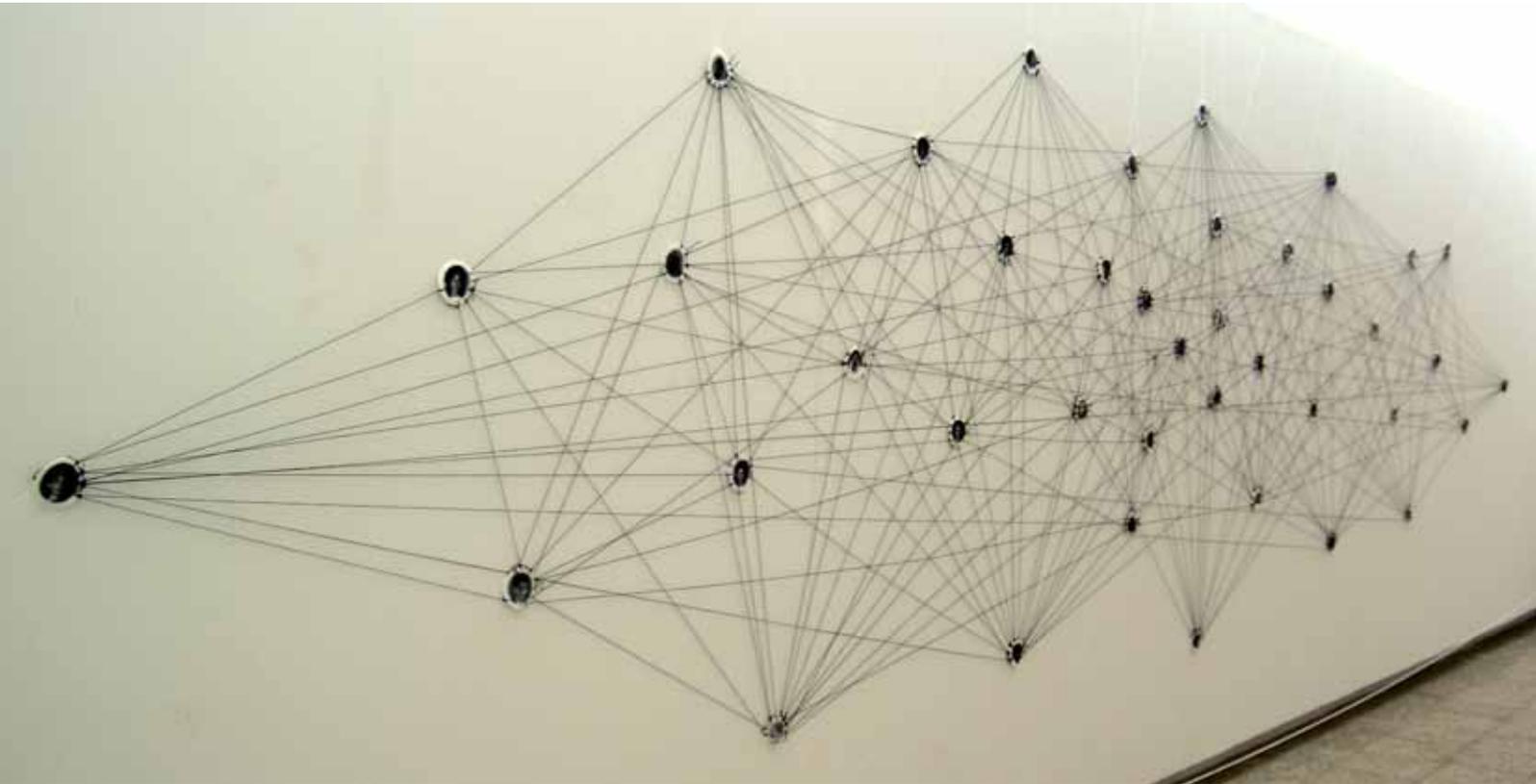


Interview with Walid Siti, January 2011 in his studio in Hackney, London

By Madeline Yale



Walid Siti *Family Ties*, 2004. Thread, plastic discs and photographs_230 x 900cm_Courtesy of the artist and XVA Gallery, Dubai

Madeline Yale: Your relationship with Iraq is the focus of your work. What is your personal history?

Walid Siti: I was born in Duhok in Iraqi Kurdistan, a semi-independent region. In 1976 I graduated from the Institute of Fine Arts in Baghdad. I wanted to continue my studies in art, but as I was not a member of the Ba'ath party I had to look abroad for opportunities. I enrolled in a language course in Belgrade, which also granted me the right to a passport. I received a BA and MA from the Academy of Fine Arts in Ljubljana, what is now Slovenia.

Trouble was brewing in Iraq when I was a student abroad. The former Yugoslavia and Iraq had a very special relationship. The local police hassled Iraqi

students like me because I was against the Ba'athist regime. I had no choice; I had to flee Yugoslavia. In 1984 I sought political asylum in London and have lived here ever since. I began making art in my studio flat and moved to this studio in Hackney after I got married in 1992.

MY: You have said that your art is a response to the atrocities of war, political upheaval and widespread violence endemic in your country's recent history.

WS: My life is affected by politics and war, whether I am involved in them or not. My work has always been haunted by these themes – by choice or by circumstance.



Walid Siti *Handle With Care* (detail), 2006_Installation_ Courtesy of the artist and XVA Gallery, Dubai

MY: The art you created in your earlier years addresses these themes in a direct manner – colourful woodcuts, linocuts and engravings contain symbols of your country's identity and the visual language of war. In some cases, you incorporated photography and newspaper articles into the images. Can you describe why you shifted to work more abstractly in your thirties?

WS: As a printmaking student in Ljubljana I discovered that the scope of the world is much wider than what I'd seen in Baghdad. My work there was a mixture of learning techniques and challenging pre-existing ideas I had about my background, my heritage, my culture, my family, the brewing against the Kurds and the war between Iran and Iraq.

I used different symbols of power, such as flags, which were planted by the military every kilometre or so to mark claimed territory. The war was so

atrocious it was almost theatrical – so many human beings perished and natural resources were drained while the two countries fought with weapons from wherever they could they purchase. When I came to London during the height of the Iran-Iraq war and the chemical attack on the Kurdish town of Halabja, I was very moved by what was happening there. My parents, my brother and my sister are still living in Iraq. It is hard to detach myself from the place and the memories that keep resurfacing.

MY: Since the late 1980s you have used a muted colour palette that is quite sombre. The colours remind me of organic, raw materials found in your homeland – the dirt of the earth, the stones of the mountains, the black of petroleum.

WS: Printmaking also trained me to work with a simplified palette. The colours of ochre, black, and grey align with the general theme of my work that



Walid Siti_Portrait of a Mountain No 1_2009_Acrylic on canvas_90 x 120cm_Courtesy of the Artist and XVA Gallery, Dubai

everything – the balance of nature, the clash of confrontation – is always black and white. I find that these dichotomies reflect themselves in my work like graphic illustrations of the idea that there are only two options.

MY: The series *Precious Stones* (1997/2007-) exemplifies this dichotomy. Can you describe why you situate the stone in the centre of the work, building layers of vertical marks upwards like conical shapes or pyramids?

WS: Stones, carved ones as well as natural rocks, are sacred shapes home to Islam and are an important component of our culture's architectural symbolism. The stones are centred to symbolise energy that radiates around them in a circular motion, like the circumambulations performed around the Ka'aba. I'm interested in layering shapes like building blocks. I begin each work with a broad base and slowly build layers up to form a peak. This repeating structure is a metaphor for the organisation of society and hierarchy of power. Architecture from our cultural heritage like pyramids, ziggurats or minarets

demonstrates this idea. The relationships formed in our culture reflect a stratified social structure, starting with the family and peaking with the military.

MY: The larger vertical marks in this series could symbolize one or more human beings encapsulated in this stratified structure. Also, there is a lack of transparency in these quasi-architectural drawings and paintings. You get the sense that something is hiding behind the multiplicity of layers.

WS: That is true. I feel that people are entrapped in the system so they naturally become part of that structure and detached it from the concept that it is a physical structure. They build up layers. This is the process of immersing structure and hierarchy of power.

MY: Another way to look at it is you need the strong base to support the highest point. That base – the masses – becomes somewhat anonymous in its foundation in order to transmit the identity of the whole.

WS: In the series *Family Ties* (2004/2008-) I deal with the idea that "us" as a group is more important

than “me” as individual in our society. Your identity is unified or entangled with the identity of the group. The base or the human in this equation is lost. Slowly the structure rises up into a peak to identify the source of power or influence.

MY: All the parts are interconnected through a diagrammatic network of lines with one or many shapes serving as anchors.

In the last few years, you have realised your works on paper into three-dimensional form. *Handle with care!* (2006) and later *Pyramids* (2010), a triangular installation comprised of handcrafted, signed and stamped stone bricks, place great importance on materiality and architecture.

WS: This is about mountains; places where we can escape to hide and sources of water and food. The symbolic habitual space referred to as “the mountains”, where Kurds have always regarded as their only friend, has lost its respect due to chaotic construction and development taking place that have little regards to the environment. These bricks symbolize the imbalance in the relationship.

MY: They’re abstracted from where they once came – removed from the source, and in *Handle with Care!* they are packaged for individual consumption, connoting a different use value – yet the stone bricks are undeniably a natural form. They are precious in how they are wrapped, for the human being to take.

WS: The construction can symbolise something you climb to achieve an end. I have an interest in ancient buildings and monuments of the Middle East – not for nostalgic reasons, but rather because of I want to understand the subject’s historical context in hopes that this may shed light on our current history. During the 1980s when the war was raging in Iraq and I was looking to make sense of what was happening through my art, I explored iconic examples of ancient and contemporary architecture as symbols for the human need for power, conquest and glory. At the time, I discovered that Saddam was building one of his many, grandiose palaces on what could have a Mesopotamian excavation site. This was apropos to this idea of human ambition and the desire to leave a mark on the land beyond sanity.

MY: And the bricks are symbolic of Saddam’s interest in the architecture of the Babylonian Empire, mimicking king Nebuchadnezzar’s signature and inscriptions on bricks used to rebuild the Tower of Babel. The bricks on the original tower were bound together by bitumen, a solid form of petroleum found nearby which was used by many 19th century painters. I find it interesting that much of your painting contains a texture and colour resembling this blackened substance.

My use that works more referring to graphic serial, printmaking serial, which imbues it with importance. You mention that mountains are furthermore important as they provide a source of water. Can you describe the forthcoming Iraqi Pavilion at the Venice Biennale and your plans to incorporate the chosen theme of “water” in your work?

WS: I am building a marriage between the present-day environment of my homeland and what existed before. In November, I visited Kurdistan of Iraq. From the plane you can see part of the Tigris and the great Zab as well as a few smaller rivers that are totally drained and are surrounded by dry, barren land. You can see how the beautiful imprint of the river resembles a snake, acting as large vein or artery of blood that supplies the land with a vital element of life. You realize how significant these rivers have always been and now how fragile they become.

I am delighted about the theme of Iraqi pavilion “water” as it gives me a chance as an artist to express my concerns about environmental issues such as water. It also offers me an opportunity to create art that is not directly related to violence and war.

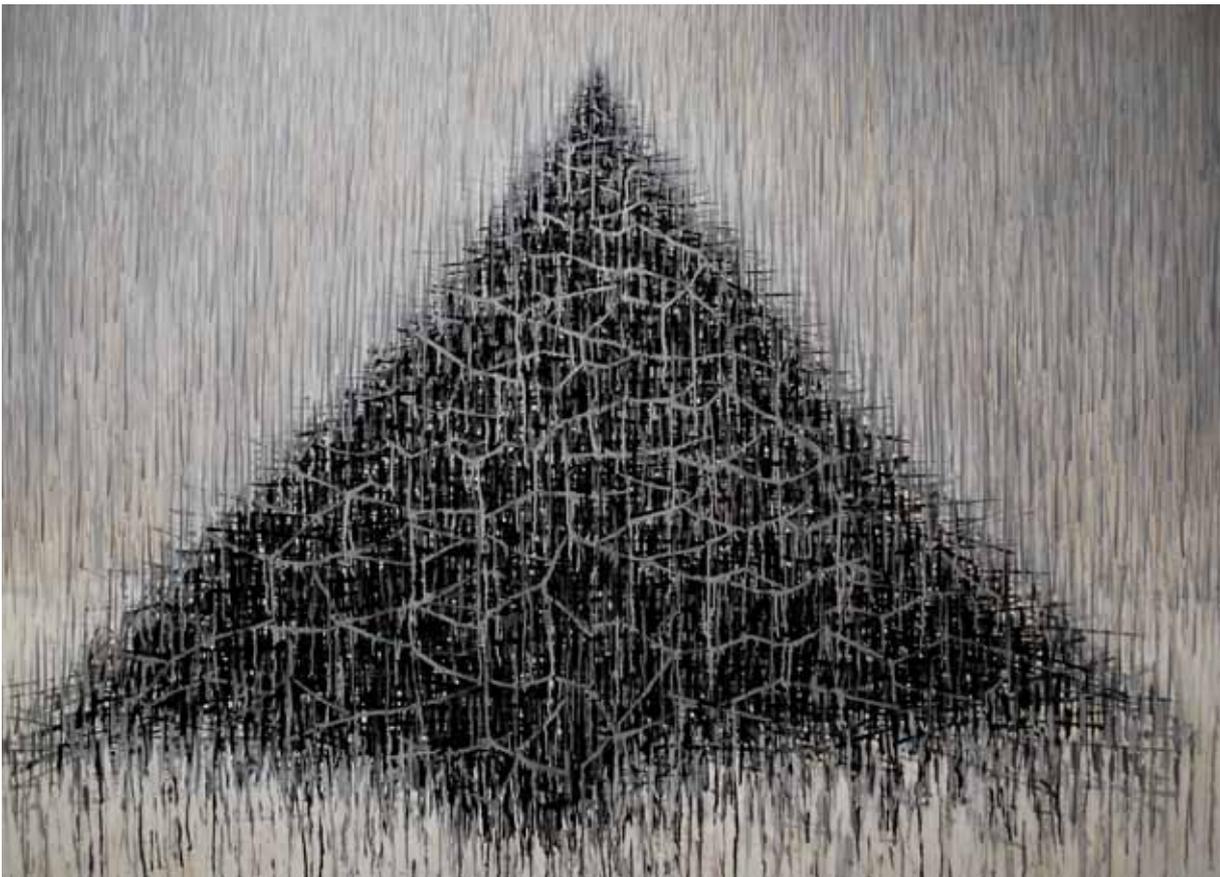
I intend to install two pieces on the theme. At the entrance of the Iraqi pavilion, I am creating a 9 metre-long installation that consists of small tube-like vessels of water that are vertically suspended by webbing ribbon. These form an undulating movement like a snaking river. The inspiration for the second work came from the image of Gali Ali Beg waterfall. Featured in many official publications and the current 5000 Iraqi Dinar, this is an iconic image that symbolises the beauty of nature and its resourcefulness. A recent wave of draught caused this waterfall to dry up in the hot season. That sent

shock waves through Iraqi Kurdistan, which led the authorities to take unprecedented action: they decided to artificially pump in the water to simulate the waterfall. This is a strong statement about saving the pride of the nation, signifies the level of threat to natural resources and possible troubles ahead.

MY: Yes, I can imagine that the usual trope of war and destruction in Iraq becomes almost a self-fulfilling prophecy – you come to expect its permanence in contemporary art and life. How does it feel to see your country represented in the news as a perpetual site of conflict?

WS: It is absolutely horrible. Internationally, Iraq and

Iraqis are always depicted as either the villains or the victims. As a Kurd, I am often identified as a victim, but as an Iraqi I feel that I am commonly associated with the State. However, I remain optimistic for the future of Iraq. I hope the people of Iraq have pulled out of the worst time in recent history. Our social structure is built upon a hierarchy: the family, the father figure, the tribal figure, and the general. It will take a long time – many generations – to come out of this formation. In spite of that, Iraqis can find solutions to reach a middle ground in a frame of some sort of democracy that can tolerate and embrace ethnic, religious and cultural diversity.

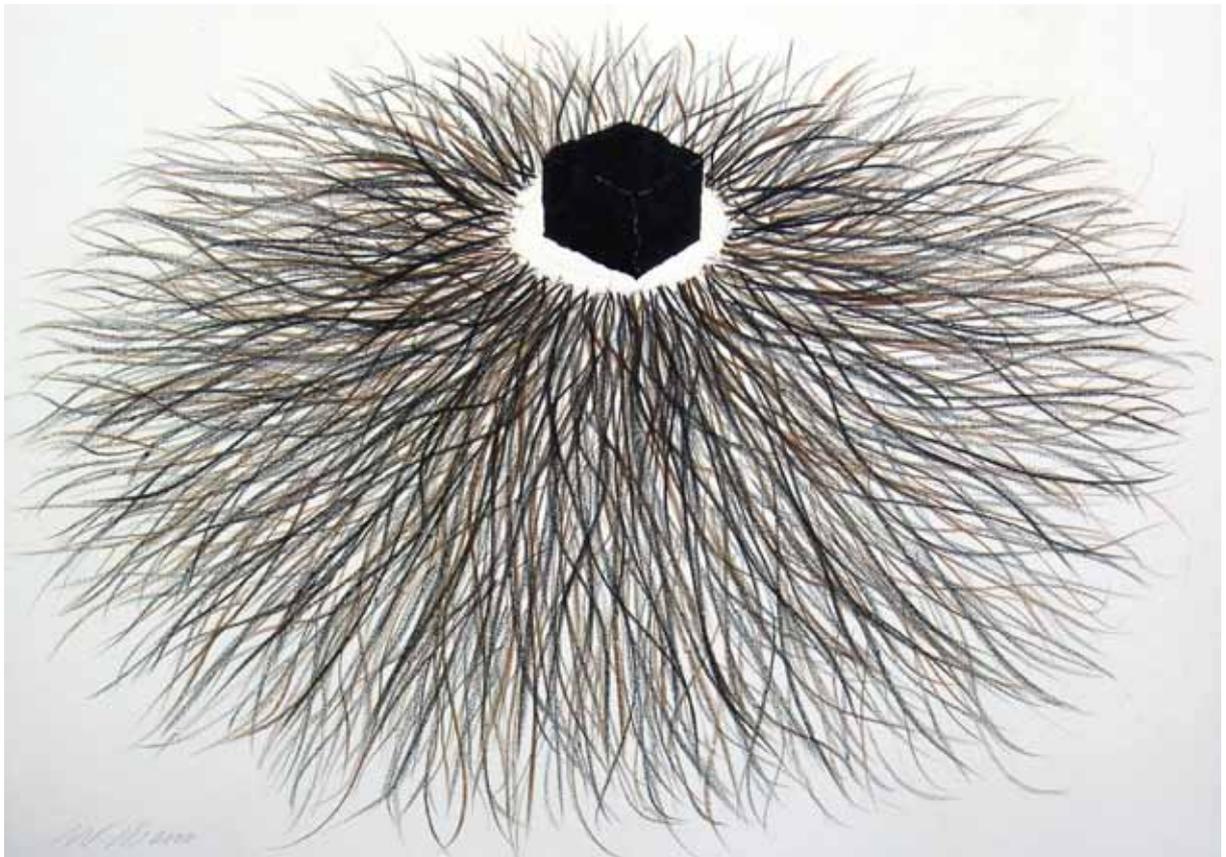


Walid_Siti_Untitled, 2011_From the series_PyramidsAcrylic on canvas_180 x 210cm_Courtesy of the Artist and XVA Gallery, Dubai

That could be a source for enhancing and enriching the cultural identity of Iraq. I remain hopeful for change.

Walid Siti lives in London. He is represented by XVA Gallery, Dubai and Rose Issa Projects, London. His work is in the collections of the British Museum, The Imperial War Museum, The National Gallery of Amman, The Victoria & Albert Museum, The World Bank, and the Iraq Memory Foundation. Art for American Embassy programme.

For further reading: Mirzoeff, Nicolas. 2005. *Watching Babylon: The War in Iraq and Global Visual Culture*. New York and London: Routledge.



Walid Siti_Untitled, 2000_From the series Precious Stones_Crayon on paper_56 x 76cm_Courtesy of the Artist and XVA Gallery, Dubai