ARTS FEATURES »

Saudi artist seeks to bring cultures together with installation Paradise Has Many Gates

As part of the Vancouver Biennale, Ajlan Gharem's "mosque made of fences" is set for construction in Vanier Park

by Janet Smith on June 20th, 2018 at 12:25 PM

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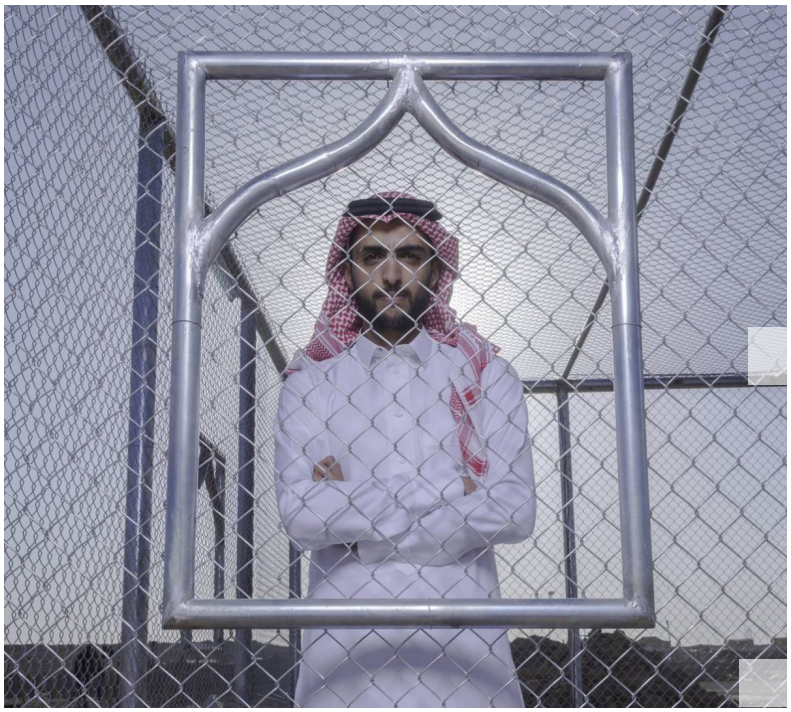

Saudi Arabia's Ajlan Gharem stands behind the chainlink of his *Paradise Has Many Gates*.

When the *Straight* reaches Ajlan Gharem by videophone, it's nighttime in the town of Namas, south of Riyadh, right after the Eid ul-Fitr holiday. The young contemporary artist is sitting out in his family's backyard, the crickets are chirping loudly, and he's smoking a cigarette; the only light comes from the mercurial glow of the village in the distance.

Against the humble setting, this is the face of the new Saudi Arabia—or at least, one of its most exciting faces. And he's taking that face out of this traditionally closed society and into the world. The next stop for his provocative installation *Paradise Has Many Gates* is a high-profile waterfront spot in Vanier Park this week as part of the 2018–20 Vancouver Biennale of public art. He is flying here to witness its building this week and official launch Tuesday (June 26).

"What's happening in Saudi Arabia now—everything has changed in one year," enthuses the affable artist, who's a math teacher by day in Riyadh, referring to reforms by young Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman. "In one year, the women are driving, the cinemas are opening again. Now is the time to be brave. It's the best time for the artists to lead the people, because there are so many things happening, but happening so fast that there is no reaction."

Gharem has indeed been brave, first installing *Paradise Has Many Gates* in a remote part of the Saudi Arabian desert in 2015—shooting video and photos there and then quickly dismantling it for fear of reprisal. The artwork resembles a mosque made out of chainlink—and its interpretations are varied and profound.

He says the first inspiration was time he spent with his family during Ramadan and other occasions in this small town, after coming from the big city of Riyadh. "In Riyadh, you

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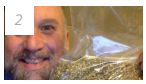
2 
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don't see those big things that keep boundaries to freedom. But in a small village you can see that clearly—the mosque in a small town is different than from the city. So I was seeing these barriers, the visible and the invisible." He wanted to conjure those ideas with his structure, he adds, pointing out almost 70 percent of Saudi Arabia's population is under 30 and starting to question the older generation's strictures. As Gharem puts it: "The older generation has more beliefs than knowledge, and our generation has more knowledge than beliefs."

Saudi Arabia is one of the largest social-media markets in the Middle East, and almost immediately, pictures of Gharem's installation went viral. Some people, inevitably, saw a mosque made out of a cage as an affront to Islam. "But it's not religious," Gharem stresses. "It's about the religiosity, how we are practising it. It's the ideology. So I came up with this idea of the mosque made of fences."

Those fences also resemble the chainlink used around the world to keep out or lock up refugees (even children, as we've witnessed on the nightly news of late); Gharem also cites the cages of Guantanamo Bay.

But the structure is also light and near transparent because of its screenlike material, glowing against the night sky with its lights; the minaret beckons with illumination in green (the colour of Islam). It is a welcoming communal space—one Gharem hopes will bring together cultures and religions while working against Islamophobia. During its installation here, *Paradise Has Many Gates* will play host to an event called Weaving Cultural Identities, a collaboration between Indigenous weavers and graphic artists and members of South Asian, Central Asian, and Middle Eastern Muslim communities. It will also house a free, public Sunset Picnic in the Park on Multicultural Day next Wednesday (June 27) at 6 p.m.; visitors can bring food, and a blanket, and expect music and dance from a variety of cultures.

Paradise Has Many Gates, pictured in the Saudi Arabian desert.

AJLAN GHAREM

"When I took the picture of the mosque, I was trying to make it beautiful," he says, referring to an ethereal shot of his desert installation against the rising sun, men in traditional robes reaching upward toward the hanging lamps of its central dome.

He says that kind of pleasing imagery can disarm people and push them beyond a knee-jerk reaction. "Look at the title itself: 'paradise' doesn't have to mean 'afterlife', it can mean your current life. There are so many gates opening to other people, just being nice to everyone. There's no difference between me and other cultures. And Vancouver has so many cultures there." He says that in Houston, where *Paradise Has Many Gates* showed at the Station Museum of Contemporary Art in an exhibit of Saudi work, visitors were even doing yoga in the structure.

For their part, Gharem and his brother, artist Abdulnasser Gharem, are working in other ways to galvanize the contemporary-art scene that has, till now, been largely below the radar in Saudi Arabia. Their Gharem Studio in Riyadh serves as a centre where artists can work and learn creative processes. And several of those young talents joined Ajlan when he travelled to London, England, in October 2015, exhibiting alongside his videos and photos of the *Paradise Has Many Gates* project. "We have more than 20 artists with us now, and it's like a think tank," he says.

Gharem admits his biggest goal is to return to Saudi Arabia and install *Paradise Has Many Gates* for a more official showing. The time is not yet, but he hopes that it will come soon. "That's my main dream—my main purpose."

The Vancouver Biennale presents a Sunset Picnic at *Paradise Has Many Gates* in Vanier Park next Wednesday (June 27) for Multiculturalism Day.

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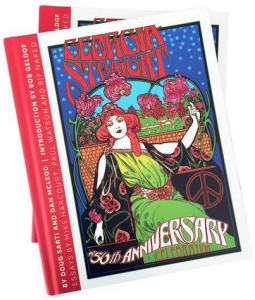

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