



# CanvaS

ART AND CULTURE FROM THE MIDDLE EAST AND ARAB WORLD

## ON THE WILD SIDE

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GWANGJU BIENNALE • ZEINAB ALHASHEMI • NAJAT MAKKI  
BUSAN BIENNALE • HICHAM BERRADA • NABIL NAHAS • LAHORE BIENNALE





Safeya Binzagr.  
Image courtesy of Darat Safeya Binzagr

Safeya Binzagr. *Mashaleh Maker*.  
1991. Pastel on Canson paper.  
55 x 75 cm. Image courtesy of  
Darat Safeya Binzagr

# SAFEYA BINZAGR

## 1940–2024

*Words by Vamika Sinha*

Long considered one of the giants of Saudi Arabian art and cultural history, Safeya Binzagr passed away at the age of 84 on 12 September this year. Her landmark practice, one of the most boundary-breaking in the Kingdom, was characterised by thorough and extensive research, akin to that of an anthropologist. The result was a dazzling kaleidoscope of paintings, drawings and etchings that will forever serve as a document of Saudi daily life, culture, rituals and identity, at a time well ahead of the oil-boom modernisation that was to transform many aspects of her country. Binzagr's depictions were painstakingly precise, and while none of the fictions around romanticisation, nostalgia and yearning marked her work, it always retained an aesthetic beauty and softness.

Binzagr was born in 1940 in the Harat Al-Sham neighbourhood of Al-Balad in Jeddah. She was however raised largely in Cairo, which afforded her greater freedom than that available to most Saudi girls

of the time to go out and experience a wider world beyond her hometown. Such an outlook paved the way for Binzagr to head even further afield, this time for England, where she attended finishing school. Several years later, having returned to Saudi Arabia, Binzagr would change not only her trajectory as an artist but also that of her home country. In 1968, alongside fellow Saudi female and Egypt-educated artist Mounirah Mosly, Binzagr held her very first public exhibition in Saudi Arabia at Jeddah's Dar al-Tarbiyah al-Haditha School. She and Mosly reportedly became the first women artists to exhibit their artworks in the Kingdom. Binzagr would eventually return to England and complete her degree at London's St Martin's School of Art in 1976.

Very few individuals in Saudi Arabia during this period even sought to identify publicly as artists, let alone hold open exhibitions, so Binzagr was not just breaking a glass ceiling but moving into







completely new territory – the oft-used word ‘pioneering’ does feel the most accurate term to use with her. By 1963 she was publishing her works in Saudi newspapers, a date that precedes by two years the very first ‘official’ art exhibition held by a man – Abdulhalim Radwi – in the country. Beyond Jeddah and the Kingdom at large, Binzagr went on to show her work overseas in cities such as London, Paris and Geneva, a presence that reinforced not only her own personal credentials as an artist with international resonance but also the expanding profile of her country and its culture.

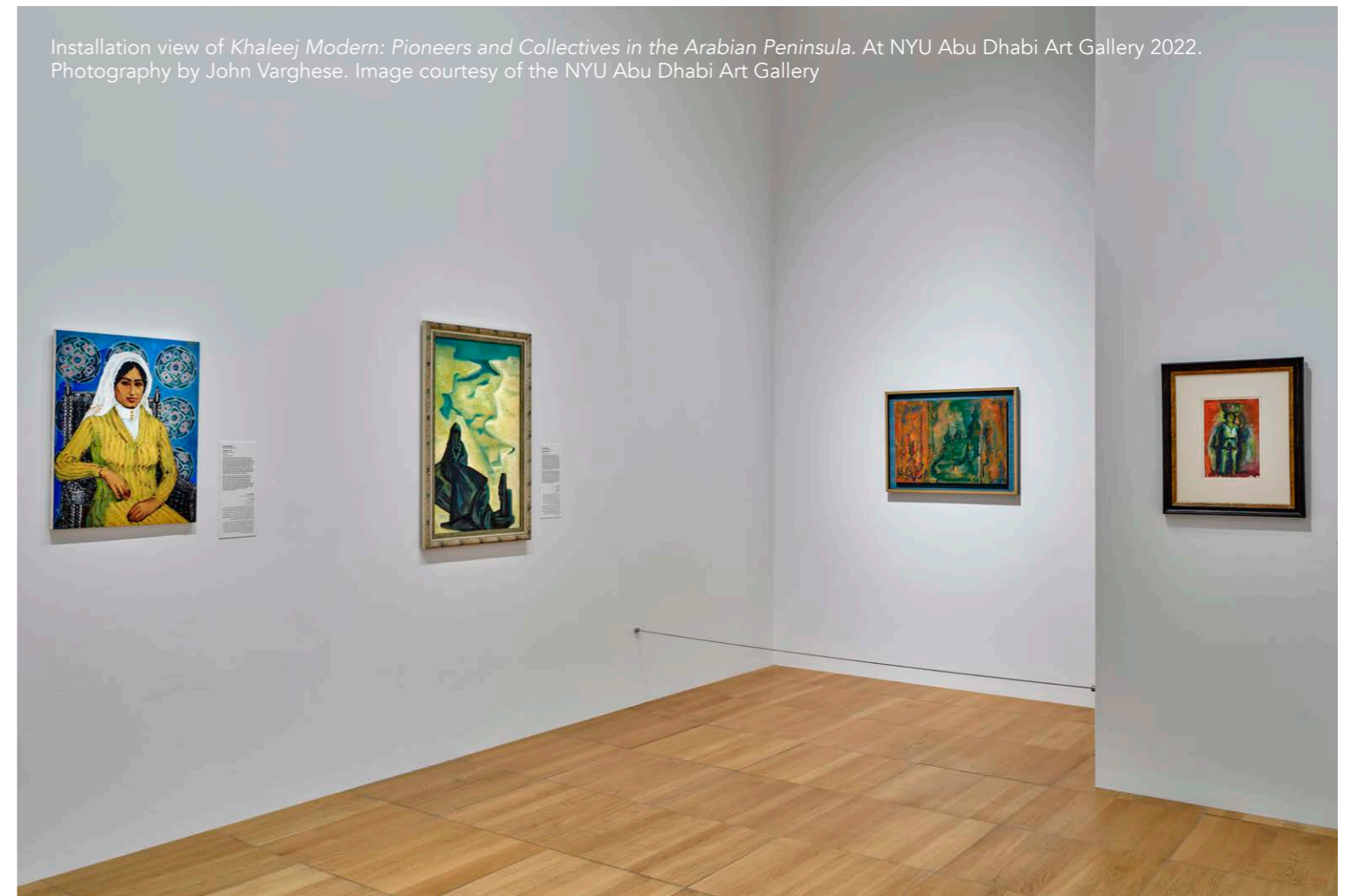
In a 2018 interview for *The National*, Binzagr reminisced on how growing up in Cairo had enabled her to return to Jeddah with a gaze that was simultaneously that of an outsider and of one who belongs. “Because I was educated in Cairo, I needed to do a lot of research in the beginning,” she explained. “I didn’t know life in Saudi before it united as a kingdom.” This perspective allowed Binzagr to enmesh herself deeply in local communities and observe intimately as a participant, while also retaining an element of distance with which to capture her environment more accurately – the common dance of an anthropologist with a degree of personal stake in their field.

Binzagr mainly depicted everyday aspects of traditional Saudi life, subjects that included children’s games, craftwork such as the spinning

of wool, marriage ceremonies, old homes and buildings, and rituals. Many of these were of the Hejazi cultural tradition, although Binzagr was also invested in exploring the country’s wider tribal diversity, particularly when manifested as variations in traditional dress. She travelled extensively around the Kingdom buying and researching different types of cultural clothing, a process that culminated in a two-year-long watercolour series that comprised identically sized panels depicting various garments from across the regions. Entitled *Turathuna (Our Tradition)* (1997–99), the series was a standout exhibit in the Modern Legacies and Geopolitics section of the second edition of the Diriyah Contemporary Art Biennale earlier this year. One of Binzagr’s most popular works remains *Al Zabun* (1969), a portrait of a Saudi woman dressed in a sunny yellow dress with a traditional white styled headscarf against a decorated background. Often referred to as “The Arab Mona Lisa” or “The Mona Lisa of Hejaz”, the painting was exhibited in the landmark show *Khaleej Modern: Pioneers and Collectives in the Arabian Peninsula* at the NYU Abu Dhabi Art Gallery in 2022, again drawing much appreciation.

Binzagr’s choice of medium spanned pastels, charcoal and watercolours, as well as etchings and oil-on-wood paintings. Her range and rigour helped ensure that she maintained a global audience

Installation view of *Khaleej Modern: Pioneers and Collectives in the Arabian Peninsula*. At NYU Abu Dhabi Art Gallery 2022. Photography by John Varghese. Image courtesy of the NYU Abu Dhabi Art Gallery



in addition to rapt national attention, attracting both serious critical respect and public acclaim. She understood the gravity of her own practice, always vigilant to the ways in which the West narrativized Saudi Arabia, its artists and women, and constantly aware of the value in building and maintaining localised cultural history. Much of this heritage was traditionally transmitted and recorded orally, which had left a vacuum for written and visual accounts. Many of the practices and customs that Binzagr recorded and portrayed in her work were already fast receding, yet she understood the significance of preserving their memory in the wider bank of Saudi culture moving forward.

Such profound cultural ambitions were further manifested in two books by Binzagr, *Saudi Arabia, An Artist’s View of the Past* (1979), translated into French and English, and *A Three-Decade Journey with Saudi Heritage* (1999). Most notably, in 2000 she completed a project she had started thinking about eleven years before with the opening in Jeddah of her own museum, cultural centre and gallery named the Darat Safeya Binzagr, where admission is free and local artists, thinkers and intellectuals can gather and make and discuss creative work together. A community beacon, the centre directly contributed to the Kingdom’s then nascent arts infrastructure through its programme

of art events and workshops. For the artist, it was also her studio and a place to continue exhibiting her work. On the Instagram post announcing Binzagr’s death, the young Jeddah-based artist Zahra Bundakji shared that Binzagr was an “iconic woman [...] who not only made extraordinarily representational works but also opened her doors to teaching and brought together so many people...” Bundakji concluded: “I’ll never forget her, the classes I took with her and the encouraging words she said.”

In 2017 Binzagr was awarded First Class Honours in the Order of King Abdulaziz for her work in producing, maintaining and preserving Saudi cultural heritage. Her life stands as an extraordinary model of artistic commitment and achievement, an expression of not only outstanding talent and creativity but also of deep investment in culture and community. Through her sustained and consistent effort, and a collaborative ethos devoid of ego, she serves as a beacon for all those seeking to navigate their own artistic journeys in a rapidly changing world. With Saudi Arabia’s national pavilion at this year’s Venice Biennale helmed for the first time by a female artist – Manal AlDowayan, whose own practice muscles against gendered traditions and boundaries – the impact and legacy of Binzagr’s foundations are even clearer. ■