



The Family, "The Replacement" project, 2013, two editions; mixed media on canvas & digital print, different sizes. Courtesy of the artist.

## Mahmoud Obaidi and Abdellah Karroum: A Dialogue

*This interview took place in the artist's studio - in the summer of 2013.*

*By Dr. Abdellah Karroum*

*Translated from Arabic by Dr Tayseer Kawa*

**Abdellah Karroum (AK):** I wish to start this dialogue by asking you about your childhood and its status in your mind as a concept.

**Mahmoud Obaidi (MO):** Lately I started having doubts about my memories, I lived a childhood of wars, war after war. I always see childhood as a beautiful phase but now I think childhood is mere nostalgia. We see all our memories as [something] beautiful. Or this may be a kind of self-defence on the part of the mind which organizes events in a way which makes them beautiful to avoid collapse. When I see the reality and read the history I see disgusting things. Things were not as beautiful as we imagine. So in my childhood there was an internal war then an external war until I left the country. This is my childhood. In any case it was relatively good.

**AK:** Can you talk about your discovery of art or your artistic awakening and when you decided to make art your way of expressing yourself?

**MO:** I was seven or eight years old. This was the beginning. By the way my mother is a writer, a woman of letters, and was a major influence for me. It was not unusual or strange for a member of the family to be working in the art arena. But later in my teens I left this arena for a few years, but I returned to it and of course I completed my university education in art.

**AK:** Are there examples of artists by whom you were influenced?

**MO:** Most certainly, when I was growing up Iraq was at war and internationally blockaded. Books and references (sources) were non-existent, travel was forbidden— that is why our sources were internal. I was influenced by old Iraqi arts in the initial stages. While studying, I was influenced by artists such as Shakir Hassan Al Said, Faiq Hassan, Ismail Fattah Al Turk and Dia Al-Azzawi.

**AK:** What is the position of Iraq, as a country, in your work? Has the idea of a 'homeland' been at all important?

**MO:** I cannot say that Iraq has no place in my mind. I have a project for the future linked to that idea - that there is no place called 'homeland'. I have worked a great deal on the subject of the homeland and the home until it began to change into the concept of the Project Compact Home or Homeland for Once. Because I have discovered that all our days are spent in the hope that one day we will see our homeland or we will return to our homeland. Homelands may be a deception or a trap .I don't know. All values related to homelands have been smashed as far as I am concerned because of what happened to Iraq after the occupation. In any case, I must also speak in this respect about Canada which gave me a feeling of stability ... I do not know what homeland means. Is it the place where we are born? Or to which we belong? Or in which we are buried? I believe that all countries are homelands for their inhabitants, so why should they not be homelands for me? Until I am thrown out of a country I shall go to another and so on. The 'concept' of Iraq is a complex subject which is a well-rooted mental being. I am here talking about old Iraq and not the present Iraq. When I read and see what is happening I wonder whether today's Iraq is the same one in which I once lived.

In my memory there is another Iraq. I have had a separation from the modern episode in Iraq. I do not feel it and I do not belong to this violence, I don't know what it is or where it came from.

**AK:** What is the significance of history and the present as concepts?

**MO:** History as time or as something tangible? As time it means nothing to me except that it is an accumulation of experience. Quite often I imagine those people who





Untitled, "The Replacement" project, 2013, two editions; mixed media on canvas & digital print, different sizes. Courtesy of the artist.

work in the field of natural work and I feel that it would be impossible for such people to be uneducated. I think it may be the influence of this accumulation. With regard to history and material culture, there are old countries which have been around for three thousand years or more which exist now as if they are still in that remote age. On the other hand, there are countries in the 'advanced' world which are only hundreds of years old but their inhabitants have built a modern civilization and they now have had an accumulation of experience through benefiting over time from the unused accumulations of other civilizations.

**AK:** Talking about history takes a long time—let us now come to the work itself. If we look at what is here in your workshop, we find very different shapes and materials. So what are the letters which you use in your artistic language whether material or intellectual, are they varied? Are they linguistic materials? Can you talk about these letters?

**MO:** I believe there are two reasons for the confusion in this atelier. The first, which is not very important, is that these collections of works are leftovers from various phases. If you follow the works in general you will find a connection between one work and another and you will find the relationships between one and the other. The second reason, which is the more important for me to this day, is that I am not convinced that it is right to put an artist within a specific framework and say he is such and such an artist. I am not an artist and in any case I do not know essentially the true or the real designation or appellation for an artist, not to mention the various sub-designations: is an artist more abstract or expressive in his practice? Is he a sculptor, or a filmmaker etc.? If you read one of my books in which a similar theme was mentioned over twenty years ago, I wrote that I did not recognize all the designations or labels and that I was going to work as an artist without recognizing any designation. The sacrifice is that over the past ten years this region has acquired an art market which likes a person to be committed to something so that he/she can be recognized by it so that people can say, from a distance, that this work belongs to such and such an artist. As far as my work is concerned, the theme is more important than the work as a form



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or as an item to be sold or produced. That is why I execute my works sometimes as sketches (rough drafts) or video or construction or only as writing. I am now thinking of exhibiting a work of mine in Montreal. The work is performance art. Obviously this work is not for selling or buying. So the 'idea', or theme or subject is something very fundamental to me. In 1999, I gathered all my works and put them in a large container for leftovers. Today I am always thinking of doing the same. I would like to do this, to take all my works and empty the atelier and leave the books and that camera to start afresh, pure. Always when one works one thinks of the curator, the client and the art fair ... these things pollute the work; I mean when you work to please this person or that person. It is easy to please the six most important star curators in the world. I know what one wants and what he likes and I know how to please him. He may not agree with my work but he will pay me attention. This is very easy but it is difficult to achieve originality and to sacrifice the issue of not producing a saleable work. I have had this problem for approximately





Untitled, 2010, mixed media on canvas, 150x150cm each panel. Courtesy of the artist.

four years. In the past I put off or cancelled certain exhibitions but not the Montreal exhibition because they promptly accepted from me performance art. Apart from that I have nothing but a book in which I write and I am executing a piece. All of these are hard to sell or make use of and difficult to hang. As far as I am concerned they are art. I am going to regret that two years from now – and this is proof that we are in the process of development or retardation – it makes no difference. This movement is good and healthy as far as I am concerned. I now believe that I shall regret having produced works which I may burn or think of burning five years from now.

**AK:** These are forms you use repeatedly to make up your visual language, yet at the same time you say that you have reached a point where you want to burn up the past and reconstruct or construct something new; this means you are engaging in a measure of self-criticism, criticism of works you yourself have produced?

**MO:** I am talking about burning up some of the works which I produced automatically and without using my

brain. I wish I could see where in the world these works are and the person who keeps them. I wish to pay such a person for the works so that I can take them and tear them up. But this is part of my experience.

**AK:** How do you produce your works after this declaration, in general? Do you draw preliminary sketches before creating a work?

**MO:** Yes I put the idea in writing of course. It depends, if it is video I write a script. If my work is a sculpture, I write the idea: that I want to carve a man carrying a fly for instance. I write and then I go into the phase of sketching the items that require drawing. This phase makes me cancel a lot of things which have been in the original initial idea. After that I enter the phase of reading and thinking to develop the idea. I read a lot and most of what I read, which is useful artistically, are not artistic books.

**AK:** Can you give examples of books by which you have been influenced?

**MO:** Edward Said. Sometimes I read Edward Said's



books more than once. By the way I do not memorize names, numbers or dates. I also read books written by new authors such as Sinan Antoon, Salah Salah, books and novels, a medley of books and articles.

**AK:** Is reading part of your work?

**MO:** Reading is an indirect part of my work. This means that when I read a book written by Edward Said, I do not go right away to produce an artistic work. After a period of reading, I begin production which has nothing to do with reading; but the ideas which come to my mind make me think of creating a specific work. Reading is one of the instruments of my work.

**AK:** How do you separate between the atmospheres of work and your personal life, if such a separation exists?

**MO:** A very difficult question. My problem now is that I am lucky to have the family I have, who give me plenty of space for my work. I am a person who loves to spend time with the family. I love to play with my children (Zaid, Zena and Zara). I always try to find an excuse to get out of my atelier especially because my

house is next to my atelier. But I try to separate. I am now in two countries because my family is in Canada and I live between Canada and Qatar. Sometimes I feel I need to spend more time with my family or at work.

**AK:** If I may rephrase the question, it is important to separate between the atmosphere of work and that of your personal life, if there is such a separation or is there not?

**MO:** Simply no as far as I am concerned because I am against the idea of going to an atelier to work. I have in this respect a fundamental problem. The atelier for me is not official working hours. I do not understand how an artist goes to the atelier to draw a picture, for instance, with a pre-made decision. Sometimes weeks pass when I do not go to the atelier and sometimes I spend hours over a period of two or three months in the atelier. I mean to say that if there is no work to be done at the atelier, there is no reason to go there. What is a work atmosphere? What is an atelier? What is a studio? To me it is a laptop, a copybook and a pen or pencil; even without a copybook because I use my





Untitled, 2010, mixed media on canvas, 150x120cm. Courtesy of the artist.

mobile, any means of writing is the workshop. As far as I am concerned, I am going to give my atelier to my son to make it a place for him to play. I do not need it because it has become practically useless.

**AK:** Do you think your artistic endeavour has had any influence or contributes to society in general? To architecture? To education? As a contribution to thought for example? And why do you produce work?

**MO:** It is difficult to say if my work has any influence in society, but from what has been written about my work I know that there is some influence. For example, my work titled *How Not to Look Like a Terrorist* had a

good influence and has been exhibited in six countries so far. A lot of people wrote about it. I had something to say and my artistic work conveyed that. If what I say means something to one or two people out of a thousand, I consider that I have conveyed the idea in the correct manner.

**AK:** Does each one of your works have a beginning and an end, from the idea to its execution?

**MO:** Yes each artistic work has a beginning and an end, but the end is not absolute. Our works always depend in a way on the works which preceded them. The beginning is the first idea. This is followed by stages until it gets to the sketch and writing; then comes the



Untitled, 2010, mixed media on canvas, 150x120cm. Courtesy of the artist.

execution. When the work is exhibited somewhere it becomes a finished work as far as the artist is concerned. If the work or the exhibition is successful, the artist may leave it in that country - like when you send your son to another country after he matures and you begin to watch him from afar. Now you have the nucleus of a new idea. You may have worked for death, you now work for life and so on.

**AK:** We have talked about books, now let's talk about films and the cinema.

**MO:** The cinema is most important for me because I studied it at university; I studied film at Ryerson

University in Canada and I made documentaries and short films. I worked as an assistant for some films in Toronto and made a film in New York. After, I returned to the visual arts, and to films for the sake of art (video art). The influence of films on me is great, but the problem with them is that they change. When I studied editing we used to resort to manual cutting. The day after I finished studying, the software called Afit began to be marketed. It involved putting a film through the computer which does the cutting. I studied for two years and worked on 16mm films. Today we have a digital camera which saves you doing everything. The point I am making is that film is the all-embracing





Manual search engine machine for missing Iraqis (Iraqi Qooqle)

medium which changes a great deal. Of the new films I appreciate, for instance, are Quentin Tarantino and Robert Rodriguez's work. I like their way of making scary, comedic and strange films. They do not dread making any film.

**AK:** What is the impact of places?

**MO:** The impact of a place is great, like if you are in a place like Berlin or New York you see a lot of things around which influence you. Consequently, your work evolves in a specific direction which is not necessarily positive. I am now trying to find local instruments to influence my work. I am trying to find something in the place I am in now.

**AK:** Are there specific places which are important to you?

**MO:** No, because I do not belong to any place and I do not like to be in any specific place. When I am in Vancouver I yearn to return to Doha and when I am in Doha, I wish I was in Montreal. I think of London, of Morocco. It seems that a lifetime is shorter than the time which can be spent finding a fixed place.

**AK:** Your works remind viewers of war and you talk about war as a theme for works, especially since 2003

and the invasion of Iraq. Have these events defined your artistic orientation or were you interested in history and society before that period?

**MO:** I am afraid what you have said is true. Others have drawn my attention to this subject, but I have made fundamental attempts to get out of this predicament. Of course when your country is destroyed and burnt up, surely it becomes the fundamental subject in your work. My country has been occupied and it is not possible to work on something else, from 2003 to 2006. But in 2007 and 2008, I gradually emerged from this subject. It may be that politics are still there. Iraq is always with me but its presence directly in work has dwindled bit by bit, apart from some events which impinge directly on the world.

**AK:** Now we turn to the future, what is the work you are creating for the future?

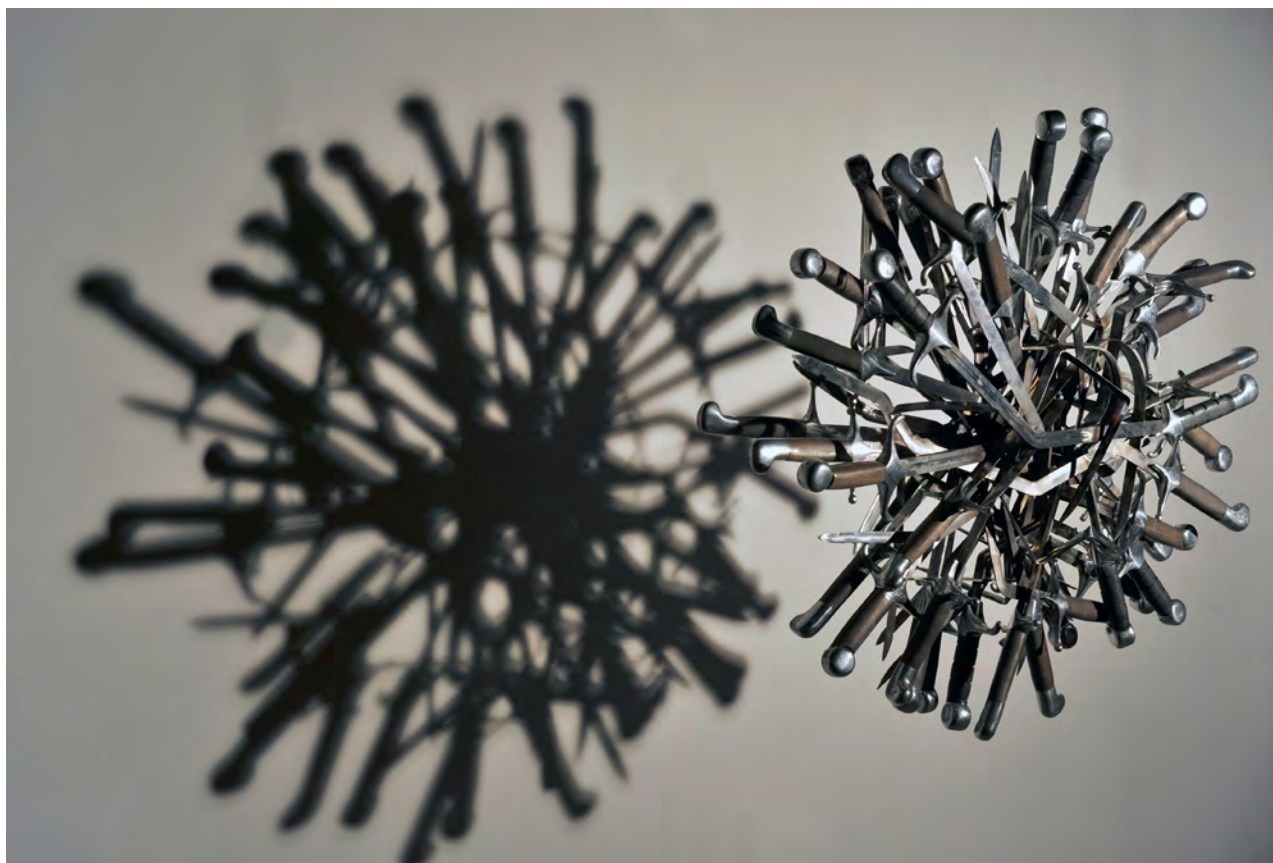
**MO:** I try to be stronger in the sense of refusing to do a work as an act of amiability. I try to be sharper and not to be timid or refrain from executing a specific or strange work. Do you know that fifteen years ago I thought of making works but I was afraid of making them; today I wish to create them. I wish I did not proceed as I was requested. I wish I followed the direction of my thoughts. A lot of the advice I received was wrong. This is the future of which I am thinking: more daring, more reading.

**AK:** Do you work at night or during the daytime?

**MO:** At night, I am a night person. During the daytime, I am blocked. All my writing and thinking is done at night. If I have to, and I have no time, I start in mid-afternoon and work until the morning.

**AK:** The event, the work, the date and the work, we have spoken about Iraq and we have discussed the artistic language and work as a project, as a suggestion or for society, work as a contribution to changing society. Let us talk about the work as a suggestion.

**MO:** I often think of the theme of a work as a suggestion in the presence of the modern media. If the work is merely a suggestion it may have the same effect it would have had if it was executed. Let me explain how: what is the use of the work after its execution? The work will



Untitled, Confusionism project, 2012, steel, 90(diameter)x20cm. Courtesy of the artist.

be there so why don't we execute it as a suggestion if the benefit is to be intellectual and cultural and not financial? If I think of doing a work and I suggest the work and write the text and do it in 3D only as a suggestion, and I write articles about it and a piece is written about it and published in magazines and in the existing media, what would be the use of the work if it existed in its material tangible form? If I lose only the commercial part of the subject, why do I execute it as a piece? Why don't future museums contain only suggestions and not works?

When I go to a place and see the picture, the text, the idea and the culture of the work instead of seeing the work itself, it gets to me more quickly and easily. In the future, instead of putting one thousand pieces in a museum, there will be sixty-thousand pieces which represent a lot of artists because each piece needs an area or a place or becomes computerized, so executing a suggestion is something beautiful. A lot of my works

are not executed but registered and written. After spending months of writing a work, I feel as if I have executed it, meaning that it is as if I have gone through a phase and done the next work. So the suggested work is very important. Zaha Hadid used to be known as a thinker. Her basic problem was that her works did not get executed or were not executable. When materials changed and developed in the world, they started looking for Zaha. Now we can execute the project which was designed ten years ago. But Zaha had been the thinker, that influential person before her projects were executed. The point I wish to make is that the idea of a book by the artist containing suggested but not executed works is a beautiful idea.

**AK:** With the books (copybooks) and suggested ideas, it may be possible to bring these together and submit a written suggestion.

**MO:** For example, a book containing forty unexecuted but only suggested works of an artist containing pictures





Untitled, 2012, steel, mixed media on canvas, 250x250cm. Courtesy of the artist.

from all orientations, containing the material and the idea, would get rid of two straits: the first from which all artists suffer is the issue of storage; the second is the issue of shipping and customs. In this case you are your storage and your atelier (with reference to the computer and the USB). One day somebody will come from a museum

and ask you: can you really execute this work? You tell him OK and you execute only that work. In reality this is my intention. There is a great deal of negativity with regard this issue, that is to say I often write an idea and two years later I find that someone has executed it. For example, the work, which is sometimes called Uranium

Generation, contains children deformed by war and deformed bodies, and there are six large statues, three of stone and three of stainless steel, of deformed children. Dia Al-Azzawi knew about the project four years ago. He asked me to execute it outside this project. I agreed. When we went to Venice this year we found that some person had executed an idea similar to this and Dia was concerned. He asked me to go and see this work. After I had seen the work I mused that if I had executed the work I would have kept the printing rights to myself.

**AK:** But at the same time when one produces a work one finds that there are a large number of similar works. The development of an artistic language, and in the field of art, takes place simultaneously through the coming together of ideas. In writing, all stories look alike. All love stories are about an encounter, then a path.

**MO:** Yes they look alike but the field of art is much smaller. Modern art has a narrow field. In practice, when you execute a work you have to look for someone who has worked on the same subject to avoid having problems. This is the negative element of when one composes a book of suggested works. I forgot to mention another point: I sometimes think that I work more than anybody else; I spend half my day thinking and writing. I spend a quarter of my day executing works and at the end of the year I finalize one or two works, perhaps one small and another large (a project). What surprises me is that when I visit an international exhibition and see the same artists participating and creating works here and there, after two months you find other works produced by these artists and after a year you find ten other works produced by the same artists. The volume of productivity is repulsive. This market has become disgusting; if you do not produce you are an outsider. There must be production and a presence. The 'VVIP', their presence and the hollow pomp must all be there and an artist must have a work in this or that event. This is a problem which forces one to produce anything or something similar to a work one produced and sold in the past. For example, I produced *The Vending Machine* and sold it twice. I can now do the same work in red. Later I shall be known as an artist who produces Vending Machines. To me this is cheap and a serious problem.

**AK:** But this is the problem of market, not the artistic idea. It is like an author producing five hundred copies of a book which is distributed in the city where the author lives and then production ends. Another person produces fifty-thousand books, for example, Mahmoud Darwish produced hundreds of thousands of books. If he produced five hundred books only, he becomes known only in the area in which he publishes the books. Irrespective of the status or the rank of the artist or the writer, if one keeps up with the issues of distribution one does reach a larger number of people.

**MO:** But in the end don't you feel that all this affects the way an artist thinks? I mean that if I work on this subject, I need more time for it than I need for the work itself. I need time to communicate with galleries and to work quickly to become known. This process of publication makes you take time to produce the one right work.

**AK:** There are fast routes to production: movement and motion.

**MO:** By the way I criticize this process but we are part of it and I am satisfied with it. I exhibit in fairs which contain markets, but quite often I feel that they produce pressure. Even the exhibition on which I work now puts pressure on me; I want it to end so that I can think freely.

**AK:** I have one last question, which may be philosophical. It is on the issue of creativity and the wish to be present and to share. At the same time there is a conflict of ideas about work as an idea and work as a product; that is to say there is a conflict between the personal history and the personal desire to create, express and give reading and reciprocity breathing space, and with the media and all the elements of the art market. My question is do you feel this conflict and does it affect you?

**MO:** This is precisely the point, this conflict. I criticize it but I cannot be outside it, I am right inside it. But my position is better. I participate for one year and refrain for two. The issue that puzzles me is how come the same artists have produced so much at such great speed? How do they time it and think? What are the efficient procedures which enable an artist to participate in seven exhibitions a year? This definitely creates a conflict.



**AK:** But as an artist when you decide to burn works or cut up works, this self-questioning is part of your work. You think about it and want to produce it as part of the work. It is a critique of the artistic world as a commercial domain or a domain in which the commercial aspect overwhelms the artistic or intellectual aspect. This is part of it and this thinking may be constructive and it is possible to turn it in favour of the artistic endeavour. You produce a lot, not numerically, but through coming up with these suggestions with which you yourself question the world of art.

**MO:** Part of me thinks of the commercial side. Part of me says that when you burn works, make video art which is a product that will sell.

**AK:** It is part of it and it is not possible to destroy everything or you will be blotted out.

**MO:** Writing does not get wiped out. In the end the whole issue is absurd. You get to a stage whereby if you become convinced that it is all absurdity, writing becomes meaningless. At the end of the day we are evanescent. I have not yet reached this conclusion and I do not want to reach this conclusion. The act of burning is simpler; it has to do with cleaning. You make a start of a kind which you believe at the time to be correct.

**AK:** Is it related to civilization? In spite of all the production and all the heritage and knowledge we get at the same time to these wars, to this exploitation.

**MO:** This is a good approximation. As you see, these civilizations have become burnt countries, countries that have fallen into oblivion, some of them have turned into remnants and ruins. The contradiction here is that you burn works. When I burned my works, I believed that I would create the right beginning. It was not burning works so much as cleaning the mind. Perhaps I wanted to add a space to my mind; this might have been part of the process. It is merely an act of cleaning and I cannot link it to this issue of civilization and say it is the end of something. But it is certain that the works I have executed this year are fully part of a different mood. For example, I am creating a work that cannot be lifted because it will be damaged; it is made of short-lived materials. I believe in the second solutions, the institutional solutions. If this orientation exists –

for example, there will be an exhibition of short-lived materials, or materials which evaporate like water for example, or of animals which die after a while or plants – we will have a larger area in our minds. These kinds of exhibitions do not exist. Even the museum thinks of something which it can preserve.

**AK:** As an artist you created work for the history of art and civilization at the same time, do you think you have or have not the choice to answer questions related to existence and orientations?

**MO:** It is impossible for me to imagine that history will reject the process of burning for instance. I believe that history is about the process of burning and the process of keeping one thing which affects the future in the long run instead of keeping idle talk or bosh, or retaining a history which has not been influential or made some kind of impact.

Here, I do not mean my works. What I mean is that some things are nothing but still weigh on the planet earth and on nature; they occupy an area. So I burn them and bury them. If I keep a product for the future, if I retain a book containing suggested works, it will be better for history than retaining quantities of work. By the way, I am not productive. Information is bigger and more important than the object and the intellectual product is the whole process.

*About the writer*

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Part of the Confusionism project



