

SAMI AL-TURKI

By: Aya Haidar

Sami Al Turki was born in 1984, of Saudi nationality. He was raised in the port city of Jeddah and currently lives in Dubai, UAE. His Irish mother and Saudi father ensured an upbringing with a broad vision between the two different cultures and traditions, bridging the gap between east and west.

His impression of his home country and his current city where he is living is the driving force behind his concepts and visions. Al Turki's eclectic and

varied style is a reflection of both his diverse cultural upbringing and the confused occidental versus oriental atmosphere of Dubai.





Mahjor, 2010. RC Print, Diasec mounting on dibond, 122x200cm. Image courtesy of the artist and Athr Gallery, Jeddah.

Washaeg (2010) is a series of 9 digital prints set up with his friends and family. He returns to the place with an exact idea of what he is looking for and executes with precise calculation. What he presents is an expansive void, hollow skeletons of what once were imposing fortresses, grey, black and blue hues which reinforce the cold and eerie atmosphere. This becomes an unfamiliar place, not only in the scene captured but also in his manipulation of it. He creates a physical divide between the print and the audience by adding several layers to it. He moves beyond the visible and invites us to enter his vision for the future.

Washaeg, loosely translated, means Nexus. Saudi Arabia is rich in natural resources and neglectful in its consumption, a mind frame which stretches across the region connecting country to country. The original image is only the first layer to which he keeps adding to, creating an almost post-apocalyptic view of his surrounding reality. Al Turki is concerned about the current state and abuse of his environment. In light of the wikileaks scandal exposing Saudi's overstating reserves of crude oil by over 40%, he work further reinforces the dangers we are faced with as a result of neglect and carelessness. This series of photographic prints speak of an empty world with an apocalyptic vision for global culture. His lens captures the void, which was once built on with majestic structures. What is left are fortified walls encircling nothingness.

Set in Obhor, a popular sea bay area set on the Red sea coast, a place he frequented very often growing

up with his friends and family. He returns to the place with an exact idea of what he is looking for and executes with precise calculation. What he presents is an expansive void, hollow skeletons of what once were imposing fortresses, grey, black and blue hues which reinforce the cold and eerie atmosphere. This becomes an unfamiliar place, not only in the scene captured but also in his manipulation of it. He creates a physical divide between the print and the audience by adding several layers to it. He moves beyond the visible and invites us to enter his vision for the future.

Born from the same idea, Constructakons (2010) developed out of his reflection of Dubai, where he currently lives and works. Dubai is a unique place, he describes, it is the only place on earth that consumes and produces absolutely nothing. This in itself is a dangerous equation, giving birth to this series of photographic prints. Al Turki presents images of tractors and cranes as though they have been stopped in their tracks, immobile. He describes such machines as "the soldiers that built this city (Dubai)." It is through their excavating, moving and

lifting that such a place has emerged as a global city. To see these machines, motionless, is as though he stops time temporarily. He captures these 'soldiers' parked up still, at night, creating a sense of peaceful harmony in an otherwise bustling urban jungle.

Al Turki's choice for working at night is entirely intentional. The black backdrop allows for his complete control in the manipulation of light and shade. As a child he collected and played with toy tractors and certainly appreciates them for their construction and ingenuity. There is an underlying conflict that surfaces, however, between his sentimental connection and their role in creating the metropolis he lives in.

Al Turki expands his variety of medium with *Billboards* (2009), a short film set in Dubai. A split screen depicts the artist driving around in his car filming the billboards in and around the city on the one side, while on the other side of the screen; Al Turki is beating the scaffolding with a metal rod. His motions are like a ritualistic dance and lead to no end, as the framework keeping up the board gives not an inch. Dubai is a city built on promise. The promise of a better life if you buy those jeans drives this car and lives in that house. Advertising companies and multinationals have monopolized the scene and desensitized a nation into wanting and consuming outside of their means and needs. Al Turki argues that these advertising billboards have pulled the wool over the people's eyes. His beating of the scaffolding is an overt expression of his anger and frustration at the system. The interesting development in the work is that since the short film was made, the billboards around the city have become blank because their rent fees have skyrocketed. In a way, the advertising billboards have led to their own self-destruction. A new body of work is foreseen to be produced by Al Turki in the near future, regarding this change in dynamic.

Fathom (2008) is an umbrella body of work consisting of two films: *Nostalgic* and *Running*.

They came to life through performance, whereby Al Turki and fellow band members sat behind walls and played music as the films were projected in the gallery space on the other side of the wall. Al Turki

simply states that *Fathom* (2008) represents the "disconcerted man in Dubai".

Nostalgic was created first in the series. It is abstract and multilayered in its depiction and depends heavily on symbolism to translate meaning. "The film *Inception* captures the fundamental concept of a dream within a dream within a dream quite accurately." *Nostalgic* starts with a man unraveling a mattress before lying on it. This mattress is the portal to the dream leading into the dream. This develops into him moving cardboard boxes, which later self-combust. These boxes carry whatever it is he feels necessary to put in them. This need for accumulation will lead to its own destruction.

Running presents a hooded man sat on the ground with his back to us. He represents the unknown soldier in the destructive society, relatable to anybody who has joined the rat race. The man starts running and it ends with him sitting on a couch. The couch represents comfort. No matter how much you try to escape, you always keep coming back and give in to familiarity and comfort. Al Turki associates this work to the Cinema of the Subconscious, whereby nothing is recognizable but is direct in its message through metaphor and symbolism.

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Still from **Billboard series**, 2009. Image courtesy of the artist and Athr Gallery, Jeddah