

IMITATING LIFE

In an exclusive introspective, Sur la Terre turns a discerning eye on the triumphs and tribulations of Qatar's local arts community.

>>> To the untrained eye, the Gulf region is only about one of two things: oil or gas. What most outsiders do not realise is that the Gulf, in particular Qatar, does not simply run on fossil fuels. Instead, it is being increasingly stirred by a widening gyre of heritage and cultivation. It shouldn't be a surprise then that Qatar has just recently been named the Arab Capital of Culture by UNESCO and the Arab League, a title held previously by such nations as Egypt, Lebanon and Palestine. The country has also been honoured as the 2021 Capital of Islamic Culture by the Organisation of Islamic Conference (OIC). Such accolades do not normally come so liberally from the international community, and are a true testament to the country's dedication to its own cultivation.

And yet, even though the Gulf is stoking its own flame with an ever increasing flare for the arts, and is privileged with a great deal of triumph, it is not without its challenges and near-tragedies. Overcoming unfamiliarity, establishing appreciation and prevailing past financial restrictions are but a few of the issues with which the community must contend. However, given the right support, there is literally nothing that can halt Qatar and the rest of the Gulf states' evolution from what was once seen as a barren centre of nomadic trade and tentative exploration into a Middle East hub of arts couture.





< FULL HOUSE: THOUSANDS TURNED UP TO THE DTFF'S OPENING NIGHT GALA SHOW >



< PRIME SEATING AT THE DOHA TRIBECA FILM FESTIVAL >



< ROBERT DE NIRO LOOKS ON AT THE DTFF >

THE TRIUMPH OF THE REEL WORLD

One of the most exemplary testaments to the Gulf's newly-flourishing love affair with the arts is the region's focus on establishing premiere film festivals. Qatar, for example, has just recently completed the successful first year of its own Doha Tribeca Film Festival. The DTFF is the first festival waving the Tribeca banner to take place outside of the New York base where it was created by Jane Rosenthal, Craig Hatkoff, and of course, Robert De Niro. The event's Chairperson, Her Excellency Sheikha Al Mayassa bint Hamad bin Khalifa Al Thani worked hard with Qatar Museum Authority CEO Abdulla Al Najjar and DTFF Executive Director Amanda Palmer to create a forum of film-art appreciation by bringing the star power and artistic ethos of the established festival to the shores of Doha. Those efforts have proven to be a resounding success.

Even though the 2009 spotlight was firmly focused on the Tinsel Town "beau monde," with significant attention paid to blockbusters like Steven Soderbergh's *The Informant*, *Amélie* by Mira Nair and *Capitalsim: A Love Story* by Michael Moore, it did not cast a darker shadow on the true purpose of DTFF: to enrich and bolster the artistry of local cinema, many pieces of which were on prominent display. In fact, it was the independent and regional films, like *Team Qatar*, which was awarded Best Festival Film honours, and *Pomegranates and Myrrh*, which was

named Best Arab Film, that truly grasped the artistic attention of moviegoers. Perhaps the night's most noteworthy accolade went to Sophia Al Maria, a Qatari filmmaker who won an award for her short film *The Racer*. Al Maria's film, which was part of the "1 Minute Film" collection showcasing shorts from local artists only, was by far the best of a number of talented entries shown in the lead-up to the festival. The decision to highlight local talent by offering them a stage at such a highly-anticipated international film festival was truly visionary. The overwhelmingly positive critical reaction to these 1 Minute Films is proof that there is an opportunity for local stars to shine in skies that stretch across geographic borders and cultural boundaries. The DTFF and other festivals like it, such as the Middle East International Film Festival in Abu Dhabi, have brought to bear the reality of what can happen when the government and participating organisations rally with each other to infuse culture in a ravenous region ready to devour its own artistic fruit as well as that imported by the international community. Check out everything that went on last year at the DTFF and see what is coming up next time by visiting www.dohatribecafilm.com

Even though this haute art hunger gnaws at Qatar and the rest of the GCC, they are still growing in appreciation, and in some respects are experiencing growing pains in other areas.



< A GALLERY SHOWING AT THE WAQIF ART CENTER >

THE DIFFERENT STROKES OF VISUAL ART

The beacon of art that most palpably radiates throughout Qatar is undoubtedly the Museum of Islamic Art. Standing like a stately sentinel of the aesthetic, the MIA lords over the arts scene with admitted grace and stature, but while it is the most powerful and prolific symbol of the arts in the country with enviable financial support from the government, it is by no means the only place to enjoy Arab art.

Despite its relatively humble beginnings and exterior, the Waqif Art Center in Souk Waqif is at the forefront of the independent studio arts scene in Doha. The Founder and Director of Waqif Art Center, Tariq M. Al-Jaidah told Sur la Terre that the purpose of the Center is to provide a local soapbox on which both accomplished and developing local artists can stand and be recognised within their own region. For too long have our homegrown maestros had to seek out forums abroad to showcase their talents, but Mr. Jaidah and his peers want to change all that. His is a dream of changing the mentality of art in the region. "You have to understand that the arts scene in Qatar is not older than 30 years," says Mr. Jaidah. "It's still in its infant stages, but we are evolving and realising that any scene like this needs to have a full circuit, from the artist to the critics. That circle creates its own momentum." The Center holds regular special exhibitions for visiting artists, creates storefronts to sell local antiques and modern fashion designs, has established a permanent gallery to show the works of iconic Qatari artists like Ali Hassan and Yusuf Ahmed,

and works with local and international organisations and governmental bodies to hold activities like the popular Pecha Kucha event. Raising this kind of awareness and the education fostered by the resident art school is important to a movement led by a man who wishes to give something back to the community.

As a keen collector of art, Mr. Jaidah thought it was important to share his artistic vision with his beloved city. In fact, the Waqif Art Center is within walking distance of where his house and school used to stand, in a neighbourhood where his family has conducted business for over 100 years. So driven was he to unite his family and national heritage with the growing regional arts movement that he jumped into the project with the souk's management without so much as a feasibility study. The Center's early partnership with HSBC Bank has managed to keep it afloat, but as with every arts-based project, fighting to stay alive is a daily struggle. Thankfully for the Doha arts community, Mr. Jaidah and his dedicated team approach the challenges that face them with relish and a shared sense of purpose. "Our dream is to be a non-profit organisation that stimulates art in the community. I don't want to categorise us as a conventional gallery. We have grown naturally into a hub for creative people, but it's not our place; we don't rule it. It's for anybody who has an idea. I make money to keep the space going, that's it." He admits that there are other challenges involved in the Waqif Art Center mission, particularly in attempting to turn the tide of mass interest, but he is

confident in the progress they have already seen, even if it is taking time. "After all," he says with a laugh, "even Rome wasn't built in a day." To see how you can build on the foundations of your own artistic knowledge and to learn what's coming soon at the Waqif Art Center, go to www.waqifartcenter.com

Luckily, the Center is not alone out there. Just around the corner, peeking out almost organically from the stone facade of the souk is yet another independent art gallery doing its best to galvanise the arts scene. Smaller than the Waqif Art Center, but no less inspirational, Al Markhiya, in just over a year after opening, has created an art house atmosphere that thrives with the energy of a big city independent art verve. Heather Alnuweiri, Al Markhiya's Marketing and Sales Manager, told Sur la Terre that the inherent mission of the gallery is to promote contemporary Arab art, be it originating from within the Gulf or outside of it. Al Markhiya has hung many of the Middle East's most talented artists on its walls in the last year, from the aforementioned Ali Hassan and fellow Qatari figure artist Salman Al Malik to prominent Syrian sculptor Ghazwan Allaf and the gallery's current exhibiting artist at press time, the amazing Hala al Khalifa. Perhaps the gallery's most unique and engaging area of interest, however, comes from its signature event, 40 MINUS. The aim of this exhibit is to embolden artists under the age of forty to show their work on a public forum. Usually a 40 MINUS event displays two or more artists simultaneously, allowing fledgling prodigies to muster the conviction and confidence so integral for later in their careers. Such an inspired platform is much needed if the arts scene is to flourish in the years to come.

Like Mr. Jaidah, Heather understands the plight faced by purveyors of independent art, particularly in regard to finances and exposure. She tells us that if they wish to keep going in a market as new and exploratory as Qatar, the smaller galleries have to stick together. "I mean, this isn't New York," she says frankly. "It's still a very small scene. If you want to be solvent, then you have to work together. There aren't many of us, so their success is our success and vice versa." In order to truly instill in all locals a sense of artistic wonder, the gallery also works with local schools like Qatar Academy and programmes such as Schools Without Walls to foster art appreciation in the next generation. Even united, however, the galleries cannot do it on their own. There is a very simple way that the people can help the arts community: Support it. Al Markhiya is not large, but its home-like space is at once comforting and pleasant, while the art housed within it is thought-provoking and sensational. Attending an event to see astoundingly beautiful works of art and meet the artists who made them is not a chore; in fact, it is one of the few free pleasures in life that you cannot afford to miss. As Heather says, "If people don't come and support places like Al Markhiya or the Waqif Art Centre, then art as a whole in Doha dies." For a nation and region so committed to invigorating an arts scene, that loss would be a true shame. Even with the challenges that Al Markhiya faces, Heather is still positive about building an arts scene here and thankfully is not going to give up any time soon. To see the upcoming events calendar and learn more about Al Markhiya, go to www.almarkhiyagallery.com

The passion that drives these galleries is welcomingly infectious and it is hard not to feel inspired by the drive of its participants to meet their goals through sometimes indomitable challenges. Of course, the triumphs and trials that drive and test the arts are not solely relegated to the spectrum of the visual. The local music scene, both traditional and modern, is strumming strongly in Qatar, but that does not mean it is completely free from discord.



< THE IN-CROWD: CROWDS FLOCK TO AN EVENT AT THE WAQIF ART CENTER >



◀ LOCAL DJ: KEVIN "THE DRIZZLE" DONOHUE ▶

PHOTOS OF THE DRIZZLE BY CLINTON CARDOZO



◀ THE DRIZZLE BRINGING THE DJ RAIN ▶


PHOTOS OF THE DRIZZLE BY CLINTON CARDOZO

THE UNSUNG HEROES OF MUSIC

Particularly in recent years, Qatar has played host to a wide collection of musicians from nearly every genre. Top performers from across the gamut of sound, like Akon, Paul Van Dyke, Tiësto, Air Supply, Chingy and Nancy Ajram, have all been attracted to the small Arabian peninsula to entertain the salivating mass of world music fans. The one negative to all of this star power, however, is that this swelling group of live music junkies are sometimes blinded to the fact that we have our own, domestic modern day minstrels. Covering a similarly vast range of styles, these melody makers are often overlooked, which is a shame given the raw talent and experience that many of them possess.

Known around town in quiet, reverent whispers as "The Drizzle," Kevin Donohue has practiced the art of DJing in Qatar for over ten years. His modest beginnings in 1998 saw him meticulously compiling musical mixes on "technologically questionable," or in his words, "ghetto" equipment for area house parties. Thanks to his passion for Hip Hop and the country's dearth of a discernible music scene at the time, his efforts soon got him recognised with a growing youth culture craving for something new in music. It was while working at the now defunct Rydges bar and other venues that The Drizzle befriended other professional DJs, rapidly forming as they did a small collective of performers and a not-so-small group of followers. "Looking back, this was an ideal time," he said. "All of a sudden there was this scene where all of these people were coming together and DJing. You'd get over 60 people coming into the [Golf Club] lounge and on the patio outside. It was sick!" From there, the vibe continued to get bigger and wilder. He started DJing at more establishments in town and participating in House music events like Global DJs, and Hip Hop parties like Goldfingers and Black Pearl, which featured Scratch, the beatboxer from the popular Hip Hop group, The Roots.

Even with this meteoric success and interest, however, The Drizzle says that he and other popular area DJs, like DJ Sam and Youngstar, are being forced to perform at smaller venues or go back to the still-thriving house party culture, or even leave the country altogether. The once booming scene is now hindered by a relatively immature live music mentality with

A professional studio microphone, likely a Neumann U87, is shown in a close-up shot. It is mounted on a silver shock mount, which is suspended by a complex network of white suspension cables. The microphone has a dark grey body and a silver grille. The background is a dark, warm-toned wall, possibly in a recording studio.

increasingly stronger controls, a lack of available equipment for purchase and an inundation of names that may be big on renown, but are often small on talent. Saying that, The Drizzle is not going to change his name to DJ Hopeless anytime soon. He believes that a growing population and increasing international attention from events like the 2022 World Cup bid and the Doha Tribeca Film Festival could spell a renewed attention to the Doha DJ arena. He also thinks that educational workshops like the Red Bull Music Academy and other large events like DJ competitions might breathe new life into a genre that is scratching records not necessarily out of creativity, but because it is just trying to hold on. "I think we're on a pendulum that is going to swing the other way completely until the events organisations, official bodies and venues realise that it's not about just making profit. We have to go back to fostering a local music scene." To get in touch with Kevin "The Drizzle" Donohue, visit his Facebook page at www.facebook.com/kdonohue



It seems to be the same song but a different track on the traditional side of local music in Qatar. The love of traditional Arabic music can be felt everywhere in Qatar, from the songs that blast from car stereos to the stacks of CDs that stand like armies at area stores. Accomplished singer Saoud Jassim and the man he regards as his teacher, famed Qatari artist Essa Al Kubaisi, are but two of the singers that perform out of Doha Sound Studio. Founded in 2003 by Mr. Matar Ali Alkuwari, the studio feels more like a loving family home than a meeting place for talented musicians. Its vibe is best summed up by Essa, who said, "In Doha, we consider all singers to be part of our family." Even though it glows with a familial pride, the studio is still serious about music. It has welcomed classically trained crooners from around the Middle East, at the same time allowing local talent a space to polish their skills. Saoud, who has been singing professionally for five years, and Essa, who has been singing for 12, say that their style comes from an appreciation of the traditional Qatari music that was always played in their own homes. While they love and are dedicated to the sounds of their youth and timeless culture, they also enjoy adding a modern touch by implementing new sounds and international collaborations from composers from places like Turkey and Egypt. "We try to be in the middle between tradition and the new voice of music," says Saoud. "We want to keep the heart of the traditional sound of our music, but we want to appeal to everyone, so we have started to mix the old sounds with Western-style beats to make a new style."

Unfortunately, singers like Saoud and Essa, much like The Drizzle, feel as though their particular "voice of music" is being drowned out by the shadow of visiting musicians. Outside funding for the studio and its singers from the government or other organisations is nonexistent,

which means that not only must each singer pay for the production of his own CD, but that it is all but impossible to cover costs for advertisements and marketing. Often, these extremely talented locals are overlooked in lieu of performers from other countries to perform at national cultural events. "It is frustrating because we want to sing the praises of Qatar at these events," says Saoud. Artists like these two do not mind the big musical artists that come to Doha, but they think that the organisers should let them in on the act by allowing them to participate in some way at the main event, or at very least open the show. Even though the support structure for these vocalists may be missing, that does not mean the resolve of their voices will fade. "We are proud of being Qatari," says Essa. "But if we don't hold onto our traditions, they will fade away. We will always try to hold onto them." To see how you can enjoy their music, visit Essa's website at www.essaalkubaisi.com or email the Doha Sound Studio at dohasound@dohasound.com

What begins in the wet scratch of a paint-marinated brush on textured canvas continues in the flickering veil of a light-soaked cinema screen and resonates in the warbling tones of a time-honoured melody, or in the guttural rhymes that grate across scratched vinyl records. The arts in the Gulf are as diverse and visionary as any other region in the world, and as such they face their own sets of challenges. When supported by corporate entities, governments and the community, the arts in the Arab world are unstoppable in passion and infinite in scope. With a renewed attention to cultivating each art form at every level, and a willingness to embrace the true promise of its recent international accolades, Qatar stands poised at the precipice of an artistic present and at the brink of a culturally robust future. ●