

Creating art out of Iraq's darkness

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May 28, 2015 at 1:48 pm

Alfraji's first recollection of black shapes is from his childhood in Iraq when the family would commemorate the Day of Ashura and both men and women would dress in black to mourn the death of Imam Hussein. He recalls his mother boiling pigment in water to dye clothes black before hanging them on the washing line. When the sun would rise, then fall, the light changed and the *shadour* (a black cloak for women) would look like a figure with a head and two arms.

Over time these memories have worked their way into much of Alfraji's paintings and work and a giant black figure has become the signature image within his collection: "This figure printed a great stamp on my

memory. You see it not only now, but from the beginning of my work especially with my early woodcuts; this black figure was always there. I don't know what description I would give to this shape but it is me or you. If I tried to imagine a shape of existence, this is the shape of existence.”

Sometimes the character is solitary and takes centre stage in the paintings and installations, at others it appears multiplied. Often it is set against a plain white background or over a page filled with Arabic script. In its many forms this, and other work, can be found in *Sadik Kwaish Afraji*, a monograph of the artist by [Schilt Publishing](#) that covers over 30 years of his artistic practice from his student days until now.

Alfraji studied at the Art Institute of Baghdad in the early eighties, not long after Saddam Hussein came to power. Saddam tried to make all art and

culture serve as propaganda for the regime just as Stalin and Hitler did, says Alfraji. But artists have the power to play with concepts and ideas as long as they are not clear enough for authorities to understand that they are a protest against suffering or that they advocate liberty. “Dictators are stupid,” he adds. “They won’t necessarily read between the lines.”

Sometimes, though, they do. Alfraji says he made hundreds of drawings and etchings in Iraq that he couldn’t show so would hide instead. At a solo exhibition back in 1989 he planned to show *Biography of a Head*, a series of engravings using the linocut technique to tell the story of a head that floats in water. Below the images are captions which read “*he started thinking*” and “*he thought about leaving*”. “I couldn’t show that book in the exhibition,” he says, “because it was clear it talked about freedom.”

It was the time of the Iran-Iraq war and many people weren’t allowed to leave the country. In these eight years music, culture and art became propaganda for the war. As art students, he says, there was no opportunity to see art outside of Iraq given that there were only two TV channels, no email and no internet. The only way to explore artwork from the rest of the world was through magazines and books.

Through these books Alfraji discovered the woodcuts, drawings and paintings of German Expressionists and the work of great artists like Edvard Munch, Oskar Kokaschka and Emil Nolde became his inspiration.

“They taught me more about art than the teachers in the academy. I learnt the meaning of art through these great pieces of art. They are my teachers.” When he was a teenager Alfraji not only read novels but also history books, mythology and poetry. He was drawn to the existentialists Nietzsche and Sartre who he says have also affected his work deeply.

Another part of the past that has greatly shaped Alfraji's work is Sadr City, the district he grew up in, which is now known for being one of the poorest districts of Baghdad. “When I was a child I was always dreaming of having a small bicycle with three wheels. But I never got it because my father couldn't get it. But my father had a salary and he could buy cheap shoes and clothes for me and we could eat. We could live.”

In the seventies Sadr City was called Al-Thawra City and Alfraji tells me that back then every day a new story would unfold and it was like living inside a magical realism novel: “To live in this city means you live inside a novel. It is not a normal city; it is absolutely not a normal city. If you want to understand this city read Gabriel García Márquez. It is really full of magic and full of stories. As an artist I owe everything to this city; all my vision, all my thoughts,” he says before adding: “I don't know if it is the same now. Things change. But this is Al-Thawra City.” Alfraji now lives and works in Holland.

Towards the end of *Sadik Kwaish Alfraji* is a work by the artist entitled *Born on April 9th* in reference to the day the statue of Saddam Hussein was torn down by the US army in Firdos Square during the 2003 Iraq War, an act which marked the end of the dictator's regime. Across 11 screens are different parts of the artist's body with pictures of the American flag, Saddam and other images from Iraq projected onto him.

As part of the same installation, shown at the Stedelijk Museum's-Hertogenbosch in Holland, *In the Name of Freedom* offers a more subtle comment on the war and foreign intervention. It features a black figure lying down and four monsters rising above it with their jaws hanging open.

“It’s about the fall of Baghdad,” he says, an explanation that runs contrary to what the title suggests. “It’s not about freedom. It’s about the disaster of Iraq.” Alfraji says the figure is Iraq and the four monsters represent the north, the west, the east and the south, which came together to kill Iraq. “It wasn’t only America that did this to Iraq,” says Alfraji, “because the rest of the world was silent.”

There were, once, brighter days in Iraq. Back in the seventies nobody in the country was illiterate, explains Alfraji, even though there were many villages in the Middle East that didn’t even have schools. When people graduated from university they began to build cities and lay infrastructure across the country. The undoing of such great work started with the Iran-Iraq war, which lasted for much of the eighties, and was followed by Saddam’s invasion of Kuwait which brought with it the heaviest embargo

in history. Then there was the 2003 invasion. “Now the damage is very deep. You have generations without any kind of education, generations with hate, with endless sickness. You need generations to get healthy again. The crisis is just getting bigger and bigger,” he says.

Earlier this year ISIS, Iraq's latest problem, recorded its members smashing up ancient statues in Mosul, the capital of their self-declared state and the largest city in northern Iraq. The antiquities are symbols of ancient Mesopotamia and one dates back to the ninth century. ISIS has already burnt ancient manuscripts in Mosul Library. Recalling school trips to visit sculptures and antiquities in Mosul when he was young, Alfraji says: “It is part of me so when I see they're gone it's really hard.”

Since Alfraji left Iraq the only time he returned was in 2009 after the death of his father. “I didn't see the city I know. I didn't see Baghdad. I wanted to see Baghdad but Baghdad wasn't there.”

In July Sadik Kwaish Alfraji's work will be on show at the Ayyam Gallery in London. On 23 July he will give an artist's talk on his new work Ali's Boat and launch his new book at the gallery as part of the [Shubbak Festival](#).