



Art's biggest stars are flocking to the collecting
mecca of **Qatar**, but how rich can art be in a land
without free speech? *Jonathan Guyer* reports





the shape of tomorrow



Doha: Plastic and ready-made, it's a city built for Jeff Koons.

When I run into him in March at the elevator bank at the W Doha Hotel, it feels staged. House music plays at a tasteful volume for nine o'clock in the morning. Koons's smile is cartoonish and his gray skinny tie impeccably knotted. A frequent guest of the Qatari royal family, the artist is in the desert peninsula's capital to headline the *New York Times* Art for Tomorrow conference. For a cool \$1,995, attendees from around the globe enjoy a three-day confab, which also features Marina Abramović, Jeffrey Deitch, Marc Spiegler, and Hans Ulrich Obrist, as well as cyborg artists ("an art movement where artists express themselves through new senses created by the union between cybernetics and their organism," according to the newspaper of record), sheikhs, and corporate philanthropists, all in conversation with *Times* journalists Roger Cohen, Robin Pogrebin, and Farah Nayeri. The convener of the event is Sheikha Al-Mayassa bint Hamad bin Khalifa Al-

Thani: chairman of Qatar Museums Authority, sister of the country's emir, and one of the world's wealthiest art collectors.

Art for Tomorrow boasts a buffet of international perspectives on cultural and urban change, highlighting Qatar's role in this New World Order. Wandering through Doha's museums and speaking with artists, I am wowed by the scale of the state's ambitions: All the art that money can buy is a lot of art indeed. But the inflammatory issues of the region's present—censorship, labor rights, dynastic succession—are left unaddressed in the *Times*'s plenary sessions. Rather, the proceedings circulate around the placid lexicon of TED Talks, platitudes of futurism veering into the apolitical and commercial. But in Qatar, you cannot separate politics from art, in large part because the emir's family is the patron of the arts.

Inside Doha's Mathaf Arab Museum of Modern Art, however, provocative gestures

can be found, albeit through artifacts of the past. Canvases by Egyptian painter Inji Efflatoun (1924–1989) tackle taboo issues. A new Museum of Slavery gestures toward Qatar's labor crisis. I begin to understand that the country's redlines are undoubtedly broken, often to little fanfare. Artists tend to shrug at rules, but I keep coming back to the inescapable fact: In Qatar, dissent might land you in jail.

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"I love the ready-made because of the idea of acceptance," Koons tells me, "that everything is in play and that everything is perfect in its own being." It's little wonder that he is attracted to Qatar. The mini-state's boom mirrors the artist's own rise to fame. Two decades ago, Doha had no skyline. It was just a smattering of one- or two-story edifices on the desert coast. Today, the sun glistens on glass towers, cylinders, space-age shapes. "As a nation that is growing very quickly and embracing global culture and joining in the narrative of global art, I think it's quite obvious for us to bring in contemporary artists," Sheikha Al-Mayassa said at the *Times* conference. "In fact, we're trying to bring contemporary artists here to inspire young artists to see what's happening around the world...with complete respect to our tradition and conservative culture."

Within the six countries of the Arabian Gulf, there are multiple art scenes operating on a variety of local, regional, and international levels, from Dubai's reenactment of a Chelsea-esque warehouse district (Alserkal Avenue) to Sharjah's cozy community of cutting-edge museums, bolstered by a popular biennial. Doha's scene has several nodes, and Sheikha Al-Mayassa is their primary driver. The line between her private collection and the massive museum expansion campaign is vague. As part of her purported \$1 billion buying budget, she is said to have spent somewhere in the ballpark of \$250 million for Cézanne's *The Card Players*

and \$300 million for Gauguin's *Nafea Faa Ipoipo*, neither of which is currently on public view.

Is art here just a quirky initiative for elites, or for the collective good? Certainly a great deal of the cultural-construction frenzy is accessible to the masses. The government reclaimed an artificial island from the sea for the I.M. Pei–designed Museum of Islamic Art. Back on the mainland, French architect Jean Nouvel is building a whimsical National Museum out of stacked disks that is bolder than any *Star Wars* set, due to open next year. A \$5.5 billion neighborhood-development project is under way, with four new museums that excavate local histories. A half-hour drive away is Education City, where six landmark American universities, including Carnegie Mellon and Northwestern, have established colonies with the generous financial support of the Qatar Foundation, though poor suburban planning makes a car necessary to travel between the campuses. Nearby stands Rem Koolhaas's Qatar Foundation building, not far from Damien Hirst's 14 massive sculptures in bronze depicting a fetus's development into a newborn, entitled *Miraculous Journey*. A stadium designed by the late Zaha Hadid, a layered ellipse inspired by local sailboats, is being assembled for the 2022 World Cup. Sixty miles into the desert, the government commissioned Richard Serra to create a series of towering sculptures entitled *East-West/West-East*, 2014. (The price tag: \$120 million.) And with Koons and Koolhaas, among others, on hand for openings and keynotes, at times it feels as if Doha is not only collecting art, but also collecting artists.

At first blush, art here is but a commodity, highbrow kitsch, a balloon dog for the royals' never-ending birthday party. But as easy as it is to be skeptical and cynical about these top-down efforts, the royal family has put an emphasis on education initiatives. Likewise, the attempt to create a museumgoing culture

Huang Yong Ping
Installation view
of *Wu Zei*, 2010,
in "What About
the Art?" at Qatar
Museums Gallery
Al Riwaq in 2016.



is praiseworthy. Doha's museums, which offer free admission, exhibit a range of contemporary art, as well as historical Arab and Islamic art. As American institutions like the Guggenheim, Hirshhorn, and Whitney begin to integrate the Middle East into their curatorial programs, Qatar has already highlighted largely overlooked moments of Arab culture, along with international trends from outside the orbit of the Western mainstream. To some degree, Qatar's museums are ahead of the curve, with their Western counterparts now struggling to play catch-up.

If the development of an Islamic art museum was a natural choice, there are somewhat untraditional cultural flows at play, too. Consider "What About the Art? Contemporary Art from China," a show in 16 rooms at Gallery Al Riwaq, on view through July 16. (Both Damien Hirst and Takashi Murakami have held solo shows there.) Al Riwaq falls under the umbrella of Qatar Museums, a state agency founded in 2005 that maintains several museums of art and promises many more. Separate from the Ministry of Culture yet distinctly part of the family business, QM's budget is not disclosed, though as oil prices drop, the institution is scaling back; 240 staff members were let go in January. Nevertheless, QM has complicated the global domination of Western art by hosting 16 artists from China, and offering them more space to exhibit than most American or European institutions previously have.

At the China premiere, hundreds of smartly dressed Qataris, expats, and guests of the *Times* conference sipped mocktails and munched spring rolls and spoonfuls of mango in the gallery's foyer. All awaited the arrival of Sheikha Al-Mayassa—for the simple reason that, according to official protocol, no one could enter the exhibition until she had. I was making small talk with some junior museum officials when a hand tapped me on the shoulder and a guard gently moved me out of the way. I turned to see

Sheikha Al-Mayassa posing for photos. Once the sea of people had parted, Her Excellency and entourage entered the galleries.

The scale of each room was grander than the one before: hundreds of Hu Zhijun's intricate clay figurines; Liu Wei's city built of oxbow dog chews; Huang Yong Ping's mammoth octopus suspended from the ceiling, its tentacles pervading the room. That was frightening enough, but the earsplitting booms from the next gallery beckoned. What was the noise coming from the huge, metal-plated cube? Peering through oval windows into the 27-by-39-by-39-foot structure, one saw a fire hose flapping up, down, and around, filling the box with water, blasting it against the walls and ceiling. The noise was jarring, the sound of urban construction injected into the white cube of a museum. A mist of water grazed my face through a small crack in the container. The piece is called *Freedom*.

I wondered whether art could play a productive role where political reform and free speech are absent, or at least strictly limited. In this conservative,

constitutional monarchy, those strictures are epitomized by Al Jazeera, a satellite news and online outlet founded by the royal family, which reports freely about current events globally but avoids local politics entirely. A day earlier, when I landed at Hamad International Airport, I had bought copies of all the day's newspapers, Arabic and English. Each had the same cover photo and some version of the less than stirring headline: "Emir Witnesses Military Parade in Saudi Arabia."

Criticism, broadly speaking, is off the table. Five years ago, the poet Mohammed al-Ajami posted a video of himself reading "Tunisian Jasmine," a passionate reflection on the uprisings that were then sweeping the Arab region and the contradictions of the royal family's monopoly on power. A Qatari court sentenced al-Ajami to life in prison. (The sentence was later commuted to 15 years.) This February, 20 scholars of Arabic literature, writing in an open letter, urged colleagues to boycott a translation conference hosted by the government: "Qatar's rulers need to understand that they will not be respected as patrons so long as they imprison artists for practicing

their craft."

Religious conservatism demarcates another redline. In Qatar, Koons could never exhibit "Made in Heaven," his collaboration with the Italian pornography star Ilona; the racy sculptures *Woman in Tub* and *Fait d'Hiver* wouldn't fly, either. Even his stainless-steel train sets with Jim Beam logos or liquor advertisements from the "Luxury and Degradation" series would offend local mores. I asked Koons about the moral dimension of visiting a country that not only wouldn't show much of his catalogue but is also willing to jail a poet. "I've heard stories of an artist being in prison," Koons told me, as

we sat on white couches in the W. "My idea of participating and of art having a moral responsibility, I think, comes from my experience of growing up," he said, "in that first you have a concept of self and of transcendence of the self, and then you become aware of your place within the community and your responsibility to the community, and that just gets played out on larger scales later in life, depending upon your desire for participation." I found that answer unsatisfactory: Al-Ajami participated, and ended up in jail. In previous interviews, Koons has discussed the moral obligation the artist has to



FROM TOP:
Jeff Koons at
the New
York Times Art
for Tomorrow
conference,
2016.

The Museum
of Islamic Art,
designed by
I.M. Pei.



FROM TOP: THE NEW YORK TIMES ART FOR TOMORROW CONFERENCE; QATAR MUSEUMS AUTHORITY



Faraj Daham
Street Language
 #22/23, 2011.
 Diptych, mixed
 media on
 canvas, 6 x 13 ft.

the viewer—a conception of responsibility that is oddly bereft of politics. These comments in mind, I asked: Isn't it difficult to create art without freedom? "I think that art can be quite political, but on the surface it doesn't have to be so obvious in its politics. The underlying core can be just for the empowerment of people, the empowerment of the viewer, but it doesn't have to be connected to any specific issue," Koons said. "If you make something which is disruptive to society and is not helpful, at a certain point it's for that society just to not really support it or pay it any mind."

Some have found ways to work within the limits while pushing the envelope. So says Sophia Al-Maria, a Qatari-American filmmaker and writer with a solo show opening at the Whitney in the fall, speaking alongside Sultan Sooud Al-Qassemi, founder of the Barjeel Art Foundation in Sharjah. They were members of an Art for Tomorrow panel discussing Doha as a "creative city," the sole session that actively addressed the local scene, focusing more on its museums than its artists.

Raised in both Washington State and Qatar, Al-Maria first gained prominence for coining the term Gulf Futurism to capture the sci-fi vision of the present that has taken shape in Doha and Dubai, and across the mushrooming cities of

the Arabian Desert. "I think censorship is, in an odd way, sometimes an advantage for an artist," she said in response to an audience question, "because it forces one to be creative, frankly." She smiled and continued, "You don't write a poem and fill the whole page. You have to use the tools you have to craft something which fits the meter."

"I'm surprised with what we got away with, to be honest with you," added Al-Qassemi, ostensibly referring to exhibitions at his Emirates-based art space, "I'm not going to talk about it too much, so that nobody notices." The audience laughed.

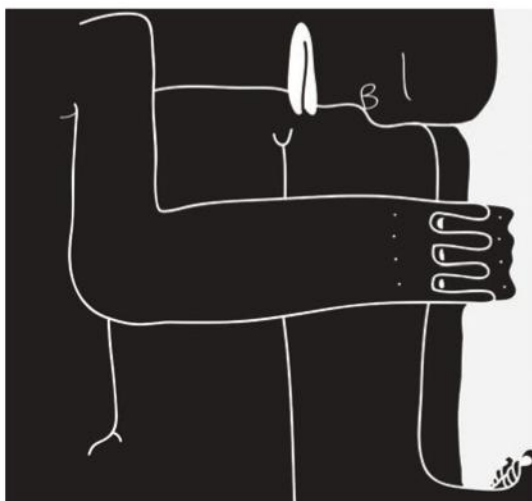
I sat down with Al-Maria later that week at the Art Dubai fair, after she had screened her playful, dystopian short film, *The Future Was Desert*. She didn't want to talk about incarcerated Qatari poets. Instead, she cited her own grappling with self-censorship, notably in her 2012 memoir, *The Girl Who Fell to Earth*. At the *Times* conference, she noted that the first video piece she had displayed at a Qatari gallery was inexplicably removed. Yet she declined to talk on record about the piece, the circumstances of its bowdlerization, or offer examples of how censorship had affected her work. "You might offend someone without knowing," she says. "Having your stuff taken

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Khalid Albaih

RIGHT:
Trapped, 2015.
Digital print
on canvas,
23½ x 23½ in.

BELOW:
Censorship, 2015.
Digital print
on canvas.



down is the least of the things that could happen.” In an absolute monarchy, the redlines are sometimes a mystery.

In spite of such restrictions, Qatar’s capital continues to attract celebrity artists. Next year, Marina Abramović will conduct a series of lectures and performances, and exhibit at Al Riwaq. “It is not easy to have a show in Qatar concerning my kind of work,” Abramović told me by phone. (When I asked her to expound on a topic she did not broach in her remarks at the Art for Tomorrow conference, she replied, “If I want to have the show in Qatar, I shouldn’t say anything.”)

She went on to praise Sheikha Al-Mayassa, to whom Koolhaas introduced her at the Venice Biennale. “In the past, who sponsored art?” Abramović asked, rhetorically. “It was popes, kings, and aristocrats. And now it’s royal families or industry.” She cited Richard Serra’s sculptures

in the Qatari desert (*East-West/West-East*, 2014), which she called “one of the best pieces he ever made in his life.” But can art transcend its material circumstances, its relationship to capital, or are such momentous sculptures inseparable from the princess (and the political system) who commissioned them?

In Doha, some of the most provocative questions about art and politics are being posed, surprisingly enough, in official museums.

The Mathaf Arab Museum of Modern Art grew out of one royal’s private collection and has already expanded to include 8,000 pieces. Displaying canvases of modern Arab masters who are scarcely represented at American and European institutions, it holds the potential to change the way we talk about art in the region. “This collection is invaluable,” said Al-Qassemi,

the Emirati art collector. Furthermore, the Mathaf—Arabic for “museum”—is creating an online Encyclopedia of Modern Art and the Arab World, an emerging resource that so far includes 40 peer-reviewed artist biographies, high-resolution images, and a handful of critical essays; a boon for scholarship considering that, even in Arabic, art publications are rare, often out of print, and riddled with inaccuracies.

In capturing politically subversive moments in recent Arab history, the Mathaf subtly critiques the present. The work of Egyptian painter Inji Efflatoun can be seen here as part of a survey of works from the collection, on view through September 4. Efflatoun had painted portraits of Egyptian workers until she was incarcerated by the regime of Gamal Abdel Nasser for her political activities. While in prison, from 1959 to 1963, she painted fellow inmates, staid women in black-and-white striped suits, and trees growing outside the barred windows. Not far from Efflatoun’s paintings, Big Brother looms: While photos of the emir hang in all Qatari lobbies, here the viewer is treated to a 10-by-10-foot painting of the former emir and his wife, courtesy of Yan Pei Ming.

A security guard had been following me from room to room at the museum—I guess he was bored. On that recent Saturday afternoon, I was the only visitor in the Mathaf’s 59,000-square-foot space. He suggested I visit a room that held *Street Language #22/23*, a 2011 mixed-media piece by 60-year-old Doha-born artist Faraj Daham. It depicts 12 masked men, sporting baseball hats or hard hats, who gaze at the viewer; they stand against a bright-yellow backdrop, beyond a barrier of caution tape. Maybe they are protesters or terrorists, but I saw them as workers shielding themselves from the sweltering sun. The 13-foot canvas rouses the country’s significant labor controversies; only one in five residents is Qatari, and the rest are foreign laborers, many of whom lack basic political

or economic rights—a situation that the *Guardian* has likened to “modern-day slavery.”

As I continued to explore Doha’s museums, I realized that one of the few ways locals can engage with a fraught present is through an exploration of the past. The Slavery Museum, a renovated Qatari former slave owner’s home, confronts labor issues that would not be covered in the local press. The museum’s elegant English and Arabic displays describe how, in the pearl and date-cultivation industries, slaves were exploited until 1929; various exhibits detail the horrors of enslavement across all continents. But perhaps the most vital piece of writing in the museum is a small sidebar, near a photo of foreign migrant workers lunching in the sun, in the final room: “Many construction workers in the rapidly industrializing parts of the world, especially the Gulf region, are considered to be contractually enslaved.”

As I exited the museum, a dozen workers in neon-yellow vests, yellow hats, and red face masks were paving the new road connecting the museums to their parking lots. It wasn’t unrealistic to suppose that they lived in tent cities on Doha’s outskirts, part of the mass of laborers responsible for the city’s grandeur. On numerous occasions journalists have been ejected for their investigations. In May 2015, for instance, authorities detained and interrogated a BBC team visiting labor encampments deemed outside the purview of their official press trip. Three recent *Times* articles about Qatar’s art and museums have failed to properly address these issues. Yet a March 2016 report published by Amnesty International illustrates that the mistreatment of laborers persists in spite of the government’s professed policy changes. “Our goal is to create a legacy of improved conditions for workers in Qatar and to set the standard for both labor rights and human rights in the Gulf region,” the Ministry of Foreign Affairs wrote in response to Amnesty’s report, which focused on stadiums



under construction for the 2022 World Cup. “To that end, we are well aware that our efforts are a work in progress.”

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“Going back to some of the problems here in Qatar, I’m naive of some of the aspects,” Koons admitted. “I know that internationally there has been a movement to try to make working conditions better for laborers, and I think that a lot of problems, not only here but internationally, have been addressed to try to make situations where, if abuses take place, they’re corrected.” Of course, Koons is not a political commentator, but I had hoped that he would have more deeply considered the ramifications of lending his name to Doha. Rather than discuss freedom of expression or labor here, he waded into theoretical issues surrounding his work. We also conversed about cartoons. “People feel unintimidated by comics,” Koons told me. “They feel familiar with them and are open to an abstract dialogue.”

It might make sense, then, that one of the boldest artists in Qatar is, in fact, an unassuming cartoonist. “Basically, I live two lives,” Khalid Albaih told me. By day, Albaih directs public installations for Qatar Museums, gargantuan sculptures in the airport or urban roundabouts. By night, when his children are in bed, he draws political cartoons, or Khartoons, as he dubs them.

His work was on display at the Doha branch of Virginia Commonwealth University, an art and design school in Education City, where Koons had lectured a day earlier. I led a public conversation with Albaih; he was candid about the limitations he faces, such as the country’s cyber crime laws that prohibit the “spread of false news” and violations of “social value,” among other vague measures. Likewise, Albaih knows certain public figures are off-limits. Yet he finds ways to slip in dissent. In one cartoon, bullets face off against pens. In another, a military official and a man in

traditional dress chase a man whose head is a shining lightbulb. “Censorship does really make you more creative,” he told the couple dozen students and faculty in attendance. By contrast, cartoons in the Qatari press are predictable, safe, and boring; like elsewhere in the Middle East, there is more leeway online and in galleries than in print or broadcast.

Albaih’s work questions the very circumstances of suppression and the utility of social media, the primary platform for sharing and consuming his art. Albaih has thus far gotten away with his illustrated critiques of authority, though he did mention that at times friends and colleagues have told him to tone down his work. “Censorship doesn’t only exist here in this region, it’s wherever you go,” he told the audience at VCU. For instance, when the *Times* profiled him in 2013, the paper declined to include any of his cartoons about Palestine in the article or accompanying online videos.

Albaih and I skipped the Art for Tomorrow “Cyborg Art” panel with Neil Harbisson and Moon Ribas and spent the afternoon driving around Doha. He is impressed by the government’s emphasis on education, his boss Sheikha Al-Mayassa’s ever-expanding art initiatives, and just how much the city has changed since his childhood. The next day, I flew to Dubai International Airport. Waiting at the luggage carousel, I hopped on the free Wi-Fi and saw that Albaih had tagged me on Facebook: The Qatari emir had pardoned the poet Mohammed al-Ajami—after he had served four years in prison.

I was reminded of what someone had asked Albaih a day prior at the artist talk: Are you brave or are you stupid? “A bit of both, I guess,” he replied coyly. “Every time I post something, I’m like ‘Yeah, that’s it. It’s going to be a problem.’ You know, I do this because of my kids. I don’t want them to live in the same world that I live in. And somebody has to say, ‘This is wrong.’” **MP**

Richard Serra
East-West/West-East, 2014.