



## KNOCKING ON HEAVEN'S DOOR

by Maymanah Farhat

The work of Jeddah-based artist **Rashed Al Shashai** examines societal shifts and the crisis of spirituality in the modern age

A significant conceptual art movement has emerged in Saudi Arabia over the past 10 years, specifically among young artists who seek to explore the transformation of local society due to the onslaught of globalisation and the rise of new media and mass consumption. Employing alternative forms of art despite Saudi Arabia's dominant history of painting and sculpture, many seem to be asking: How does visual culture reflect such changes? As artists capsize the art object, they question its status and function in the 21st century.

For Jeddah-based artist Rashed Al Shashai, found objects and appropriated imagery can be reconfigured in ways that allow the viewer to identify societal shifts, providing a 'semantic field' through which to navigate the potency of such phenomena in daily life. Although Al Shashai addresses local audiences by situating his works within a familiar context through recognisable elements, the philosophical underpinnings of his installations relate to universal themes such as the intensifying role of media as a socialising agent or the crisis of spirituality in the modern age.

In 'The View' (2013), for example, partially open shutters reveal a newscast that occupies the span of a large window. The dim picture of a screen appears between its slates, as the soft glow of a television has replaced the scenery of the exterior world and the hum of an anchor's broadcast stands in for the ambient sounds of an interior setting. The artist's commentary is twofold as he recreates the sensations of transmitted images that now define ordinary experience while also scrutinising the veracity of compiled narratives.

Although similar in its physical structure, the large-scale work 'Heaven's Door' (2014), presents a counter vantage point. An elaborate aluminium light box contains arched stained glass windows, the ornate forms of which are made from kitchen tools such as pots, colanders, and baskets. Replicating a facet of religious architecture with cooking objects, Al Shashai prompts the viewer to reconsider the definition of sacred space by pointing to the moments of divine evocation that can be found in everyday acts, the preparation of food serving as an analogy for the sense of spiritual sustenance that can be obtained through religious beliefs and practices.

Al Shashai's latest body of work, 'Section 11' (2014), indicates a continued investigation of social themes with the added component of a pedagogical approach to engaging viewers. Inspired by his work as an arts instructor at a school for gifted children in Jeddah, the artist has created several new installations that tackle such issues as religious tolerance and free will through the assemblage of popular objects and imagery. Stacked coffee cups, Looney Tunes characters, ancient pictographs, and other disparate items are brought together to underscore the complexities of maintaining traditions in a society that must adapt to a swiftly changing world. 'I Chose' (2014), a series of origami fortune-telling games, contrasts the life

choices that might lead to certain futures, such as professional careers or levels of political militancy. As viewers are shown the steps that result in various paths by selecting sections of each piece, an emphasis is placed on how minor decisions can result in considerable consequences. In 'Shortcut' (2014) and 'Inevitable' (2014), the artist compares the origins of Muslim theology with the diverse interpretations that have characterised the evolution of Islamic thought and governance since the founding of Islam in the seventh century. The mounted works are composed of the covers of Islamic books against which LED light displays are placed. The illuminated, centralised symbols of the works are attributed to the Prophet Mohammad, who utilised simple sand drawings to demonstrate the teachings of Islam to his followers. 'Shortcut' shows a direct path to spiritual fulfilment while 'Inevitable' outlines the many shortcomings of deviating from piety. As he adopts the technology and format of a commercial advertisement, Al Shashai advocates a return to basics despite the purported growth of ideas and the ideological offshoots that can inadvertently produce divisions. At the same time, the artist's use of the historic symbols draws a powerful connection between art and social development in terms that resonate with his audience.

In Saudi Arabia, artists have found that viewers have been slow to respond to new forms of artistic media, and often remain skeptical of conceptual art in particular. Through his work as an artist, arts educator, and the former founder and director of the Tasami Center for Visual Arts, Al Shashai has approached his audience in ways that integrate contemporary art as a vital aspect of local visual culture. ■

Rashed Al Shashai,  
*Heaven's Doors*,  
300 x 400 cm,  
aluminum lightbox,  
strainers and plastic  
plates, 2014