab spring is a testament to this. In many ways there is already a new openness in the air with regards to the use of social media and that more young people are travelling and working abroad and being subject to many more western: Movies, TV shows and Internet resources. This is not to suggest that the Omanis should completely adopt western non-Arabic values, but more, to embrace creative ideas and open discussion, as this frankness is to my mind what constitutes healthy creative nations.

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