

GAME CHANGERS THE HOPE ISSUE

Hassan Meer: The artist helping shape Oman's contemporary art scene

April 29, 2020

Hassan Meer is making a name for himself in the country's growing art scene.

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By Sharifa Al Badi



Hassan Meer is supporting the growing art scene in Oman through Stal Gallery, founded in 2013. Image: Courtesy.

The award-winning Omani artist Hassan Meer is making a name for himself in the country's growing art scene. His paintings, photography and installation work, which revolve around Omani culture, spirituality, and the artist's childhood memories, have contributed to bringing forth Oman and its artists to the world. I speak to the artist about his beginnings, and his contributions to the country's art scene.

Born in 1972 in Mutrah, a historic and cosmopolitan port town in Oman, Hassan was in awe of his grandfather's house, especially the room he was raised in, which housed numerous decorative items from all over the world, including colourful accessories from India, and old mirrors and artefacts from Africa. He also spent his time listening to the fascinating tales of the older generations of the town, all of which formed some of his main inspirations for his artwork later on.



When he was young, Hassan constantly tried to run away from school, as he never felt that he belonged. "School at the point did not play an important role in my art as the art classes were very basic and not interesting," he reveals. "So I joined an art studio for the youth, where I developed my skills and met the leading artists in Oman at that time."

Upon graduating from high school, Hassan had his heart set on studying art, but at that time it was difficult to secure an art scholarship. So, he worked in a telecom company for four years until he finally received the grant to study art and design in 1995. At the same time, the Omani government also sent him to numerous important art exhibitions around the GCC, and to workshops in Austria and Spain as part of a cultural exchange program.

During that period, there were not many young Omani artists, like Hassan, so the government wanted to invest in those who displayed potential in order to bring back to the country what they learned from other places. Hassan completed his studies in 2001, graduating with MA in painting and a BA in Fine Art with a specialization in media art, from the Savannah College of Art & Design in Georgia, USA.

It was during Hassan's university years that he began to explore installation work and videos, and to use them as a medium to express his thoughts on spirituality, life and death, magical rituals inherited from eras past, and to revisit and depict the treasured memories of his younger years in Oman. These themes have remained dominant in his work over the years, earning him a place in exhibitions all around the world, including Tokyo's Mori Art Museum, the Sharjah International Biennale, and the Royal College of Arts Galleries in London.



"The Place I Call Home" by Hassan Meer. Image: Courtesy.

This year alone, Hassan took part in the UK- Middle East Travelling Exhibition with his work 'The Place I call Home' in Manama and London. The same work was also showcased in Cardiff, Dubai, Riyadh and Kuwait City.



"The Place I Call Home" by Hassan Meer. Image: Courtesy.

It was also during his university years that Hassan founded the Circle Show, with the aim of encouraging experimental art in the Sultanate. Today, it continues to be a platform primarily for emerging artists.

In 2013, Stal Gallery and Studio was established as a cultural project by the Al Serkal Group that wanted to give Omani artists, including young artists, a platform. Al Serkal Group is the force behind Dubai's famous cultural district Alserkal Avenue.



Stal Gallery and Studio in Muscat, Oman. Image: Courtesy.

The gallery and studio was named after Stal, a village in Oman's Wadi Bani Kharous that has given birth to many great scholars, imams and writers throughout history. Today, Hassan serves as the art director of Stal Gallery and Studio, while also serving as an art expert in a government-owned development company. "My future dream is to help the government build as many art facilities in the country: more creative art studios, galleries and contemporary art museums. [Essentially], more platforms to encourage Omanis to experiment in the endless world of art," he says.

For Hassan, the Gulf region is becoming an important artistic hub. "Countries like Saudi Arabia, the UAE and Qatar have invested in the younger generations and added a strong infrastructure by building new galleries, art foundations and Museums, giving artists the freedom and imagination to create". He currently sees that Oman has a smaller art scene compared to the other Gulf States because of the limited number of galleries and facilities. However, it is growing and improving on a daily basis, as the country has an abundance of budding artists with unique styles, who are able to compete at an international level, he says. "All people have a role in helping the art scenes grow, it is up to us to attend galleries and exhibitions, to give comments about artists' work, and to try and understand different art philosophies".



Artwork by Hassan Meer. Image: Courtesy.

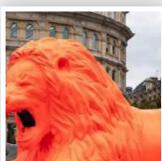
Art brings forth to society beauty, culture, compassion and a different perception of life. Hassan believes artists contribute to the growth of cities in ways other industries cannot; they help educate people allowing them to become more aware of all their senses and emotions and can play a role in raising the quality of life.

Sharifa Al Badi is a published writer and author from the magical lands of Oman. She has written for *Equire ME*, *Khaleejiya* and *The Culture Trip*. She is also the author of "Demis Aella & The Magical Forest" and "50 Things To Know As An Adult."

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