

Art as a ‘Psychological Outlet’: Expatriation and The Work of Contemporary Iraqi Artists

By: SAMAR FARUQI, Director of Research, Meem Gallery.

Living in exile and grappling with the harrowing changes of a homeland devastated by war, sectarian conflict and foreign occupation permeates the work of many contemporary Iraqi artists. Expressions of personal pain, trauma and loss articulated in various

artists, started in the 1980s because of the Iran-Iraq War (1980-88), accelerating during the Gulf War (1990-91), and the situation resulting from the crippling economic sanctions imposed on the country. There were several artists, however, who



Himat Ali, The Sea (2005-2008-), mixed media, 200 x 400 cm

media evoke experiences which subtly diverge from present-day perceptions of Iraq as a nation defined by bloodshed and interminable destruction. Intermingled with confrontations with the current state of the country are references to poetry, cultural heritage and the teachings of modern art pioneers, and it is through such allusions that viewers can engage with the multivalent experience of exile.

The mass emigration of Iraqi civilians, including

remained during this period of upheaval, including a group of young artists – the 1980s generation 1 – who spent their formative years studying at the

1- The 'Eighties Generation' was coined in 1991 by Iraqi critics, poets, writers and artists who believed that contemporary art reached maturity during the Iraq-Iran War. Artist Hanaa Malallah finds this problematic as the work of this generation is very much a continuation of the artistic practices of previous generations. It should be noted that the term was not specifically coined for the artists discussed in this paper; my selection of artists is limited to those included in the Art in Iraq Today exhibition, held at Meem Gallery. In this essay, the use of 'eighties generation' refers to a group of artists who studied and exhibited in Iraq during the 1980s, as well as artists who were of the same age group but emigrated during this period, for example, both Modhir Ahmed and Amar Dawod left Iraq during the early 1980s.

Institute of Fine Arts, and Academy of Fine Arts, in Baghdad. 2

Founded in 1939, the painting department of the Institute of Fine Arts was, from its formation until the late 1980s, regarded as a leading centre for the development of contemporary Iraqi art. 3 During the eighties, young artists had the opportunity to study under prominent exponents of the modern art movement including, 4 most notably, Shaker Hassan Al Said (b. Samawa, 1925-2004-), one of the founders of the One Dimension group (al-Bu'd al-Wahid). 5 Al Said encouraged his students to follow and develop their own creative trajectory and stressed the importance of referencing Iraqi heritage, particularly the forms and symbols found in Mesopotamian art. This approach was initiated by 1950s modern Iraqi art pioneer Jawad Salim (b.

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3- Artist Ghassan Ghaib describes the Institute of Fine Arts as 'the womb where we grew as students and later as artists.' Unless otherwise stated, all citations are from the forthcoming publication *Art in Iraq Today*, ed. Charles Pockock, Samar Faruqi and Noura Haggag (Dubai, Meem Editions) or personal correspondences with the author. I would like to thank the artists for their help during the writing of this piece.

4- From 1939 up until 1960, artists Jawad Salim and Faiq Hassan, considered the pioneers of modern art in Iraq, initiated and taught painting and sculpture at the Institute; other instructors during this period include Atta Sabri, Ismail Al-Shaikhy, Khalid Al-Rahal and Kadum Haider. During the 1960s up until the 1980s prominent artists who taught there also included, in addition to Al Said, Rafa Al-Nasiri, Mohammed Muhridin, Salem Al-Dabbagh, Mohammed Ali Shakir, Salman Abbas and Ali Talib; sculpture instructors notably Roman Artomovisky (from Poland) and Lazisky (from Yugoslavia) taught for several years. I would like to thank May Muzaffar for providing all information related to both the Institute and Academy of Fine Arts, Baghdad.

5- Founded in 1970, the first meeting of the One Dimension group was held at Jamil Hamodi's house and attended by Al Said, Abdulrhman Al-Kaylani, Rafa Al-Nasiri and Dia Al-Azzawi. Al-Azzawi and Al-Nasiri left the group after the first exhibition because Al Said used a personal statement as the group's manifesto. For further information on the One Dimension group see Nada M. Shabout, *Modern Arab Art: Formation of Arab Aesthetics* (UPF, Florida, 2007), pp. 109,119 ,15-130 ,129.

Ankara, 1919-1961-) and continued during the 1960s by Dia al-Azzawi (b. Baghdad, 1939), a key figure in the modern art movement and one of the founders of the New Vision group (al-Ru'yya al-Jadidah)⁶. Al Said's influence at the Institute was profound, and as poet and art critic May Muzaffar notes: 'with his bold ideas and sophisticated intellectual positions, he sparked the imagination of the youth and revived within them the spirit of enthusiasm.'⁷

Studying and exhibiting amid the ruination of their homeland places the artists of the eighties generation in a particularly unique position. Political changes not only affected them personally - reinforcing their interest in tradition and identity - but also in terms of their ideological and technical approach to art. Sanctions greatly limited access to art materials, leading many artists to incorporate readymade or 'found' objects into their work—an approach which several have continued with after leaving Iraq. Opportunities for exhibiting art work became increasingly difficult, and following the 2003 US invasion, it soon became untenable, mainly for security reasons, for remaining artists to stay in the country. While the work they produced in Baghdad bears witness to the trauma and upheavals of war, their recent output demonstrates the challenges of coming to terms with life as an expatriate in self-imposed exile.

Resettlement Through Omission: Absence

Standing patiently in a tartan suit, a young boy

6- Founded in 1969, the group also included Rafa Al-Nasiri, Hashim Samarchi, Saleh Al-Juma'e, Tarik Ibrahim and Mohamed Mahr Al-Din and Ismail Fatah. The group's manifesto, published in October 1969, was titled *Toward a New Vision*. Al-Azzawi has noted that although they are referred to as the New Vision group, they did not actively use this as their group name during exhibitions. Also see Nada Shabout, *Modern Arab Art: Formation of Arab Aesthetics*, pp. pp. 125 -29, for further information.

7- Referencing heritage was a prominent feature in the modern art movement of the earlier decades, bolstered by a sense of nationalism amongst artists. Art historian Nada Shabout has observed that starting from 1968 art expressed 'intense Arabism and anti-imperialism; during the 1980s nationalism was to become even stronger.' She points out that while the art produced in 1980s is popularly regarded as Baathist propaganda art, this is not exclusively the case: 'This period...has not received in-depth study and requires reevaluation and closer analyses of the works produced.' See Nada Shabout, 'A Dream We Call Baghdad,' *Modernism and Iraq*, ed. Zainab Bahrani and Nada Shabout, exhibition catalogue, Wallach Art Gallery, Columbia University, 28 January - 28 March 2009, pg. 30.

clasps onto the hand of his father as they pose for a picture on a riverbank of the Euphrates in Kufa. This scene is the first of two photographic prints in Nedim Kufi's (b. Baghdad, 1962) diptych series *Absence* (2010), which displays large reproductions of old photographs from the artist's family album. In the first image, a young Kufi is captured with his father, in the second, correlating work he is missing. The absence of the child from his father's grasp is both haunting and palpable, but it is through this omission that the artist inscribes his experience of exile and reconciliation. A family friend in their hometown took the first photograph with a red box-camera in the 1960s, the second, was modified by Kufi with Photoshop. 'Nearly forty years separate the two images,' Kufi states, 'and by this act of remembrance, I am attempting to recollect that moment in time, emotionally, intellectually and qualitatively.'

Kufi graduated from the Institute of Fine Arts in 1985 and left Iraq in 1990, settling in the Netherlands in 1995, where he studied graphic design. Unlike many of his peers, he did not endure the effects of sanctions and therefore did not experience the paucity of art materials. Indeed, his use of Photoshop is indicative of the media afforded to him because of his exile, and this series can therefore be seen as a technical representation of his life before and after his emigration. 8

Together the two images tell the story of two generations, homeland, expatriation and resettlement. Kufi notes that each diptych in this series presents 'two inseparable images, exemplifying one existence,' but also poses the question, 'Who omits whom?' Is it Kufi who has left behind the Iraq of his childhood? Or is it his father who has been left behind, omitted from his son's journey and new life as an expatriate? The resonance of the Iraq of the previous generation is also referenced by artist Delair Shaker (b. Baghdad, 1971), son of ceramicist Saad Shaker (Baghdad, 1935-2005-), who left Iraq to live in Jordan during the 1990s, emigrating to Phoenix,

Arizona in 2005. 'The Iraq that I grew up in was shaped by my father's hands and his unconditional love for his country,' says Shaker. Writing about his return to Baghdad after his father's passing, he recalls:

Before leaving the Middle East, I travelled to Baghdad one last time to find its museums smouldering, my father's public installations broken, his works stolen and libraries destroyed. The country which was a cradle for my artistic development and my father's talent had all but disappeared.

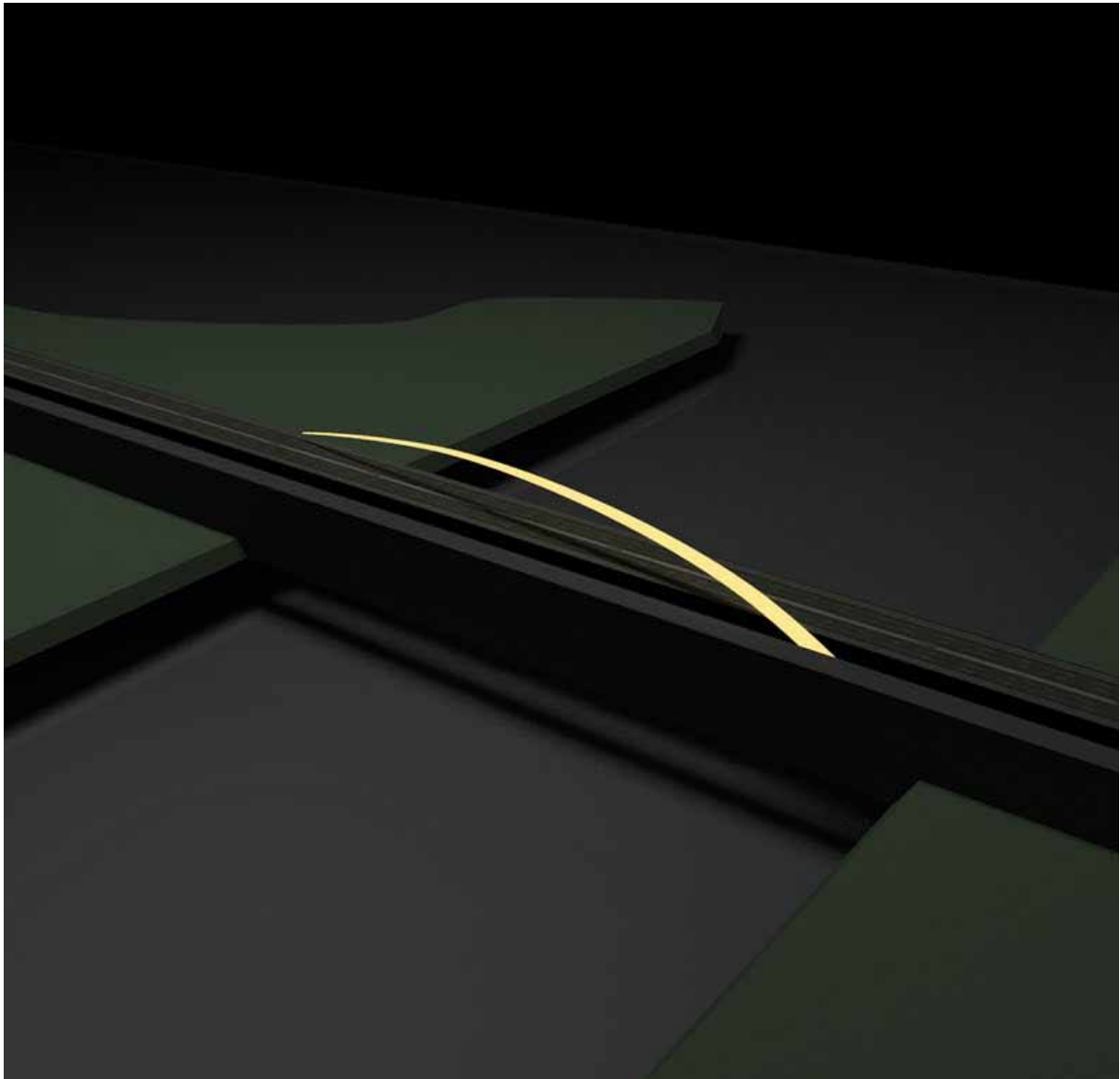
With the profound destruction of the country, Shaker and Kufi can no longer relate to present-day Iraq as home—'home' is to them the Iraq of their fathers' generation. 9 In describing the scene that the works in his *Absence* series evoke – they also include images of him with other family members - Kufi reminisces:

The melodious voice of Umm Kulthum coming from that radio on the shelf, and that of the birds, filling the backyard of our house, with their echo thudding deep in my heart, and the shine that glimmers in that image. The purpose in my mind outruns that in my eyes, which is to freeze these two moments, as I stand confused in the middle.

Using family photographs, Kufi attempts to recapture his experiences of living in Iraq as a child while linking them to his current state of exile; his statement that he is 'confused in the middle' seems to reflect his need to negotiate his position as an expatriate. Similarly, artist Himat M. Ali (b. Karkuk, 1960), who left Iraq in 1990 to live in Tokyo and later Amman, eventually settling in Paris, notes the dichotomy of living in exile: 'My land and my being are in a different place.' Kufi notes the painful process of constructing the diptychs in this series but also acknowledges the revitalising effect the experience generated. He emphasises that his intention is not to create 'an imaginary homeland' but to 'reach remote islands of happiness and relief within the mind.'

8- I am not suggesting here that Iraqi nationals are unaware of graphic design programmes such as Photoshop but am referring to the specific context of Kufi's experience as he pursued his studies of graphic design after emigrating to the Netherlands.

9- Another work in the *Absence* series shows a four-year-old Kufi with his father, both wearing pyjamas. Similarly, in the scene of father and son standing on the riverbank both wear suits; the sartorial unity in both works reinforces the father-son relationship.



Nedim Kufi's nominated design for the Holland's Bridge COSMOPOLITE Prize, 2009

Painting, Poetry and Islamic Art: Love Dijla

The forms rendered in the vertical panels of Nazar Yahya's (b. Baghdad, 1963) triptych *Love Dijla 1* (2010) visually link together to create a narrative based on the alteration of the Tigris River (Dijla means Tigris). 'Shapes that are taken from reality have symbolic meaning that become more effective and inspiring when seen in relation to other shapes,' comments Yahya. An overturned balam boat, representing the riverboats that travel down the Tigris daily, is delineated on the first panel; the

second is of a Barbus fish, one of the most common species of fish in the Tigris and Euphrates; and the third is the corpse of a drowned man with his hands bound by chains behind his back. 10

Through this work, and the other paintings in this series, Yahya tracks the transformation of the

10- Yahya's explanation for his use of these forms is: 'I used the image of an overturned boat purposely in order to maintain the vertical rhythm of the painting and to achieve a consistency between it and the other shapes; also, showing it overturned serves the idea which I want to express. As for the fish, it is one of the most popular species of fish in the Tigris and the Euphrates...I love this kind of river fish, there is, in fact, an Iraqi folk song about it. The lying figure is of a drowned man...as we see in imagery on television or the internet.'



Ghassan Ghaib, *The Tree of Memories* (2010),
Nickel with mixed media, 165 x 80 cm .

Tigris 'from a space of beautiful memories to an arena stained with sectarian conflict and policy.' Yahya, now settled in Houston, graduated from the Academy of Fine Arts with a degree in painting in 1987. Having grown up in Baghdad, he recalls: I was born near this river [the Tigris] and watched its rapidly flowing water carrying boats, wandering between Karkh and Rasafa every day in the placid, peaceful life of the people of Baghdad. This transports me from what I know of it now: it is a river that conceals anonymous victims, feeding the fish in its waters. In *Love Dijla 1*, muted tones underscore the plaintiveness of the subject. Particularly disturbing is the inclusion of the corpse, which is covered with a paisley pattern. This print, which the artist has used in previous works, is a popular textile pattern found on the headscarf of Middle Eastern women. 11 Here, Yahya's incorporation of this pattern has

11- The print is from the headscarf of Yahya's wife.

a dual function: to 'grant [the figure] sanctity and respect instead of being regarded as scandalous as is traditionally taken in our culture,' while the vine-like, floral print recalls the landscape through which the river passes. The figure, like the balam and the fish, is rendered in a flat, simplified form, which is inspired by Islamic manuscript paintings and miniatures.

References to Islamic architecture are also visible in his work, *Love Dijla 3* (2010), which displays a repetitive oval pattern redolent of a muqarnas vault, but is also akin to the silvery scales of a fish. Yahya remembers observing an angler scaling a Barbus, noting the correlation between the geometry of Islamic art and the precise and repetitive decorative structure of the fish's skin. With Chinese rice paper immersed in grey ink, Yahya pasted each oval onto the canvas along with cut-out images of his parents from the 1960s, which, as in Kufi's series, references the resonance of the previous generation. Beneath the canvas, the same oval cut-out images of his mother and father lie scattered on the floor, representing the collapse of the Iraq of the artist's childhood, as well as the steady obliteration of Iraqi culture because of displacement and war, which can be compared to the excoriation of a fish's scales.

The work of pre-eminent Iraqi poet Muhammad Mahdi Al-Jawahiri (b. Najaf, 1900-1997-) is another source of inspiration for the artist. Al-Jawahiri's poem 'O Tigris', which he wrote as an expatriate - a poem that has inspired the work of many artists including Dia Al-Azzawi's sculpture *Blessed Tigris 12* - is particularly apt in relation to the *Love Dijla* series. Yahya notes the resonance of this verse to the contemporary state of the nation: 'The clash of this age of occupation can be heard against the voice of Al-Jawahiri when he addressed the Tigris as an expatriate.'¹³

12- The sculpture was displayed at the British Museum during the 2006 exhibition *Word into Art*.

13- For an English translation of the poem see Hussein Hadawi, trans., in Venetia Porter, *Word into Art* (London, British Museum Press, 2006), p. 8. Yahya's work *Al Jawahiri* (2010) pays homage to the late poet, displaying nine reproductions of Al-Jawahiri's image in a composition similar to Warhol's Marilyn Monroe series.



Ghassan Ghaib, *Organised Anarchy* (2010), mixed media on canvas, 180 x 360 cm, Barjeel Art Foudation

Contemporary Art and Heritage: ‘Ruins Technique’

Hanaa Malallah’s (b. Thee Qar, 1958) singed canvases are an apposite expression of the artist’s thirty-two-year experience of war and hardship. Malallah, a graduate of the Institute and of the Academy of Fine Arts (1979 and 1988), studied under Al Said and attributes this technique, which she has coined ‘ruins technique’, to the late artist’s experiments with distressing and burning material during the 1970s. Predicated on the importance of heritage, Al Said’s technique also resonated with the contemporary age. For him, the ruination of media formed a link to the ruins of Mesopotamia, and his focus on heritage informed the work of the eighties generation, who drew inspiration from the objects housed in the National Archaeological Museum as they simultaneously endured the country’s destruction.¹⁴

¹⁴ Artist Amar Dawod uses the term ‘visual excavation’ in relation to his work, alluding to primacy of archaeology amongst this generation of artists.

Young artists’ choice of media reflected this – choices which were eventually also impacted by the effect of sanctions - as Malallah explains:

We deemed traditional art materials as incapable of delivering our artistic message. Instead, we worked with burnt paper and cloth, with barbed wire and bullets, with splintered wood and found objects, borrowing from history and our catastrophic present alike. For many of us, this ‘ruins technique’ became the visual signifier of our cultural resistance and a carrier of our identity as Iraqi artists.

Delair Shaker, who graduated from the Institute of Fine Arts in 1990, used a similar approach after leaving Iraq for the US in 2005, when he witnessed the traumatic changes and destruction of his country. In the following years, my compositions reflected Iraq as I saw it right before I left. I layered pieces of burnt, patterned cloth and mixed-media materials.... I created my paintings as if watching

the destruction of war through a telescope belonging to the destructor, a soldier peering through his rifle, while the paintings themselves documented the war on the receiving end, through shards of glass, sand, thin strips of metal, burnt materials, colour and clay.

When Malallah left Iraq in 2006, settling in London a year later, 15 she continued to create works which are a confluence of the past and the present day, discovering new archaeological sources during her visits to the British Museum, particularly the art of Sumer. 16 After emigrating, her focus also shifted to the relationship between religion and art. 'In testing the veracity of art's spiritual roots as well as the limits of abstraction,' says Malallah, 'I seek knowledge in the space between abstraction and figuration.' A potent expression of this is her work titled *Portraits (HOOPOE)* (2010), which comprises a neatly arranged square patchwork of burnt, punctured canvas and mixed media with a small oil painting - similar to miniature oil portraits - of the Hoopoe bird at the top centre of the composition. In Attar's *The Conference of the Birds* (1177), a book of Persian poems which acts as a metaphor for the Sufi pursuit of enlightenment, the Hoopoe leads the journey of thirty birds seeking the land of the Simorgh bird. The Hoopoe also has sacred significance as it is referred to in the Qur'an as a messenger from the non-material world. 17

Birds can also be seen as a symbol of expatriation; however, this is not explicitly the case with Malallah's work. 18 For her, the bird is 'a creature between heaven and earth, the world in between.' The subject of the bird is alluded to in other works such as *Shroud* (2010), another mixed media piece which includes bird feathers, demonstrating the artist's interest in

15- Malallah left Iraq in October 2006 to start a six-month fellowship at the Institut du Monde Arabe in Paris; however, as the situation in Iraq worsened she found it impossible to return and accepted the offer of a fellowship at SOAS from the Scholars at Risk Programme, settling in London, where she currently lives and works.

16- Referencing the past is prevalent amongst many contemporary Iraqi artists, as demonstrated by the exhibition *Iraq's Past Speaks to the Present*, British Museum, 10 November 2008-15 March 2009.

17- While Malallah does reference Attar's Hoopoe, she is referring to it in the Qur'anic context.

18- As'ad Orabi has referred to Dia Al-Azzawi's use of the bird as a 'symbol of expatriation and travel with no hope of return.' See As'ad Orabi, 'The Modern and the Inherited,' *Dia Al-Azzawi: Retrospective*, ed. Pocock, Faruqi and Haggag (Dubai, Meem Editions, 2010).

natural materials and the environment. Nature is a pervasive theme in Malallah's work, particularly with regard to the sublime. She notes: 'Fire as an element of nature creates marks that are not controlled by me, thus the Self becomes a spectator: artist and viewer are invited to 'read' the language of nature, which is the language of the divine.'

Malallah's recent work also explores semiotics, logic and mathematics – she has PhD in the Philosophy of Painting from Baghdad University – subjects which are tied together through Ludwig Wittgenstein's (1889-1951) theories of knowledge. Through her art Malallah investigates the pursuit of knowledge and the state of existence between two poles, whether it is 'between abstraction and figuration' or her reference to the bird as 'a creature between heaven and earth'. This is perhaps also a manifestation of life in exile and negotiates the position of the self in both spiritual and corporeal terms.

Colour & Abstraction: The Tree of Memories

The colourful bindles hanging from Ghassan Ghaib's (b. Baghdad, 1964) *Tree of Memories* (2010) seem more whimsical than representative of expatriation. Ghaib, who graduated from the Institute of Fine Arts in 1986 and the Academy of Fine Arts in 1997, derives inspiration from nature, and recreates his impressions of Baghdad as he remembers it as a child: 'I approach [my work] with the imagination of a child amazed by the beauty and security I missed of the city where I lived and grew up, and where visual pollution and cruelty now prevail.'

Ghaib first expressed his anxiety about the devastation of his homeland by creating compositions with found objects such as documents, cords and metal. His interest in the readymade – a common feature in the work of many artists of his generation - is also visible in *Tree of Memories*, which displays laminated migrant identity cards. 19 Starkly contrasted with the rather fanciful rendering of emigration through the bindles is the disturbing realism of exile depicted through the presence of officialdom in the identity cards, indicating the complex relationship the artist

19- The identity cards are copies of the original, which does not directly posit them as 'found' or readymade; however Ghaib's reproductions of a readymade item indicate his continuing interest in this practice.



Amar Dawod Kaleidoscope (2010),oil on canvas, 260 x 320 cm

may have with the homeland of his memory and his current reality. ²⁰ The cards bear the face of Ghaib, as well as that of his peers including Hanaa Malallah and Himat Ali. ²¹ The Tree of Memories is also representative of a family tree, uniting Ghaib's generation together in their experience of exile and demarcating their shared history.

The motif of the tree is a recurring subject in the artist's recent work, inspired by the heavily forested area of Jörn Skellefteå in Sweden, where he lived for a year in 2003 before relocating to Amman.

²⁰- Binds also appear in other works such as *My Beautiful Tree* (2010), *One-and-a-Half-Steps to Heaven* (2010) and *Organised Anarchy* (2010) where the basic form of the bindle is painted.

²¹- Others include artists Sahab Ahmed, Salah Ghafel and writer Lutfia Al Dhlemy

²² For him, Sweden is a natural paradise, and the vivid colours and abstraction of nature found in his work are often a reference to that. Indeed, it is now Skellefteå that Ghaib longs for, since the Baghdad that he relates to as home no longer exists. As an expatriate, Ghaib creates highly emotive works that are an intermingling of cultures, combining his identity as an Iraqi with his residence in Sweden. His painting, *One-and-a-Half Steps to Heaven* (2010) is an abstract rendering of his departure from Iraq. Situated between two distinct areas of colour are

²²- Swedish authorities did not agree to renew his residency and since he could not go back to Iraq, he settled in Amman where he lives and works today. The title of his recent exhibition *Banned From Paradise*, Karim Gallery, Amman, 2010, highlights this experience since Sweden for Ghaib is 'paradise'.

three tightly bound bindles, symbolically carrying the artist's belongings and representing travel; the darker hues of blue and black represent Baghdad while the brighter shades of yellow and orange delineate his entry into Sweden.

'In my latest works,' Ghaib states, 'emigration and departure prevail along with nature, where each idea is connected to the other; not unlike a bird that has lost its nest, struck down in a storm, trying to rebuild its home again.' As in Malallah's work, nature is a prevalent theme used to explore various states of being, and with regard to the bird, Ghaib's metaphor is linked more explicitly to the idea of expatriation. Ghaib refers to his work as a kind of 'organised disorder;' he arranges and combines myriad experiences, influences and inspirations, perhaps attempting to make sense out of his circumstances, such as in *Organised Anarchy* (2010). A similar idea is noted by artist Amar Dawod (b. Baghdad, 1959)²³ - who graduated from the Institute of Fine Arts in 1979, and left Iraq a year later to live in Lodz and later Västervik - when he explains his views regarding the current state of society: 'humanity has organised the world in a devastating way.... Painting, as a reaction to all this, is a kind of liberation and thrilling road, even if that road is sometimes bumpy.'

Simulation of Baghdad: Walls of Wartime

Kareem Risan's (b. Baghdad, 1960) *Walls of Wartime* series represents the accumulative markings of decades of warfare. Each canvas simulates a segment of the graffitied walls of Baghdad, recreating the imprints of individuals' spontaneous expressions of defiance. Washes and dry applications of paint are layered with stencilled letters and numbers and spray-painted forms. Under grainy areas of paint are swatches of promotional prints and brickwork, over which outlines of figures display narratives related to the recent years of occupation. Risan, who graduated from the Academy of Fine Arts in 1988, left Iraq in 2006 and writes that he uses his work 'to remind audiences of what has happened in my country; to

condemn the causes ensuring that my emigration was the only choice after life became impossible in my homeland.'

Iraq remains Risan's homeland but, like many of his contemporaries, he can no longer relate to it as home. In *Here Was My Home* (2010), 'HOME' is stencilled in neat block letters on the right-hand side of the composition, faintly repeated beneath layers of paint at the centre, indicative of what home has become for millions of Iraqis today. Disturbing recollections of Baghdad are rendered in the form of bullet holes and security fencing, while a bespectacled military officer gives menacing orders to the semi-visible head of another figure. The figures' teeth are a particularly prominent feature, and appear in other paintings in this series, symbolising the 'ferocity and brutality of war.' Conversely, in *Drawings and Marks* (2010), the five mouths in the upper right of the composition represent international condemnation of the American occupation of Iraq.

Risan does not explicitly refer to the figures in these works as members of the US military but states that: '[The figures] in my paintings symbolise people with unknown identities, who kill innocent people and destroy my country.' A number of signifiers - such as combat boots, camouflage print army uniforms, the American flag and the officialdom of stencilled words such as 'NOT ALLOWED' - do not necessarily give each figure a specific identity but do identify them as American soldiers. With the *Walls of Wartime*, viewers subsequently acquire the gaze of Iraqi civilians.

While Risan's series is perhaps the most obviously politicised expression of all the works discussed, his interest in creating walls is predicated on the relationship between people and the environment (his exploration of this theme is perhaps also informed by paleolithic cave paintings). 'Wall paintings and signs were, and still are, one of humanity's expressive styles, and a means by which man could face his daily problems,' he states. In creating wall paintings Risan also aims to separate the act of painting from its relationship to the exhibition space of a gallery, and automatism, what the artist refers to as 'Chaos and Disarray', also aids him in recovering memories

23- Amar Dawod also refers to the bird, but in the context of his creative imagination: 'When I begin the act of creation, millions of imaginary birds haunt me, waiting in the distant horizon. I wait too, in the expectation of a single glimpse; they appear and then fly off again.'



Nedim Kufi, Absence (2010), Photographic print on canvas, 180 x 240 cm (180 x 120 cm each), Barjeel Art Foundation

of Baghdad:

There, in the country where I was born, studied and gained knowledge, I left a lot of memories which I try to retrieve through what I create on my walls. I recreate the walls of my city, Baghdad; its lanes and neighbourhoods, its dusty walls worn down by the ruination of the culture prevailing today.

Iraqi Art Today

Art historian Nada Shabout has observed that in recent years, interest in contemporary Iraqi art is 'very conditioned by the politics of a victimized people or a new "liberated" nation.'²⁴ Exhibition titles such as *Iraqi Artists in Exile*, Station Museum, Houston, 2009, *Beyond the War*, LTMH Gallery, New York, 2010, and *My Home Land*, Art Sawa Gallery, Dubai, 2010, highlight the way in which contemporary Iraqi art and artists are often defined by exile. While these exhibitions do not necessarily

24- Nada Shabout, 'A Dream We Call Baghdad,' *Modernism and Iraq*, p. 31.

aim to portray the artists as victims, they do underscore the increasing importance and focus on their position as expatriates. Group shows also demonstrate the way in which artists with differing techniques and approaches are unified through exile. 25 In Iraqi critic, Farouk Yousif's discussion of the work of Ghaib, Risan and Yahya, he highlights this point, which is also applicable to other artists of the eighties generation:

[They] are descendants of a generation that is disappointed, perplexed about their state of belonging, and light-hearted in their search for its objectives. There is a generation impacted by war, only finding peace through expatriation as a substitute of their homeland. It is these experiences that still make it possible to maintain a partnership between these artists.

What the art works discussed here demonstrate is that

25- This unity is noted by *Beyond the War* curator Gayle Mandle.

expatriation is not solely a monolithic experience of anguish and loss, and that it perhaps reinforces the need to reference and sustain aspects of Iraqi culture. Exile is also an experience which forces artists to negotiate their position as 'global' or 'diaspora' artists and assimilate themselves into new art scenes, exposing their work to different audiences and being exposed themselves to different international art practices. As Al-Azzawi states:

As part of the formation of the Plastic Arts Movement ...emigration disturbed the artistic experience within Iraq. At the same time, however, it gave a lot of young Iraqi artists, who faced enormous difficulties, the opportunity to deepen their artistic awareness and develop their relationship with the universal movements as a rich and variant source after having been confined to the Iraqi experience on a local and regional level.

For artist Modhir Ahmed (b. Baghdad, 1956), who was taught by Al Said and Rafa Al-Nasiri (b. Tikrit, 1940) at the Institute, emigration was a means of discovering 'a unique path' for his art. He left Iraq during the eighties to study at the Warsaw Academy of Fine Arts. There he further developed his skills as a graphic artist and in his 'quest for self-expression' travelled to Sweden, where he lives and works today as a renowned graphic artist. Kufi, who has noted the positive outcome of creating art that revisits scenes from his childhood, has also assimilated himself into a new culture and art world through works such as his design submission for the 2009 Holland's Bridge COSMPOLITE prize. Malallah received a postgraduate certificate in Islamic and Modern Art from SOAS in London in 2008, where she has delivered seminars on the 'ruins technique' at the university, introducing Al Said's artistic experiments and contemporary Iraqi art practices to a wider, international audience. For many of these artists, there is a cathartic corollary in the varying expressions of their work. 'Through my artistic work,' Nazar Yahya states, 'I try to investigate the answers provoked by my personal confrontation with a changing world...finally accepting expatriation as a late psychological outlet.'

The artists and works discussed are included in the

five-part Art in Iraq Today exhibition series held at Meem Gallery, Dubai.

Part IV of the series continues this March with an exhibition of Iraqi modern masters Dia Al-Azzawi, Rafa Al-Nasiri and Ali Talib. The exhibition concludes with Part V in April, exhibiting the work of Ali Jabbar, Halim Al-Kareem, Sadik Kwaish and Mahmud Obaidi.

Meem Editions' forthcoming publication Art in Iraq Today (edited by Charles Pocock, Samar Faruqi and Noura Haggag), is dedicated to the memory of preeminent art critic Jabra Ibrahim Jabra and his seminal essays titled 'Art in Iraq Today.' It includes essays by Samar Faruqi, May Muzaffar, Nada Shabout, Farouk Yousif and the artists exhibited.

Samar Faruqi, Director of Research, Meem Gallery. Since joining Meem in March 2009, Samar has edited Meem Editions publications including Dia Al-Azzawi: Retrospective and Parviz Tanavoli: Monograph. She is currently working on the forthcoming publication Art in Iraq Today, which is being produced in conjunction with the Iraqi art exhibition series held at Meem Gallery. She has a BA Honours in Art History from Goldsmiths College, University of London and is currently a PhD candidate at the University of Cambridge, where she received a distinction for her MPhil dissertation on John Frederick Lewis' harem paintings. Her research interests include modern and contemporary Middle Eastern art and representations of women in British Orientalist paintings.



Delair Shaker, Wings of Hope (2010), mixed media on canvas, 152 x 122 cm