



[Detail of Sadik Alfraji's "Flying Over Baghdad" (2014). Image copyright the artist. Courtesy of Ayyam Gallery.]

*Diluting the melancholic longing for unattainable dreams, which will only ever remain dreams, Sadik Alfraji injects the possibility of hope into his latest exhibition, currently on view at Ayyam Gallery Dubai's Al Quoz outpost. Curated by Nat Muller, who also edited Alfraji's first monograph, Driven by Storms (Ali's Boat), stems from a drawing that the Netherlands-based artist received in 2009 from his nephew Ali. Alfraji drew on the aesthetics of Ali's boat, symbolising a much-desired escape from the atrocities of his native Iraq, to construct a dreamlike environment that allows Ali to travel. Here both artist and curator speak about the inception of *Driven by Storms*, its existentialist meaning, and the universality of Alfraji's oeuvre.*

## **Sadik Alfraji**

**Marina Iordan: From your nephew's drawing (2009), you created a whole body of work. When and how did you think of building around Ali's letter?**

**Sadik Alfraji:** I have this drawing since 2009 and until two years ago, I hadn't done anything with it. Then the boat started coming to me in my dreams and in my visions but I had no idea what I was going to do. This is art—something magically links the concept and its development. Between these two stages, I feel lost and then all of a sudden, I start.



[Installation view of the exhibition *Driven By Storms*, Ali's letter and drawing framed. Photo credit, Ayyam Gallery.]

**MI: What does Ali's Boat represent for you?**

**SA:** The idea behind Ali's boat is humanity. When Ali gave me his letter, he was (and still is) living in a city that is hell. His letter brought me the same dream I had of returning to Iraq. Both our dreams of fleeing and returning failed. It's a complicated condition of existence—how to follow our dreams if we know that they only are dreams.

**MI: How do you choose the medium for each of your artworks, and decide between static versus moving images?**

**SA:** When the idea comes and after I get myself out of this gap I mentioned earlier, the vision becomes clear and I can see the finished work, or at least seventy percent of it, which includes the medium. The rest comes during the creative process and allows for new possibilities. Picasso once said: "I start painting a soldier and find myself painting a tree." You start with a vision and things suddenly change in the process.

**MI: You have been living in diaspora in The Netherlands for decades. Do your works have a therapeutic effect on you, in the way that they make it more bearable to live outside of your homeland?**

**SA:** All art is a kind of healing. Each human being has their own way of healing, indispensable to survival, and for me, it is art. Through art, I have this great illusion of having a meaning in life, although in the end, there is no meaning. The same illusion appears when it comes to freedom and my work is an introduction of this—our freedom is an illusion. We feel that we are free, but we are not. Jean Paul Sartre said, "we are our choices." But when you think about it, we are not free in our choices.

**MI: Camus says in *The Myth of Sisyphus*, which inspired your previous work: "The struggle itself toward the heights is enough to fill a man's heart. One must imagine Sisyphus happy." Have you ever translated happiness into your works?**

**SA:** There is happiness in sorrow, because knowing the truth releases you, whereas ignoring it imprisons you. The same goes about our existence and my work. When we will face the truth of our existence, we will be released. Although I believe it will bring us sadness, it will, at the same time, bring us happiness.



Ayyam Gallery.]

[Installation view of *Driven by Storms*. Photo credit,

**MI:** How do you feel when you observe viewers' reactions to your work?

**SA:** It brings me a great feeling, to watch people discovering my work because I feel myself talking to them through my art. But at the same time, if I have to personally engage with them, I want to run away, because I feel exposed.



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[Installation view of *Driven by Storms*. Photo credit



[*Take Your Boat and Abandon Your Home*, from Ali's Boat series (2015). Image copyright the artist. Courtesy of Ayyam Gallery.]

**Nat Muller**

**Marina Iordan:** Tell me about your curatorial process. How did you conduct your research?

**Nat Muller:** I knew Sadik's work quite well, because there are not many Iraqi artists in diaspora in The Netherlands. I had met him before and seen his piece at Mathaf [Arab Museum of Modern Art, Doha]

and was very impressed. Then I was asked to do the monograph and received thirty years of Sadik's work with hundreds of images meticulously organised into folders.

I just spent time with it, to get a feel of it and see the development. What I think is interesting in Sadik's work, that can also be observed in the book, is that his early work from the 1980s, heavily influenced by German expressionism, is about his time in Iraq during the [Iran-Iraq] war. It feeds into his work thirty years later, with a very different aesthetic and approach but you still see that things are coming back. He will never say that, but there is humour in his work.

It's interesting to work with Sadik, because he never knows where the work is going to take him. He would tell me something and I would come back to his studio two weeks later to discover he has done something completely different. Somehow there is the idea of an artistic journey in his work.

**MI: Today's aesthetics of Middle Eastern art penetrate and influence many aspects of society. Within this blurry field between politics, aesthetics, discourse, and mediation, where would you situate Sadik's practice?**

**NM:** I don't think Sadik's work is very political. It comes from a very personal place and what makes it great art is that he manages to transcend a very personal experience, geopolitically defined, to something larger, that we all can relate to. We all can relate to loss, displacement, sorrow, dreams that we have and cannot fulfill. It's a very humanist approach and his work is very empathic. That is what makes it very poetic, although it deals with a heavy reality. In Middle Eastern art, the work that succeeds to merge poetics with a certain geopolitical specificity is often the strongest work.

**MI: In the introduction of Sadik's monograph, you evoke Kan ya ma kan (once upon a time). What led you to linking this term to Sadik's work?**

**NM:** I spent a long time working on the monograph and then all of a sudden, I had to write the introduction. For me, it was about asking myself: if I had to distill the work into one label, what is Sadik doing? He is telling stories. If you look through the work, there is always this aspect of imaginary. At the time I was reading Marina Warner's *Once Upon a Time* and it just clicked. She said that stories are an archive of history and that's what Sadik is doing: telling about Iraq, his city, and place of birth. Telling stories is not only a mechanism of preservation, but also a way to cope, process the pain incurred while being in exile and sharing the story.

*\*Extracted from an interview with the artist and curator conducted by the author on 8 March 2015.*