





# REFLECTIONS FROM AN ARTIST VISITING KUWAIT

## Reflections from an artist visiting Kuwait

Travelling to the Middle East is never done with an easy mind even though I have to admit that I have exhibited in these regions before, in Jiddah and Rhiadh in 1999 and again in Rhiadh in 2001.

The very first thing that strikes you is the scents in the air; the air is not dry as you would expect, it is humidified by the Arab gulf that embeds the periphery of the small country like the outside of a horse shoe.

The air is as foreign as the tales of Ali Baba, spices and expulsions of exotic plants mingle and mix, carried on the scent of the turquoise seas and a desert far beyond.

The second thing that strikes you is the marble-clad, clean buildings with an obvious opulent wealth and a mix of modern Western building techniques where the habitual patterns of the Kuwait traditions has managed to grab a foothold in the architecture. An obvious American influence is also prevalent and you can't help but staring, at least for a while, as large American vehicles pass by, baffling even the smaller luxurious European sports cars that also can be seen in numbers.

With the tensions that has been in the Middle East and the not too distant war, you would expect customs officials to be at least very thorough and serious in their work, and as customs officials go, some intimidation can take place everywhere in the world but this is not so in Kuwait, at least not during my entry to the country. They are surprisingly warm and welcoming, albeit of course professional at their job, you leave them with a good feeling and get a smile and a wish of a happy stay to follow you as you exit the airport.

I was here by invitation from the Royal Danish Consulate in Kuwait. I came with my range of hand crafted Tiramisu sculpture furniture, the "La Lumiere" series of lamps, a sculpture and paintings on canvas and hand made paper. I also had my son Daniel with me, who at the age of 18 already is a seasoned professional artist; he has exhibited world-wide since he was 11 and actually sold every piece he has ever done.

Taking on a new country for an exhibition with a son, furniture, lamps, paintings on canvas and paper in acrylic and ink is not an easy task; you have a two-day blitz of an exhibition and it's up to you to take responsibility for working up each and every sale. I think this is why I like it so much; each time is a clean slate and a tremendous challenge to sell out, or just to break even.

A big issue is "beating the drums", I've never exhibited in Kuwait and do not expect the public to ever have heard of me, no matter how many exhibitions and appearances in articles and on TV I have had elsewhere. This time, or these days, I'm lucky, I have the fortune to have my own media manager and it's his job to contact the papers and hound them down until they turn up, give them material and then follow up after the visit.





After a short drive through Kuwait City we arrive at the SAS Radisson just by the sea. SAS Radisson is daunting; six restaurants, no less than two enormous dhows on land, one used for two restaurants and the second, which is the largest dhow in the world, is used as a banquet facility (extra ordinaire, is the word a Frenchman would use about this boat).



Those of us, who entering a new hotel, has a quick shower, slip on a clean shirt and go down to the bar for a gin tonic are in for a surprise; alcohol is strictly forbidden in Kuwait and all the waiter can offer is a smile and fruit juice.

The food makes up for the lack of sophisticated drinks and the food is fresh, served in abundance and done with a flair that tells you that a not small amount of culinary missionaries have settled in Kuwait with success.

Being a professional artist with a wife and four children – living only of your art and crafts, is not an easy task. The day starts at 6.30 (thanking the powers above I could not get those G&T's) with a 30 minute jog and a quick dip in the pool.

Breakfast is taken whilst I go through the day with my son and media manager, the schedule fills up quickly until it becomes clear that we have to work with military precision and with a full push through the day to reach our targets. Budding artists who thinks they can just slap the paintings on the wall and go down to the pool, beware; you will not sell anything...



Being in a new country setting up an exhibition makes you aware of just how easy life is back home where you know the language and where to get things done. Small things such a stapler, nails, a piece of string, tape, and that bigger brush you suddenly need becomes mountains to climb as the sun rises during the first hours of work until it reaches zenith and some 30 odd degrees Celsius. The Kuwaiti watching me work smiles as I comment on the weather and replies "in the summer it can reach 70", he turns his right palm up and cups it slightly, and it seems like he says In Shallah "God willing" with the friendly gesture.

The three days we had before the exhibition soon turns in to a blur, the list of things to remember, get, arrange and people to meet seems never ending and a day feels like a week.

All arrangements were done by the Royal Danish Consulate in honour of HM the queen Margrethe's birthday and the head of mission, Henrik Bendix and trade commissioner, Michael Jørgensen where there like never-tiring angels from above helping with a smile and gusto that kept us all on track.



It's a realisation I believe not many people are aware of; in foreign countries there are brave people working for you and for your country and if you run a business, or try to arrange something abroad, I have a very good piece of advice; contact the nearest trade commissioner in the embassy or consulate and you will be surprised over the knowledge they have and the doors they can open.



There are also companies abroad that are resourceful and willing to help, we had the opportunity to meet the managing director of Maersk in Kuwait, Hans Peter Glipman Jørgensen and his helpfulness, sponsorship and support went far beyond anything we could expect. My advice for those doing arrangements abroad is; work as hard as you can, be respectful to those around you and try to meet as many people as you can and you will find that there are people who are only too happy to help – anywhere in the world.

I firmly believe that if you do what you believe in and believe in what you do and treat yourself and others with love and respect there will be somebody up there looking after you and, in some mysterious way, making things happen. It's not always I know why things happen or why I meet the people that I do but it's all for a purpose and nothing makes that clearer than when you uproot yourself and go abroad on an "adventure".

Saturday afternoon on SAS Radisson, the exhibition is only a few hours away (19.00) and we experience an anti climax as we look at the exhibition. We have worked as hard as anybody ever could and I fail to see a single thing that could have been done different, or for that sake, better.

I go to the pool with my son and media manager for an hour of reflection and cooling down before the big opening; ambassadors from various countries have been invited and are coming, a hoard of journalists are waiting and Kuwait TV 2 will cover.

Changing into suits and shirts, but wearing the proverbial white Reeboks that have become my signature and worn with black sunglasses, I also note that most of my pictures are sold. We are opening with a near sold-out show!

It suddenly dawns on me that sponsors, consuls, trade commissioners and directors of the hotel as well as people walking past and seeing the works of art have snapped up the paintings one by one as the preparations have gone on.

One set of paintings has double red stickers on them already and I suddenly remember why; they were sold early and my son promised another set on commission to be done and delivered on our return home and I say to myself that it can't get better than this.

The opening is grand and the 280 m2 reception area outside the exhibition room is filled to capacity with dignitaries, journalists and art lovers, as well as a large number of people from the Kuwait Art Association.

Three great jazz musicians has been flown in from the Danish Royal Academy of Music in Århus and it is surrealistic seeing them playing next to the Bang & Olufsen stand, surrounded by Kuwaiti's in the Dish-dash, the customary white robe.





The Danish head of mission in Kuwait cuts the rope to officially start the exhibition and the race begins, the rest of the evening goes in high-speed slow-motion as a thousand balls are kept in the air. This is the moment of truth and tremendous amounts of concentration is needed as we co-ordinate journalists, say hello to everybody that has come to see what we do. It's rare that you actually sell any works of art in the tumultuous environment that the successful opening of an art show is; you just hold on to the ropes and let the ship ride the storm of people and hope they will come back later, or the next day, when you have more time.

End of the first night, two tired artists, a media manager, Bang & Olufsen, delegates from the embassy and directors of the hotel gathers, compare notes and celebrates the success with malt beer. We all sneak a look at the bottles and read the "0 % alcohol" printed on the sticker and then comfort ourselves with the fact that it's more suitable than fruit juice and at least, there won't be any hung-over artists in the morning as we prepare for the second and last day of the exhibition.

I believe that we only sold a few pictures the first night, but in reality – we all worked too hard and talked to too many people to really notice who of us sold what and to whom, the only evidence being a quick scan that reveals more and more red round stickers next to the works of art. A sales log is judiciously kept and there is a stack of business cards with notes written in the barely readable fashion of the busy and standing-up.

Selling art, as such, is also deeply over-rated and an impossible thing; I firmly believe that you can't sell art as such. It's impossible because in the end of the day it is the buyer who makes up his mind about what he sees in the painting and therefore, what it means to him and also, for

all practical purposes, what it is worth to him...

This tends to be the moment when I, who probably talks too much normally, step back and keep quiet. I like to watch people's expression as they look at my art, I do not necessarily want to hear what they say as I need to keep my own relation to what I do but their faces and gestures tells me the story that a face-to-face discussion cannot.



I find that people are generally afraid of expressing their true relationship to the art that they see because they are afraid of saying the wrong things and this is a shame. Art is exactly what it means to you, as a viewer and nothing else. The value, is what it is worth to you. For me, as the creating artist, the price is a simple equation of my expenses and the cost of having a wife and four children, nothing more, and nothing less.

I'm in fact sometimes afraid of speculation getting the better of me. I know that I have become something of a brand name internationally and I know for a fact that many art lovers buy my works with speculation in mind and that is a thought I have to keep out of my mind at all times.

If I start to paint for money I risk losing the objective and message that I try to convey and then all is lost. Not to say that I won't make more money, I probably could. What I'm afraid of is losing the relationship that I have with what I do and the love and respect that I have for those around me and life in general.

I just noticed that I used the word "relationship" in the sentence above and that struck me. Look at the way the word is constructed; "Relation" and "Ship". You can perhaps understand that as love and respect placed in a ship, steering your life for better and for worse. What we need to get away from is money, letting the stress of the daily day get to you, not spending enough time with your family and friends and not trying to see the beautiful things that there are in this life of ours. That is my sales technique, if I ever had one.

The second day of the exhibition started slowly at 16.30, I believe we were all grateful for this as it gave us some more time to talk to the many interesting people who came to see our works. Paintings went slowly and imperceptibly, often the subject of a hello and some talk, the person, or persons, walking off and coming back before deals were struck. I think this is the right way and I love the quiet sounds coming from people who just takes some quality time, look deeply in to a work of art and small talks; it's similar to the hum that can be heard in a good restaurant where we, as people, just sit, eat and enjoy. The second, and last day, ended with the desired and seemingly unattainable "sold out" being declared after checking that all works had the red round sticker next to them. We spent some time, exhausted, with the sponsors and the Danish consulate congratulating ourselves on the success and the way that things had been planned and carried out.

The following morning we got up early, everything we had brought with us needed to find its buyer and paintings wrapped, ready for delivery. It may be sad to part with the works but that is also a positive, it allows you to clean the slate and look forward, you cannot develop as long as you hang on to what you have done previously.

We had two days to wrap up before heading home and those days were not just spent packing, we also had the honour of an invitation to the Art Association of Kuwait.

I believe that nowhere can the state of affairs be seen more clearly than in the art and writings of a nation so we were very excited to see the works in the Art Association.

I'm not sure what I should, or could, expect. Was it to be strictly traditional works? Where the colours going to be dull brown, okra and yellows? Was there to be any inventive and expressionist works? Thoughts flew through my head as we drove through Kuwait city with its mosque's and minarets.





I had already come to realise that Kuwait was a more open society than some of the other Middle East countries, they openly permitted and accepted other religions, the Abaya, the traditional veil worn by women was not obligatory, and generally, the welcomes were warm and heartening but nothing could prepare me for what I saw once we had greeted the artists of the association and entered the exhibition.

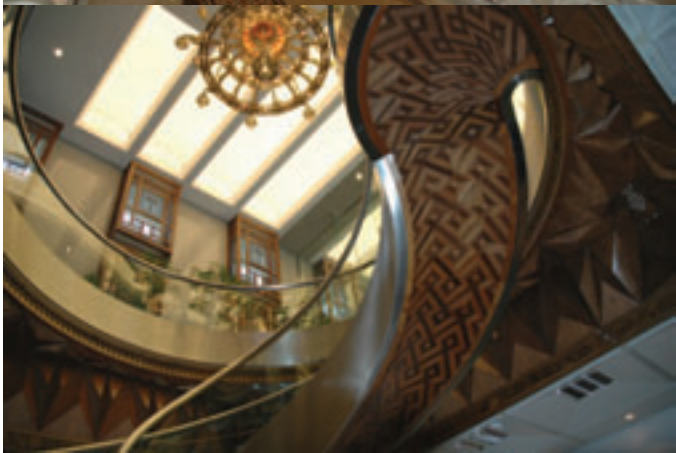


Not only is art in Kuwait broad, skilfully executed with strong and well controlled colours, they also span most of the art forms in the world and are full of expression and control. Some artists stray and explore themselves using unique media and techniques, some artists involve Kuwait classicism or work around recent Kuwait history, such as the '91 invasion or historic motives. Some female artists, such as Dhamiaa Alayoubi and Thuraya Al-Bagsami are truly exceptional and portray the female emancipation and freedom that women have in today's Kuwait vis-à-vis the traditional, sometimes oppressing conditions that women experienced in the patriarchal society of the old Kuwait.

I firmly believe that Kuwait art could, and should, be seen around the world. There is no better way to understand another culture and also, as far as art goes, the Kuwaiti can hold their own and be successful even at the highest international levels and I have the strongest urge to take a group of talented young Kuwaiti artists and arrange an exhibit in Denmark. I just hope that we Danes can treat them as well and welcoming as they treated us.



Last stop was the parliament of Kuwait. The wife of the Danish trade commissioner, Vibeke Jørgensen, had pulled strings and worked hard to arrange a guided tour to see the very heart of the Kuwait society – the parliament.



The Danish architect Jørn Utzon is perhaps best known for the design of the opera house in Sydney, Australia. Whereas the Sydney opera house is unique and truly exceptional, the lesser-known but equally exceptional design of the Kuwait parliament does pose a much bigger challenge which he executed with brilliance and flair for the culture and metrological conditions under which it is built.

Jasem Al-Matrouk, the head of Protocol & Public relations greeted us as we entered the building. There is one fabulous feature that stands out as you first view the building; an enormous tent shape with its front to the Gulf Sea to catch the cool breeze from the Arab Sea. This also, as you experience once you are in the National Assembly hall, channels the light and funnels it into the large assembly room and also, from the inside, acts as an acoustic device to spread and even the sound during sessions.

The Arabian tent is also the symbol of hospitality and in this case, the openness of the Kuwait democracy. Jasem Al-Matrouk underlined this by telling us that any person, from any country, is welcome at all times to participate as a spectator during the National Assembly sessions.





I was so taken by the splendour of the building and the way that Utzon had managed to truly make the unyielding concrete look and feel like the fabric and shape of a tent so I returned the following day when the National Assembly was in session and not only was Jasem right in saying that any person from any country is freely allowed during the sessions; it was also a great experience to see and hear the "Speaker", who is the head of the Kuwait democracy, in session.

Other remarkable features are the enormous, light rooms that stretches transversely from one end of the building to the other. It gives a feeling of grandeur and I am honoured to see the work of my colleague Utzon and how well it is executed and merged with the traditions of Kuwait, sun positions, sound and sea.

Dear Kuwait, and the people of Kuwait – It was an honour and an extremely positive experience to visit your country and I sincerely hope that this exhibition is the first of many visits and also that I may one day welcome you to Denmark or to France, where I currently reside.

By Rogér Larsen



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