

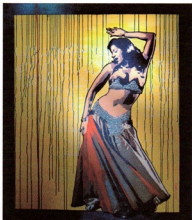
THE LAHD GALLERY, LONDON.

MAJELLA MUNRO

The Lahd Gallery, founded in Riyadh in 2005, opened a new branch in London in October of last year. As its first international branch, the London space furthers the gallery's remit to introduce Arabian artists to audiences beyond the Middle East. The original Saudi Arabian gallery was founded with the particular intention of presenting works by female artists, and together these aims give the Lahd gallery a uniquely progressive, pan-regional and critical stance, expressed through a lively exhibition program.

Hamad and Ali had their first exhibition at the gallery from May to July this year. The Kuwait-based duo infuse digital media with traditional painterly and calligraphic techniques, producing an ambiguously transnational pop-inspired idiom that still remains responsive to local culture. They appropriate and subvert pop as a style pertinent both to their critique of the global dominance of American culture, and their interrogation of the relative obscurity of domestic celebrities in international terms. The figures in the paintings on show are celebrities who are well known in their country of origin, but have limited international profiles; their representation in this new cultural context renders them obscure and, simultaneously, raises their profile amongst a new audience. Thus each work is a metaphor for their larger project, which attends to popular culture in order to challenge Western perceptions of the Arab world exclusively in terms of politics and religion, a critique sympathetic to the aims of the gallery itself.

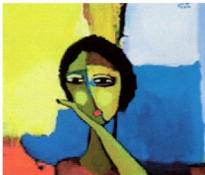
Hamad and Ali also feature in the gallery's current exhibition, which showcases works by several of the artists represented by the gallery, drawn from across the Arab world. Amongst the exhibitors is Tagreed Al Bagshi, a Saudi Arabian painter and a prominent activist in organisations promoting women's art. Her paintings, which are dominated by



HAMAD AND ALI, SAMIA JAMAL.



HAMAD AND ALI.



TAGREED AL BAGSHI



female figures, seek an indigenous modern idiom: the figures are reductively rendered, yet invoke "tradition" through their use of strong colour and schematisation. Shurooq Amin, from Kuwait makes the feminist content of her images even more explicit: the series on show here presents highly-detailed images and portraits shot through with bullets, expressing the tribulations and paradoxes of the feminine within a repressive and violent context. She explains the use of bullets as "an allegory of society's murder of human rights, and freedom of speech and choice. Inevitably, bullets are etched into our Middle Eastern politics, history, culture, and religion". The *Society Girls* series offers a critique more directly connected to gender politics, highlighting the manner in which veiled women are stripped of their individuality in public, but continue to subscribe to sexualised fashions and glamour. Thus the veil is no longer a tool of modesty, but now something which further serves the sexual objectification of women. Like Hamad and Ali, Shurooq uses sections of calligraphy arbitrarily, as pattern and decoration. The manner in which these artists combine contemporary styles with specifically local contents successfully negotiates the boundary between the local/traditional and the international/modern, making them not only accessible to international viewers, but also a model of how a response to context and place can be achieved within a globalised art world. Together, these works challenge preconceptions that artists from the Middle East do not explore themes of the body and gender, or interrogate both domestic and international politics; these concerns gives these works interest in a wider international context, and make the Lahd gallery an extremely valuable contribution to the London gallery scene.

SHUROOQ AMIN, *THE BULLET*
SERIES: *IS THERE A PROBLEM BABY?*