

SHIMMERING SHAMMAREY

By: Noor Kadhim

February, 2013. Amman, Jordan. I remember the day clearly. I walked into a gallery off Rainbow Street and saw red.

It was not just any red. It was a red that engulfed me, that overwhelmed me, in its infinite depth. It was a red that stuck two fingers up at the Establishment. It was neither the red of the blood that has been spilled across the centuries, nor the red of the eternal rose. It was Shammarey Red. For if Yves Klein could claim a colour, so too can Mohammed Shammarey. And at the corner of this interminable blanket of red, concealed beneath a drape, crouched the Machiavellian creator himself, beating upon his drum.

A viewer habituated to skimming the surface might presume upon a glance at Shammarey's digital works that the frequent intercession of the artist's bodily image in them is motivated solely by vanity. This would be a mistake. A more profound examination tells us that the artist is gently provoking us from beneath his veil. Shammarey's desire seems to be to force us to look twice. Sharply defined images are sometimes placed in a recurring pattern like the Bedouin, kandoura-clad figure standing either with his back to the onlooker, or towards us with his face wrapped up. At other times they are unitary images, like the Khaleeji woman, face and head shrouded in plastic bubble-wrap, a humorous poke at Islamic traditionalism. The works challenge the viewer to evaluate his or her preconceptions about society's rules and prohibitions. By entreating us to plunge into his digitally perfect red sea, the artist invites the audience to enter his world. For Shammarey is that rare breed of artist who does exactly what he wants, when he wants, and lets no one dictate to him otherwise.

But if red represents rebellion in Shammarey's dictionary, black stands for solitude. Born in 1962 to an Iraqi father and a Saudi mother, Shammarey was a child of Baghdad, having spent his formative youth there. The black sheep of the family since childhood, Shammarey was left to his own devices by his parents, who soon abandoned any hopes that he would grow up to be like his older brother Ahmed, the successful, the logical one. "Ahmed set an example to our sisters, Nadia, Fadia, and Dima, but I was the lost artist, wasting my time and my life", said Shammarey.

And yet, skating on the edges of education, Shammarey never failed a single year at school. He attended the Islamic Educational School in Karkh before completing high school at Baghdad College and Athamiyah High. He then

studied nutrition at a specialist college. Nutrition? His ample teddy bear build and the cigarette between two fingers did not fit with this revelation. "My grades were not good enough to get me into Fine Arts", Shammarey chuckled, exhaling a cloud of smoke that resembled the Cheshire Cat. "I wanted to be a musician. We did not have written school reports in Baghdad, but if we did, they would say that I was quite an introvert." This is true even today; Shammarey is only comfortable in a group if it does not exceed ten people. I recalled my own interview of Alexander McQueen, during the Oxford days, years ago. The bad boy of British fashion, a non-conformist creative genius like the man before me, had then blushinglly confessed that he was actually very shy, preferring to steer clear of the fashion glitterati. It may be a characteristic trait of the maverick artist, whose alter ego chooses to manifest its extroversion through subtle, creative means.

However, when the young Shammarey injured his finger permanently during a brawl, and his musical career was thwarted, he ventured into painting. It was his father, Saad Abdul-Jabbar Al-Shammarey, himself a prominent Iraqi artist, who noticed Shammarey's artistic talent and encouraged it. One day, he gave his son a studio space of his own in which to unleash his creative juices. Shammarey's early works were nuanced by smoke, scattered scripts and ruins, by an Iraq that was an amalgam of family and folklore. He was influenced by the Abbasid ruins he had grown up with, having spent much of his youth around the historic Khan Murjan and the Mustansiriya School. However, the artist has not returned to his homeland since 2008. Shammarey brings his own experiences into his works, so that they become a self-portrait and visual reproduction, not of an era or nostalgic remembrance, but of the artist's personal torments and musings. Abandoning painting for a time in favour solely of digital photography, Shammarey explains that he is able to transpose his overflowing concepts much more readily through digital art and installations than painting. For the perfectionist in him, the process is quicker. "It's Darwinian - 'Survival of the Fittest'."

Shammarey's 'Paper Planes' installation provides a perfect example of the marriage of concept with acute attention to detail, executed with a precision and transparency that have become the artist's trademarks. 'Paper Planes' focuses on the use of Arabic calligraphy, linking them through flocks of suspended paper planes with engraved words and expressions associated

with the holy pilgrimage of Hajj, and Mecca. The work was singled out by the Saudi Aviation Authority as one of the projects for Jeddah's new airport. Shammarey will be allocated two virtual cube-like spaces, 4.5 metres in dimension, to execute the concept. It is supposed to distract bored travellers by giving them something to look at, snippets to read. "I love airports. I don't mind delays," Shammarey the introvert confesses. "I love to be a fly on the wall, observing people."

Meanwhile, in another continent, April 2014 will mark the first time that this Iraqi artist will be presented in a solo exhibition as a local artist rather than a Middle Eastern 'export'. At the Station Museum in Texas, Shammarey's adopted home since 2008, 'Paper Boats' will be exhibited. The photographic series treats the issue of human trafficking. Shammarey takes a stance on the portrayal of women as commodities, exploring this theme via female bodies that he places on the sides of delicate, semi-crumpled paper boats. Like many of his peers in the Iraqi diaspora, Shammarey is fortunate to have access to an unrestricted stage for expression in the West. One of his even more controversial concepts, for instance, deals with circumcision, an Islamic rite. He admits that abroad he is indeed allowed free reign to explore these topics, unlike in the Gulf or his home country, where such things are taboo. "My expression can be stronger", he says, "although the pain that stimulates it is the same pain." However, the drawbacks that Shammarey perceives in his new environment are paradoxically a side effect of the absence of those same elements that made him stay away from his troubled homeland. "At the beginning, I felt I was lost. The art (in the US) lacked serious research. Though lots of it existed, it did not express true pain or suffering. For me, truly great art came from those immigrant artists with other ethnic roots, whose experiences, of war and displacement, for example, are dramatic." This statement is not generic or matter-of-fact, however. In it resides the subjective essence of Shammarey's creative drive: the *je ne sais-quoi* that sets him apart from other artists who are concerned predominantly with aesthetics. For black also stands for pain, in Shammarey's visual vocabulary. "Art embodies the release of the pain that I feel. I need to release it in order to rest my soul. Many of my works are self-portraits; they are introspective." Since, for Shammarey, art simultaneously personifies and liberates pain, he refuses to bow to the decrees and the whims of the commercial art world. "Galleries are becoming like fast food outlets," he bemoans. "They're concerned with turning stock rapidly, and imposing draconian terms on artists. I want to be free to create art whether it sells or not, because it is an expression of what is inside my soul."

The soul found an outlet in the artist's 'Longing' series, of 2013. In 'Longing', Shammarey partly returns to the medium of paint to evoke the pang that he feels at this stage of his life "for geographical places or people that I do not see anymore. The longing is for my love, country, and my parents whom I haven't seen for 14 years. It is spiritual, and nags at me." Ultimately, 'Longing' is that ephemeral, intangible essence that Shammarey yearns for, but does not quite capture. "Maybe that is why it is a pain," he suggests.

'Longing' evolves with a new video work that has not yet been publicly unveiled. 'Hula' is a work of many dimensions that plays on the three senses

of sight, sound, and touch. It features a girl around whose waist spins a hoop. Like a Sufi dancer, she keeps spinning until she reaches a state of euphoria, and is finally consummated by Longing. "The works evoke life's journey; the marks on her body left by the rotating hoop are her experiences. She is whirling into eternity, a self-perpetuating state of yearning."

Conversely, the euphoria and meteoric rise of the contemporary art market, especially in the Middle East, does not generate great excitement for Shammarey. "The Middle Eastern contemporary art market is not taken seriously in the West," he says. "Don't be fooled by the auction figures. Western investment in Eastern art, which includes Korean, Indian and Pakistani art, is driven purely by money. It's a business. It does not rely on influential and respected ambassadors of Arab art such as those who wrote about Warhol and Rauschenberg. They simply do not exist for the Arab world. It's about time for some serious writing on today's Arab artists, for a set of criteria to be established."

'Hula' personifies a further idea: that the notion of universality has ended. For Shammarey, the rhythm of life is now much faster, and few artists will be in the spotlight much longer than a few years. Like the hula dancer, they must keep turning and churning out new work of a consistent level, to remain internationally recognised. "We have entered the era of digital technology where artistic tools are constantly being updated, and we must keep reinventing ourselves," he says. "It used to be that in the Middle East, when an artist gets older, he becomes a 'Pioneer', automatically, the head of a tribe, almost. It is not like that anymore. Art has become marketing and PR. It's not about the art alone." In this constantly changing, ego-driven world, it is a joy to find an honest, confident artist like Mohammed Shammarey. He is a true diamond in the rough; albeit one that requires some more polish than others. Shammarey's art is truly free, because it respects only the present. Like Degas, who requested that his statues not be cast in bronze but permitted to decay naturally, Shammarey's happiness in art is, in his words, the pleasure of the moment that ends with the ending of life. "I don't care what happens after I am gone. I leave my marks in the here and now, like imprints in the sand, not knowing what comes after or whether the tide will wash them away."

About the Writer

Noor Kadhim is an art law and arbitration lawyer with experience working in the UK, France, and the Gulf. Her clients range from artists, galleries, auction houses, art dealers, and museums and other institutions. She speaks English, Arabic and French. Noor is also an art consultant on Iraqi art, and founded INtheFRAME (www.intheframe.org), a curatorial and art consultancy platform for Iraqi and Middle Eastern art, under whose auspices she curates exhibitions in international locations. Noor is also a freelance journalist, and a regular contributor to Contemporary Practices. More details can be found on www.intheframe.org, or by contacting her at noor@intheframe.org.

With thanks to Raghad, who is an arm, a leg and a legend, wrapped into one.



98.2 Black Boat, 2011. Digital print on paper, edition of 3, 300x500cm - Courtesy of the artist.



The red one | Darwish, 2012, 80x50cm, digital print, edition of 3 - Courtesy of the artist.