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## Hayfa Abdullah Exhibition

By Staff Writer

Stellan Holm gallery presents a selection of works by Hayfa Abdullah. Hayfa Abdullah (b. 1981 in Riyadh, and lives and works in Jeddah) is a figurative painter of luminous, brilliantly colored canvases. For her first solo show in the United States, the artist is presenting twenty five works from her last series, net proceeds will go to The Child Mind Institute, a non-profit organization dedicated to transforming the lives of children and families struggling with mental health and learning disorders.

Hayfa's current body of work focuses on surrealist representations of Arabic culture. In contrast to the traditional rendering of Islamic mores and identity, Hayfa's approach to capturing her people utilizes more daring and progressive content— exotic women arising from Hookah pipes, intriguing gentleman pouring from coffee pots, and fiery femme fatales erupting through spray bottles or handheld lighters. Hayfa's work dares to reimagine the Arabic spirit through a lens that is modern, vibrant, and rebellious. Hayfa Abdullah is among the next wave of female artists bursting from the Kingdom. "I come from a land of sand and sun, a kingdom filled with traditions as old as time. For me, I speak through my paintbrush. And rather than painting the word I am 'supposed to see', I reach into the depths of my imagination and I paint what my soul wants. Though I place great value on convention, custom, and propriety, I seek to recast the world through the use of rich colors, surrealist ideas, and metaphor.

My paintings depict the vivid world of my imagination. Influenced by the surrealist work of Frida Kahlo, my vibrant painting series strives to show the bold, audacious side of humanity. Whether featuring women smoking hookah, blue haired femme fatales emerging from spray bottles, men drooping onto a palette board with paints, my paintings seek to give inspiration and voice to the hidden side of every individual. I hope that the same freedom that my paintings give me will be given to the voiceless parts of people everywhere in the world As human beings, we are limited by certain realities that give us shape and security. The mind, however, is its own place and has no limits. With the paintbrush in my hand, no walls can bind me, no forces can control my thinking or being. The brush sets me free." — Hayfa Abdullah Text by Lilly Wei, Art Critic and Curator: Over the past several years in Saudi Arabia and other Gulf states, there has been an explosion of creative ventures by young artists, many of them women. They have found the arts to be a powerful agent of individual and collective expression, an effective means of addressing a spectrum of concerns from the personal to the political. Offering a topical, insider's view of regions in transition, telling their own stories in a

multiplicity of ways, they have captivated an international audience with the resonance and originality of their projects. While many have taken up new media and technologies, others, like Hayfa Abdullah, prefer the time-honored discipline of painting, one that is enjoying a global resurgence.

Her interest in a fine arts practice was kindled when the highly regarded Saudi artist, Mona Al-Qasabi, introduced her to painting in 2000 and Hayfa Abdullah discovered that she had a natural aptitude for the medium. She fell deeply in love with oil paint's material voluptuousness and flexibility, delighting in its infinite colors and luster. Paint became as much her subject as the images she created from them. That imagery often centers on objects specific to the culture in which she was raised, although, as the daughter of Abdullah bin Abdulaziz Al Saud, the late king of Saudi Arabia, her upbringing was cosmopolitan and she frequently spends time in New York, Paris, and elsewhere. In this new series of 25 paintings from 2015, traditional Saudi objects from daily life often appear, blending the animate and inanimate in mischievous, surprising ways. Her style is fresh, bold, and packs a punch. She also comments on how women are perceived, stereotypes playfully presented and subverted. Her fantastical metamorphoses are a kind of visual magic realism, drawn from the realm of the imagination and not so much from art history, although she greatly admires Magritte, Dalí and Frida Kahlo, among others.

The first painting in the series is Hookah, the lovely blonde head of a sophisticate emerging from a hookah like a male pipe dream. Another is Oud, depicting a similarly bewitching but more traditional figure poised atop a bottle of scent, her face veiled except for challenging, dramatically outlined eyes. Other paintings refer to the illusions of art and its processes, such as the grimacing green-skinned man birthed into existence by paint and brush. Still others—a woman's face reflected in a cracked golden mirror or embedded in a candle, weeping (recalling Urs Fischer's wax sculptures)—speak about the passage of time and loss. Spray, a particularly ravishing work, shows a blue-haired female head trailed by the sweep of a royal blue headscarf placed against a sumptuous red ground. Her mouth is opened in a visceral scream of anguish and anger, as she erupts rebelliously from her confinement within a bottle. An actual visage is depicted in Mahjub, a sensitively drawn portrait of a man poured out of a beautifully executed golden dallah, a traditional Arab coffee pot and another highlight of the series.

Yet another is Doukhoun, its imperious head wreathed in smoke, cradled by an incense burner, a commanding presence from an earlier period as indicated by the style of his dress. What all the work has in common are themes of mutability and the instability of identities, paralleling the rapid changes that characterize the contemporary world and affect us all. The series will be shown at Stellan Holm in New York in April and May 2016, the artist's first solo exhibition in the United States. Hayfa Abdullah is a Saudi Arabian female artist from Jeddah, KSA. She recently completed her undergraduate studies at the Art Academy University of San Francisco, where she majored in Fine Arts with a focus on surrealism. She is currently an MFA student at the Art Academy University. In 2014 Hayfa was selected to design the promotional material for Columbia University's INSTEP graduate program. In 2015, Hayfa had her work showcased at Cube Art in Dubai, during Eye Art at the Arabian Wings in Jeddah, KSA, and at Festival at the Arabian Wings. In 2016, Hayfa is having two solo exhibitions. The first one in March is in Jeddah, Saudi Arabia at Rochan Gallery. The second will make her international debut in April and May at Stellan Holm Gallery in New York.