

Halim AlKarim: Photographic Abstraction and the Lag Effects of Conflict in Iraq

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Halim AlKarim_Untitled, 2002_from the series Urban Witness_138 x 300 cm (triptych)_Photograph Lambda Print, Edition of 3 +2AP_
 Courtesy of the Artist and XVA Gallery, Dubai

Born in Najaf, Iraq in 1963, Halim AlKarim spent his early years enjoying life in Beirut, where his father taught history and politics at the American University. The family returned to Iraq when Halim was nearly 10, settling in the city of Baghdad. The artist began making sculptures at an early age alongside his older brother Sami. Both Sami and Halim attribute their character and interest in the photographic medium to their father, who was an avid amateur photographer and gardener. Halim notes, "I cannot remove the smell of my father's darkroom from my mind, nor the smell of orange blossoms on our trees ...these things remind me of my home in Baghdad." Halim and Sami's academic education prospered through visits to the National Museum of Iraq where their uncle served as curator.

The museum's collection of Mesopotamian art, notably the ritualistic and mythological objects from the Sumerian period, impacted Halim's early practice through the use of simplified forms, repetition and abstraction.

In the 1970s and '80s, Halim's father began to experiment with methods of developing and printing. "Sometimes he printed partially out-of-focus images – I thought then that these were accidents, but maybe he meant to work in this manner. These experiments stuck in my mind and are a technical source I draw upon for my own work." At the time, photography was undergoing a subversive period in its history. The rise of Conceptualism led to an absence of photographic orthodoxy in

meaning. Putative expectations about photography and photographic information ceased to include historical assumptions that they must be tethered to concrete ways of seeing.¹ Photographic abstraction – a marriage between the mechanical manipulation of the image in post-production and the final product’s ontological deviation from its documentary underpinnings – was greatly popularized in the West by artists including Bill Armstrong. The photograph itself, or the negative in Halim’s father’s case, served as the starting point for building the material object. From 1983-1988, Halim studied ceramics at the Baghdad Institute of Fine Arts, where he was exposed to compositional abstraction through the works of Faik Hassan, the school’s first department chair and leader of the progressive art collective “The Pioneers.” Following university, Halim shifted his focus to photography and soon experimented with the perceptual limits of the medium. He was immediately captivated by the concept of disengagement. Working with models selected for their beauty and, in some cases, for their ability to portray anger, he photographed his subjects in front of stark backgrounds, which he made disappear in the darkroom. Choosing to minimally focus the enlarged negatives onto the photographic paper, he began to create his own blurred images that the viewer’s eyes cannot rectify at any distance.

His subjects’ blurry, optical instability (what Rosalind Krauss calls “holding the referent at bay”²), metaphorically describes the artist’s perspective about Iraq at the time: “...the situation was really out of focus. The government pushed us to become part of their machine, with the goal of stripping us of our humanity and values. Day by day, year by year, we were confused and distrustful of everyone.” This period marked a crisis in photographic veracity; information systems were increasingly corrupted during the course of Iraq’s wars, images were manipulated and used as weapons, or alternatively they were shielded from public view in an attempt to hide ubiquitous injustices.³

1- Rexler, L. 2009. *The Edge of Vision: The Rise of Abstraction in Photography*. New York: Aperture, p. 145.

2- Rexler, p. 145.

3- Levi Strauss, D. 2003. *Between the Eyes: Essays on Photography and Politics*. New York: Aperture.

Rather than documentarily recording these devastating experiences, the artist chose to communicate what he endured through a vocabulary of psychologically expressionistic images. This transcendent methodology is what photography specialist Lyle Rexler describes as a paradigm shift



Halim AlKarim_Witness From Baghdad 3, 2008_150 x 100 cm, Photograph Lambda Print_Edition of 32+AP_Courtesy of the Artist and XVA Gallery, Dubai-1

in the medium starting in the 1980s: “[a change] in emphasis from cultural and formal aspects of photography to epistemological, technological, psychological, and material underpinnings.”⁴ The photographic representation of the “real” began to be of little importance. Rather, artists like Halim sought to, “display the constant interplay in all images of what is disclosed and what is withheld, what can be shown and what can only be imagined.”⁵ Halim’s artistic style pushes the viewer to reflect upon the interpretive absence of clarity: the obscurity of the subject leads us to seek what is lost, in hopes of regaining it in the annals of our memories.

4- Rexler, p 184.

5- Rexler, p 184.



Halim AlKarim_Untitled 1, 2008_From the series Kings Harem_225 x 100 cm_Photograph Lambda Print_Edition of 32+AP_Courtesy of the Artist and XVA Gallery, Dubai

Begun in 1985 and continuing today, Hidden is the artist's earliest photographic theme and incorporates the Sufi concept of "al-batin" in Arabic 6, one of the ninety-nine names of Allah that denotes "truth" when recited. The series Hidden War, Hidden Prisoner, Hidden Face, Hidden Victims and Hidden Love all reference the artist's perspective that humanity is best preserved from brutal acts of violence when an inner focus is maintained and hidden from view. Many works within the theme are covered with a tightly stretched sheer scrim of white or black silk; this compositional device represents a transcendental portal to the subconscious, where the serene human form latently lies protected underneath.

Following a trip to Beirut in 1985, Halim AlKarim first developed the series Hidden War. The series consists of black and white triptychs featuring three faces evoking a frisson of psychological uncertainty. Beautiful, innocent humans are flanked by either grotesque forms representing Iraq's dictatorial leaders or disappearing victims, many of whom represent mythological Sumerian sculptures he viewed during his youthful times at the Iraqi National Museum – a site heavily looted during the Gulf Wars. The series is a chilling foreshadowing of the artist's personal history of pain and loss.

During the Iran-Iraq war, Halim's family was forced out of their home in Baghdad. Their ties to the Islamic Da'wa Party, which supported the Iranian Revolution and Khomeini, were a threat to Saddam's military dictatorship. Three of artist's siblings scattered to Australia and Sweden. His brother Sami was sentenced to death in 1986 for his political public art and his family's relationship to oppositional forces; Sami served torturous years in Abu Ghraib prison and was released in 1989. Halim was unwillingly conscribed to serve in the Iraqi military during the first Gulf War, which the artist describes as, "a fearfully lonely and harrowing journey."

Halim AlKarim soon escaped the military and sought refuge in a rock-covered hole in the southern

6- Amirsadeghi, H., S. Mikdadi and N. Shabout. 209. *New Vision: Arab Contemporary Art in the 21st Century*. London: Thames & Hudson and TransGlobe Publishing Ltd., p 1823-.



Halim AlKarim_Goddess of Rome_2006_180 x w 120 cm_
 Photograph Lambda Print_Edition of 32+AP_Courtesy of the Artist
 and XVA Gallery, Dubai

Iraqi desert. He attributes his physical and emotional survival to an elderly Bedouin woman who brought him food and water, as well as educated him about mysticism and gypsy customs. Aided by this wise and kind stranger, the artist retreated to a deeply meditative state that enabled him to distance his memory from the atrocities of war. He emerged from seclusion on occasion, refusing to disclose his whereabouts to his friends or family for fear of jeopardizing his safety. This period had a profound effect on the artist, resulting in his everlasting commitments to self-discovery and the expression of his core beliefs through art.

Following this experience in hiding, Halim AlKarim sought political asylum in the Netherlands, where he later received citizenship. The artist returned to university in 1996, earning a degree at the Gerrit Reitveld Academie of Fine Arts in Amsterdam. Innovations in digitization allowed Halim to further develop his illusionary technique and extend the use of the medium.⁷ The impact of wars and the related pursuit of truth and humanity remained the central foci of the artist's work.

Begun in 2002, the enlarged portrait series *Urban Witness* introduces the eyes in sharp-focus color amidst each subject's greyly diffused face and bust. The viewer is invited to mediate between the clear referent of the eyes and the blurred periphery, including the masked mouth connoting secrets or stifled freedoms. The figures in the series are primarily youthful and attractive, implying a fragile innocence. Halim continues to evolve this concept in the series *Witness from Baghdad*, begun in 2006. The artist describes this repeating composition as, "a form of self-preservation and an act of resistance, a mentality adopted by many Iraqis... You are witnessing this violence and you cannot talk about it, yet you cannot hide the beauty of your soul which appears through your eyes."

Halim AlKarim's most recent series *Hidden Love* perpetuates similar ideals. Females' faces are colorfully masked in what appears to be electromagnetic auras that hover on their skin. The bold figures' mouths are taped, once again representing Iraqi citizens who were unable to speak freely for fear of retribution. Their faces are psychologically suspended between the tranquility of their innocent beauty and the catharsis of the shared experience of war. This juxtaposition mimics the roles of the Babylonian goddess Ishtar who represents, "the place of all extremes...all that is in excess or out of control"⁸, as well as her Sumerian counterpart Inanna, who likewise descended to the depths of the underworld as part of her spiritual initiation.

7- Baker, G., as quoted in Hammer Lectures "Aperture Panel: Abstraction in Photography" 8 July, 2010. Los Angeles: The Hammer Museum. Available at: http://artforum.com/video/id=23908&cmode=large&page_id=6

8- Zainab, B., 2001. *Women of Babylon: Gender and Representation in Mesopotamia*. London and New York: Routledge, p. 159.

Educated about these mythological goddesses from an early age, the artist believes they mortally exist in every city. He began the Goddess series in 1985 in homage to those who provided him protection during times of violent upheaval, starting with the Goddess of Beirut. The series now includes the Goddess of Dubai, the Goddess of Florence, and the Goddess of Rome, among others. The latter two of these works photographically reconstruct recognizable feminine subjects from High Renaissance paintings, bringing the dead to life and once again immortalizing them. The artist further taunts the viewer with scopical desire, abstracting and diffusing the seemingly familiar subjects via post-production manipulation, extending them beyond optical coherence to a mystical framework.

Halim AlKarim intentionally mobilizes the stereotypical male gaze in these Western Goddesses, as well as the Orientalist gaze in the cross-cultural and cross-historical body of work entitled Kings Harem. In these blurred images, the artist directly confronts the overtly eroticized concept of the exploited, kept woman.⁹ The subjects contain a thinly masked rage beneath their veils, their power eroded by patriarchal influence. Like Renoir's *Odalisque, Woman of Algiers (1870)*, of which one of the works draws a likening to, Halim theatrically gestures to Western stereotypes of Islam using what Edward Said describes as a component of the colonial agenda to divide and control via coercive power and objectification.¹⁰ Yet, the artist localizes this corruption; his reference is mainly to the self-indulgent behaviors of his country's rulers who perpetuate inequality and the loss of humanity. The artist's commitment to conveying the unspoken truths of fellow Iraqis remains strong, yet his work transcends his personal experience to describe that

much of the world contains places of perceived danger and misunderstanding. For Halim, the concept of home or homeland remains a psychological abstraction. He works from his studio at XVA in Bastakiya, Dubai and also lives in Colorado with his mother, wife, children, and brother Sami. The artist's solo exhibition *Hidden Love*, on view at XVA Gallery in Dubai's DIFC from 2 March – 10 April, 2011, is the first viewing of the series in totality. Halim AlKarim is concurrently developing a new body of imagery on the subject of water for the Iraqi Pavilion at the 54th Venice Biennale.

9- Al-Ani, J Rexler, L. 2009. *The Edge of Vision: The Rise of Abstraction in Photography*. New York: Aperture, p. 145. "Acting Out" in Bailey, David and Gilane Tawdros (eds). 2003. *Veil: Veiling, Representation and Contemporary Art*. Cambridge: MIT Press, p. 9697-.

10- Said, E. 1978. *Orientalism*. New York: Vintage.

For further reading:

Amirsadeghi, Hossein, Salwa Mikdadi and Nada Shabout. 2009. *New Vision: Arab Contemporary Art in the 21st Century*. London: Thames & Hudson and TransGlobe Publishing Ltd.

Saatchi Gallery, 2009. *Unveiled: New Art from the Middle East*. London: Booth-Clibborn Editions.

XVA Gallery. 2009. Halim AlKarim: Photographic Archive. Dubai: XVA Gallery.



Halim AlKarim *Hidden Love 6*, 2009_170 x 122 cm_Photograph Lambda Print_Edition of 5 +2AP
Courtesy of the Artist and XVA Gallery, Dubai