

At ESRA, the Saudi Independent Cinema Salon Opens a Space for Dialogue Around Saudi Auteur Cinema

By hosting the inaugural Saudi Independent Cinema Salon, ESRA Paris became more than a venue for a showcase of Saudi independent films. For one day, the school transformed into a space where cinema, visual arts and public discussion converged, creating meaningful exchanges between filmmakers, students and audiences while opening new perspectives on contemporary Saudi auteur cinema.

By Sara Berretima

Some cultural events are defined less by their programme than by the conversations they generate. They create opportunities for dialogue, encourage encounters between artists and audiences, and allow cinema to exist beyond the screen. The inaugural **Saudi Independent Cinema Salon (SICS)**, held at **ESRA Paris** on **9 July 2026**, was one such occasion.

From the moment visitors entered the school, it was clear that this was not simply a series of film screenings. Students met filmmakers in the corridors, conversations began before audiences took their seats, and discussions continued long after the credits had rolled. Throughout the day, cinema became more than something to watch, it became something to experience collectively.

By hosting the Salon, ESRA naturally extended its educational mission beyond the classroom. As one of France's leading film schools, ESRA is not only a place where future filmmakers acquire technical and artistic skills; it is also a space where films are viewed, questioned and debated. Bringing together screenings, critical discussions and artistic encounters, the Saudi Independent Cinema Salon reflected this commitment to connecting education with contemporary cinematic practice.

The Salon was conceived by filmmaker and visual artist **Gigi Hozimah**, in collaboration with **Benjamin Azoulay**, Vice President of ESRA. Rather than creating another international film festival, the initiative proposes a more intimate format designed to encourage meaningful exchanges between filmmakers, students, industry professionals and audiences while introducing European viewers to contemporary Saudi independent cinema.

This approach shaped the event's structure. Every screening became the starting point for discussion, every conversation an opportunity to deepen the audience's understanding of the films, their creative processes and the cultural contexts from which they emerged.

The programme reflected the diversity of voices currently shaping Saudi independent cinema.

The experimental short **The Moment Mozart Mourned Himself**, directed by **Aqeel Alkhamees**, explored memory, solitude and artistic creation through a fragmented cinematic language that invited viewers to actively construct meaning.

In **Takes on People Smoking**, **Mohsen Ahmed** transformed an everyday gesture into a cinematic observation of human behaviour, demonstrating how ordinary moments can become sites of visual and narrative exploration.

With **Damaged Masculinity**, **Majed Al Saihati** examined contemporary representations of masculinity through a story balancing dramatic tension with irony, offering a nuanced reflection on changing social identities.

The programme concluded with **And Then Comes Winter**, written and directed by **Gigi Hozimah**, an intimate film in which silence, restrained performances and emotional nuance become the primary narrative language, portraying a couple confronting uncertainty with remarkable subtlety.

Presented together, these four works did not seek to define Saudi cinema through a single perspective. Instead, they revealed the richness of a cinematic landscape shaped by diverse artistic voices, narrative forms and aesthetic approaches. What united them was not subject matter, but a shared commitment to creative independence and personal expression.

Yet perhaps the most significant aspect of the Salon began after each screening.

As the lights came back on, audiences remained in the theatre. Conversations unfolded around filmmaking choices, narrative structures, production realities and the broader social contexts reflected in the films. Students, faculty members, filmmakers, critics and professionals exchanged perspectives that often differed, but consistently deepened the dialogue initiated by the works themselves.

These discussions were further enriched by the participation of film critic **Alex Masson**, a member of the selection committee of the **San Sebastián International Film Festival**. His contribution situated the featured works within broader international conversations about contemporary auteur cinema, encouraging audiences to consider both their artistic specificity and their place within today's global cinematic landscape.

The dialogue extended beyond cinema through the exhibition **My Body Is My World**, presented alongside the screenings. Created by **Gigi Hozimah** in collaboration with artist **Hanaa Hejazi**, the exhibition invited visitors to move seamlessly between moving images and visual art. Exploring themes of body, memory and identity, it echoed many of the questions raised by the films while expanding them into another artistic language.

Rather than functioning as a parallel programme, the exhibition became an integral part of the Salon's overall experience. Film, photography and visual arts complemented one another, reinforcing the event's interdisciplinary character and highlighting the connections between different forms of artistic expression.

This continuity became one of the defining qualities of the Salon. Screenings led naturally into discussions; discussions evolved into informal encounters; those encounters, in turn, extended into the exhibition spaces. The event unfolded less as a sequence of activities than as a coherent journey through cinema, art and dialogue.

Within this context, ESRA's role emerged organically. The school was not merely hosting the event, it provided the intellectual and educational environment in which it could fully develop. The conversations taking place throughout the day illustrated how a film school can serve not only as a place of professional training but also as a forum for critical thinking, cultural exchange and artistic discovery.

The partnership between the Saudi Independent Cinema Salon and ESRA gave the initiative a dimension that extended beyond film exhibition. Through the collaboration fostered by **Benjamin Azoulay**, the project brought together education, artistic practice and international cooperation, creating opportunities for meaningful interaction between filmmakers, students, educators and industry professionals.

By the end of the day, the Salon had offered far more than a programme of four films. It proposed a way of experiencing cinema in which screenings become conversations, conversations become encounters, and encounters continue to shape new perspectives long after the audience leaves the theatre.

As the final visitors departed ESRA, discussions continued in the school's hallways and courtyards. Conversations moved effortlessly from screenwriting to directing, from memory to cinematic language, from the films that had just been discovered to those still waiting to find new audiences. Perhaps this is the most enduring achievement of the first Saudi Independent Cinema Salon: creating, if only for one day, a space where films continued to live beyond the closing credits through the dialogue they inspired.