

Ahmed Mater

b. 1979, Tabuk, Saudi Arabia

Currently lives and works in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia

An artist and doctor, Ahmed uses photography, film, video and text alongside traditional techniques such as painting, calligraphy and illumination to express his unique vision of the world – a vision based on his belief in the transformative potential of art. In recent years his country's landscape has also become his canvas, with Land Art installations at AlUla in northern Saudi Arabia. Today he is one of the most significant cultural voices in the Middle East, both through his own art and his influential collaboration with other artists and institutions. His studio in Diriyah, Riyadh, is founded on the principle of open access and education, providing a space for young artists to develop ideas and contribute to a new cultural Renaissance in Saudi Arabia.

Ahmed's art, like his life, is one of intersections, tracing the fracturing fault-lines of tradition and innovation, heritage and globalisation, economic progress and community. In his work he maps, documents and analyses these changes, considering the psychological impact on the individual, society, and the world.

Born in Tabuk in 1979, Ahmed moved with his family to the southern province of Asir where his early years were to witness extraordinary social and ideological shifts in Saudi Arabia and the wider region. It was a time of seismic change, when the oil boom and regional conflict led to increasing tensions between religion and power. The reverberations were felt even in the fertile mountainous region close to the border with Yemen where Ahmed grew up, far from the Kingdom's dominant religious and administrative capitals.

As a medical student in Abha, Ahmed began to explore an interest in art first awakened by his mother's traditional *al-Qatt al-Asiri* wall paintings. In 1998 he heard about al-Meftaha Arts Village, which had been opened at Abha in the 1980s by the governor of Asir province, Prince Khalid bin Faisal al-Saud, as a cultural oasis in reaction to the radicalisation of 1979. At al-Meftaha, Ahmed soon began to play a leading role in the formation of some of the Kingdom's earliest contemporary art movements and exhibitions: Shattah, Mostly Visible, and Edge of Arabia, which has connected a new generation of Saudi artists with audiences around the world.

Ahmed's interest in collaboration and socially engaged artistic practice was key to the establishment of Pharan Studio in Jeddah around the end of 2013. The idea of a common story that binds people together, at a local or national level, is threaded through his work and led to his participation in the tribal gathering at Standing

Rock Sioux Reservation in North Dakota in 2016. It was here that he showed *Evolution of Man* - a human X-ray holding a gun to his head that morphs into a petrol pump - in solidarity with the protestors seeking to protect their land from the construction of an oil pipeline that would jeopardise their water source, damage sacred sites and violate tribal treaty rights. From 2017-18, for its inaugural year, he was the Founder Director of MiSK Art Institute in Riyadh, where his tenure included overseeing the first Saudi National Pavilion at the Architecture Exhibition at La Biennale di Venezia.

After completing his tenure at MiSK in 2019, he returned during the Covid pandemic to his earlier seminal project of photographing Mecca (documented in the book *Desert of Pharan*), seeing a rare opportunity to capture the city when completely empty. He began to work on his next book, *Prognosis*, and in 2021 moved to his new studio in JAX district - a thriving community centred around the arts and culture in Riyadh. He participated in the first edition of Noor Riyadh Art Festival and the first contemporary art Biennale in Diriyah entitled 'Feeling the Stones'.

In 2022 Ahmed revealed the land art project of 'Ashab al-Lal' (mirage) for Wadi AlFann in AlUla, the desert region of north-west Saudi Arabia - an impressive feat of engineering that he has developed over four years. In 2024 he exhibited his collaborative project with Armin Linke, 'Saudi Futurism', at the Diriyah Biennale, and opened his mid-career retrospective, 'Ahmed Mater: Chronicles', at Christie's London. Later that year, he was awarded the French Chevalier de l'Ordre des Arts et des Lettres in recognition of his exceptional contribution to the artistic world as well as his profound impact on the cultural landscape of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia.

His work is part of major international collections, including The British Museum, London; Victoria & Albert Museum, London; Los Angeles County Museum of Art, California; and Centre Pompidou, Paris.