

THE GEORGIA Straight

VANCOUVER'S NEWS & ENTERTAINMENT

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+ ---
**CHAIN-LINK
MOSQUE**
SAUDI ART'S
NEW FACE 19

**INDIGENOUS
LANGUAGES**
PRESERVING CULTURE
WITH TECH 11

**DINNER IN
THE SKY**
GRAVITY-DEFYING
THRILLS 15

jazz festival

Sons of Kemet saxophonist Shabaka Hutchings looks to Africa to revitalize the music that came out of New Orleans a century ago

SQUAMISH 12 • SNAIL MAIL 28 • CAMERA OBSCURA 20 • CANNABIS 10



this week's

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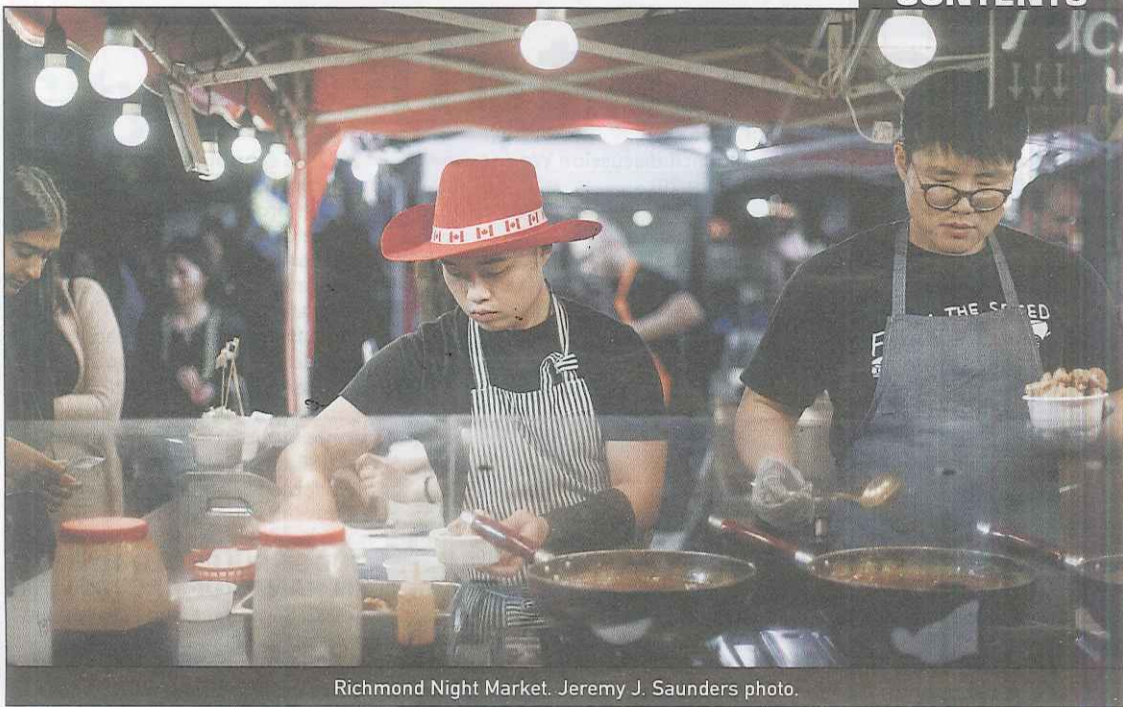
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Richmond Night Market. Jeremy J. Saunders photo.

9 NEWS

The City of Vancouver is taking aggressive measures to curb real-estate speculation in the Broadway Corridor in advance of a rapid-transit project being built from VCC-Clark Station to Arbutus Street.
 > BY CHARLIE SMITH

10



CANNABIS

First Nations entrepreneurs are advocating for much more Indigenous participation in the cannabis-legalization process.
 > BY PIPER COURTENAY

11



TECHNOLOGY

A local nonprofit combines tradition and technology while preserving First Nations languages through a suite of unique apps.
 > BY KATE WILSON

15



FOOD

Ever wanted to sit at a table for dinner and get hoisted 150 feet above the city? Ever had to visit a bathroom while up there?
 > BY TAMMY KWAN

19



ARTS

Ajlan Gharem's *Paradise Has Many Gates* went viral in Saudi Arabia. Now the big art installation is hitting the Vancouver waterfront.
 > BY JANET SMITH

27



COVER

Sons of Kemet saxophonist Shabaka Hutchings shows that there's a lot more to jazz than the American model.
 > BY ALEXANDER VARTY

29 CLASSIFIEDS

Automotive | Education | Services | Travel Marketplace | Employment | Real Estate Property Rentals | Music | Announcements Callboard | And more...

COVER PHOTO PIERRICK GUIDOU

START HERE

- 15 The Bottle
- 28 Confessions
- 15 I Saw You
- 24 Movie Reviews
- 12 Real Estate
- 31 Savage Love
- 14 Straight Stars
- 8 Straight Talk
- 22 Theatre
- 23 Visual Arts

TIME OUT

- 23 Arts
- 29 Music

SERVICES

- 29 Careers
- 12 Real Estate

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BY JANET SMITH

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 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



Above, Saudi Arabia's Ajlan Gharem stands behind the chain link of his *Paradise Has Many Gates*, also pictured in his homeland's desert, below.

Art opens up new gateways

At the Vancouver Biennale, Saudi artist Ajlan Gharem's "mosque made of fences" aims to bring cultures together in Vanier Park

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.

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.

"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 Abdunasser 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.



THINGS TO DO

ARTS



Editor's choice

MANE EVENT For 25 years, Chor Leoni has been launching each summer by mixing it up on the Bard on the Beach stage—wildly jumping from Broadway hits to folk songs, funk, and everything in between. But now the all-male choir's schedule has become so busy that it's bidding adieu to the warm-weather showstopper—but not before reprising a hit from its first performance on the Bard stage, Miles Ramsay's merging of Cole Porter's "So in Love" with Leonard Bernstein's "Tonight". That piece will share the farewell program with everything from Peter Gabriel's "In Your Eyes" to a Lady Gaga/Madonna mashup. Yes, the boys are going to go out in style. ♦

Chor Leoni presents Mane Event at Bard on the Beach this Monday (June 25) and next (July 2).

High five

Five events you just can't miss this week

1 ONCE (To July 29 at the Granville Island Stage) A cool, Dublin-set indie spin on the guy-meets-girl musical.

2 TITANIC: THE ARTIFACT EXHIBITION (June 23 to January 11, 2019, at Lipont Place art centre in Richmond) Shoes, Champagne, and more brought up from the bottom of the sea.

3 JEREMY DUTCHER (June 27 at the Roundhouse Community Arts and Recreation Centre) Opera meets ancient Indigenous song in a unique concert.

4 MACBETH (To September 13 at the Bard on the Beach BMO Mainstage) Strong vision and performances at the bloody Bard season opener.

5 CABIN FEVER (To September 30 at the Vancouver Art Gallery) A fun and artistic celebration of an iconic piece of architecture.

In the news



VINES FEST BLOOMS The multidisciplinary, eco-minded Vines Art Festival has announced details for its event, which opens on August 8 and wraps on August 18 with the main event at Trout Lake Park. Performers on the last day include queer Filipino-Canadian rapper and soul singer Kimmortal; dancer and choreographer Katie Cassady of TWObigsteps Collective and Donald Sales/Project 20; New York-born, Montreal-bred performance poet Rabbit Richards; artist collective Art Is Land Network (AILN); and punk-edged percussion masters Onibana Taiko. Meanwhile, Vines' Resilient Roots Project is partnering with emerging and midcareer Indigenous "artists" to create a new work to be performed at Trout Lake on August 17 and 18. Also look for artists eco-activating parks throughout Vancouver in the lead-up to the main event, at Kits Beach, CRAB Park, Granville Island, the Roundhouse Community Arts and Recreation Centre, and Strathcona Park. ♦