

**FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE**

**Exhibition: Abdunasser Gharem**  
**Location: Edge of Arabia, London**  
**Preview: 8 October 2013, 6-8pm**  
**Dates: 8 October - 8 November**



Ayyam Gallery in partnership with Edge of Arabia present the first major solo exhibition of work by Abdunasser Gharem – the most significant Saudi artist of his generation and the highest-selling living Arab artist. A pioneering conceptual artist and Lieutenant Colonel in the Saudi army, Gharem has consistently challenged existing modes of artistic practice in the isolated, rapidly changing Saudi cultural landscape. This immersive exhibition draws together the different strands of his practice – photography, video, painting, sculpture and performance – giving audiences the first opportunity to experience the full scope of the artist’s work.

At the core of Gharem’s work is a negotiation between paving the way for progress (both artistically and socially) and maintaining a connection with Saudi heritage. His desire to preserve and build upon traditional art forms rather than break with the past is a radical gesture in the context of the recent history of Western contemporary art. Though frequently reflecting on and questioning sensitive issues, his work maintains a respect for history, and the influence of his military role can be felt with references to authority and use of established symbols of power and bureaucracy.

Gharem’s role in developing an audience for conceptual art within Saudi Arabia has been pivotal. When he started out there were no art schools and only a handful of contemporary galleries to display his work, so his response was to take it to the streets. These early performances helped inspire a new generation of Saudi artists to take their practice from their studios to the streets - a hugely important development marking a radical shift in artistic production in the Kingdom.

Included in the exhibition will be new presentations of several of Gharem’s iconic performances including *Flora & Fauna and Manzoa* (both works 2007). The former saw Gharem wrap one of the trees lining Abha’s main street in a sheet of plastic, within which he remained all day, surviving on the oxygen produced by the tree. Though unlike anything local people had seen before, Gharem found an audience receptive and keen to understand what he was doing; subsequent performances have been increasingly collaborative, involving the community directly within the performed actions.

Gharem also collaborates with different communities outside of his performances. For *Moujaz* (2013), a new work in the artist's ongoing series of oversized stamp sculptures, he turned to Morocco - a country with a rich history of Islamic art production - to work with their highly skilled craftsmen. Hand-carved by Moroccan artisans, the sculpture is intricately decorated with geometric designs and calligraphic motifs in the Islamic tradition.

A founding member of 'Edge of Arabia', Gharem is a fierce advocate of arts education and is among a handful of influential figures who have worked to promote art in the Gulf. Following the record-breaking sale of his installation *Message/Messenger* at a 2011 Christies auction that established him as the highest-selling Gulf artist, he donated all the proceeds to fostering art education in his native country. He is currently working to establish the Amen Art Foundation, which aims to be the first artist-led foundation in Riyadh, offering artist studios, lectures and workshops for emerging artists. Gharem has most recently participated in Edge of Arabia's group show *RHIZOMA* (as part of the 55th Venice Biennale), where he presented a majlis as a conceptual platform for discussion and collaboration.

## Notes to Editors

### About the Artist

Born in 1973 in Khamis Mushait, Saudi Arabia, Abdunnassam Gharem currently lives and works in Riyadh. He studied at the Al-Meftaha Arts Village, Abha, in 2003 and, in 2004, joined other artists from the school to form 'Shattah', a group whose exhibitions challenged existing approaches to artistic practice in the region. Past solo exhibitions include: *Restored Behaviour*, XVA Gallery, Dubai (2010); *The Path*, King Fahd Art Village, Abha (2006), *The White Tongue Who Speaks Slowly*, King Fahd Art Village, Abha (2004); *Who Keeps Watching the Sun (Sunflower field)*, *Death Mattered*, Attileh, Jeddah (2004); *Mute*, Attileh, Jeddah (2003); and *UN Inspector*, Attileh, Jeddah (2003). Selected group shows include Victoria & Albert Museum, London (2012); Palazzo Grassi, Venice (2012); Edge of Arabia London (2012); Mori Art Museum, Tokyo (2012); British Museum, London (2012); ifa-Galerie, Berlin (2011); 54th Venice Biennale (2011); Athr Gallery, Jeddah (2011); Willem Baars Projects, Amsterdam (2011); The Farjam Collection, Dubai (2011); Maraya Arts Centre, Sharjah (2010); Gwangju Biennale (2010); Martin Gropius-Bau, Berlin (2010); Sharjah Biennial 8 (2007).

Gharem's works are held in numerous private and public collections, including: The British Museum; The Victoria & Albert Museum; LACMA, Los Angeles County Museum of Art; The Saudi Arabian Ministry of Culture and Information; The Jameel Art Foundation; The Nadour Collection; Greenbox Museum; The Barjeel Art Foundation; The Farjam Collection; Kamel Lazaar Foundation; BASMOCA, Basma Alsulaiman Museum of Contemporary Art.

### About Edge of Arabia

Edge of Arabia is an independent arts initiative developing the appreciation of contemporary Arab art and culture with a particular focus on Saudi Arabia. As a social enterprise Edge of Arabia is committed to reaching local and international audiences and improving

understanding through free exhibitions, through publications, and through an education programme incorporating talks & seminars, artist residencies and vocational training. Following its launch in London in 2008, this grassroots initiative has travelled to Riyadh, Berlin, Istanbul, Dubai, Jeddah, three times to the Venice Biennale.

[www.edgeofarabia.com](http://www.edgeofarabia.com)

### **About Ayyam Gallery**

Founded by collectors and cousins Khaled and Hisham Samawi in Damascus in 2006, Ayyam Gallery sought to nurture Syria's burgeoning and dynamic contemporary art scene through landmark non-profit initiatives such as the Shabab Ayyam Project, an incubator for emerging artists. Expansion into Beirut and Dubai enabled Ayyam Gallery to broaden its scope from the promotion of work by Syrian artists to those from the wider Middle East region. In doing so, Ayyam Gallery has established itself as one of the foremost exponents of Middle Eastern contemporary art to the international community.

Today, Ayyam Gallery is recognised as a leading cultural voice in the region, representing a roster of Arab and Iranian artists with an international profile and museum presence, such as Abdunnasser Gharem, Khaled Jarrar, Nadim Karam, Safwan Dahoul, Samia Halaby, Sadik Alfraji, Afshin Pirhashemi and Khaled Takreti. A number of non-commercial exhibitions, as well as the launch of initiatives like The Young Collectors Auction, have further succeeded in showcasing the work of Middle Eastern artists with the aim of educating a wider audience about the art of this significant region. Ayyam Gallery Damascus currently functions as a studio and creative haven for artists who remain in the war-torn city. In early 2013, Ayyam Gallery launched new spaces in London and Jeddah. [www.ayyamgallery.com](http://www.ayyamgallery.com)

### **Exhibition Facts**

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Location: 40 Elcho Street, London SW11 4AU

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