



SOCIETY

Residents of a remote town await a guest **3**



ARTS

Reconstruction of historical atrocities **13**



SCIENCE

Book of all species in the world **29**

WEEKEND REVIEW

GULF NEWS

07/03/08



As Iran approaches parliamentary elections, the potent mix of nationalism, ideological zeal and fear of foreign interference has closed down the political space. President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad's conservative regime is busy consolidating its position by uprooting the liberal reformists. With freedom of speech curtailed, the opposition is turning to the blogosphere in a last-minute attempt to be heard

Full story on Page 8

The changing face of Iranian politics

BOOK REVIEWS INSIDE

Flashback to the future

Message of heritage preservation conveyed through paintings and anecdotes

REVIEWED BY JANICE D'SA
Special To Weekend Review

Fifty years of experience in the Gulf region and a passion for all things Arabian — *Al Khaleej and Beyond: Reflections of Two Artists*, a book of anecdotes and paintings by Peter Lawrence and Mike Shepley, embodies just that.

Lawrence, a sanitation and environmental engineer, and Shepley, an architect planner turned film producer — both avid travellers and finalists at the 2005 Dubai International Art Centre's Water Colour Challenge — had hit upon the concept for the book during one of their *Madinat Jumeirah* contemplations.

Al Khaleej and Beyond takes readers on a journey beyond the emirates; into the Pearls of the Gulf (Iran, Kuwait, Bahrain and Qatar), Oman, Yemen and Saudi Arabia; as well as the Mashreq countries (Syria, Jordan, Egypt, Lebanon and Turkey) through the authors' art.

Myriad Arabian anecdotes — about the days when a handshake finalised a contract or when *mushkala kabeer* could fizzle out into a *maafee mushkala*, dot the pages.

The book is a visual treat, comprising the contrasting and sometimes complementing works of the duo. The same scenes have

been depicted by the two artists, each covering a different aspect, giving a different perspective.

In the painting *Gone to Lunch*, for example, while Shepley has ignored the clothesline to focus on an empty chair and paint in a vehicle to lead the eye into the composition, Lawrence has focused on the clothesline. The chair and the vehicle are absent in his canvas.

The use of vibrant colours in the paintings is equally enrapturing. The image of the devastated city of Beirut — the grim moments captured in a splatter of grey upon grey from within which raises hope in the form of a cheerful boy — is captivating. So is Lawrence's depiction of the steam-driven paddle cruiser once owned by King Farouk. It reminded me of the 1978 Agatha Christie film *Death on the Nile*.

All encompassing

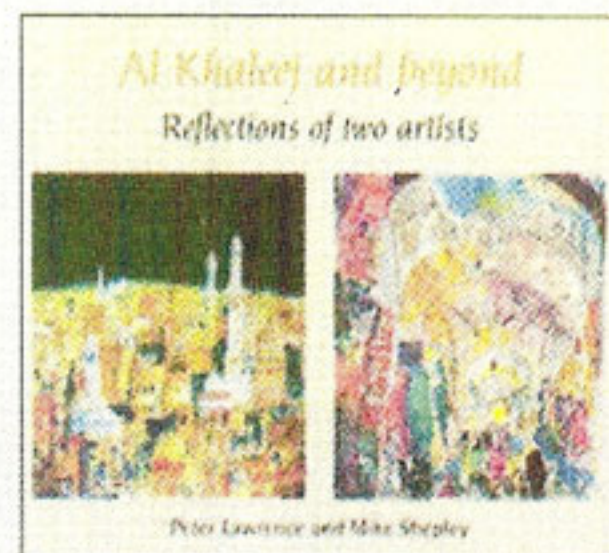
Although the paintings of Lawrence and Shepley may leave a lot to the viewer's imagination, there is no subject — animal, artefact or emotion — that they have left untouched. The cool archways of Lebanon's local market; the streets of Sana'a in Yemen; the brightly coloured Ashik-designed Persian carpets flying through Vakil Bazaar in Shiraz; the camel; a scorpion on Saudi Arabia's sands; a scops owl of Kuwait being mobbed by my-

nahs; wild cats; the Sphinx; chameleons in Yemen; yellowfin tuna and Omani lobsters; the agama of Petra; Picasso trigger fish of Jeddah; hawksbill turtle of Oman; a North African kingfisher; Hamadryas baboons (portrayed by Shepley on the lines of *Le Penseur* (the thinker)) — all figure in the paintings.

Even as the book focuses primarily on the authors' anecdotes and paintings, the reader will eventually realise that it is an appeal to the need to conserve heritage while moving towards urbanisation. The book serves as a reminder of how booming economies can submerge heritage, leaving nothing for the generations to come.

While some scenes depicted in the book, such as the shoemakers of Muscat's Mutrah Souq, remain unchanged, there are others that will never be seen again — such as the crowding of people near the walls of Nizwa Fort or the old boatyard next to Al Garhoud Bridge in Dubai.

However, all is not lost. The anecdotes exude hope that such ancient beauty



Al Khaleej and Beyond: Reflections of Two Artists
By Peter Lawrence and Mike Shepley,
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may be preserved for future generations.

In some scenes, thankfully, there is a neat combination of history with modern architecture. Consider the UFO-shaped water tower amid traditional Jeddah buildings. Shepley and Lawrence also touch upon some of the ongoing preservation projects — such as the Shuamiri Reserve, which is a regional initiative meant to preserve the Arabian oryx; the Wadi Dayqah dam project intended to manage natu-

ral water resources, thereby supporting wildlife unique to this region; and the Ramsar protected site, which is home to flamingos and could ensure the survival of Arabian leopards in the region.

Then there is Lawrence's painting of the five-star eco-lodge created by Mounir Neamatalla for Cairo's elite. It shows us that there are ways to pursue development in an eco-friendly manner, as the book does, too.

Janice D'Sa is a writer based in Abu Dhabi.

Al Khaleej and Beyond - Reflections of Two Artists is available at McGrudy's as well as Virgin Megastore.