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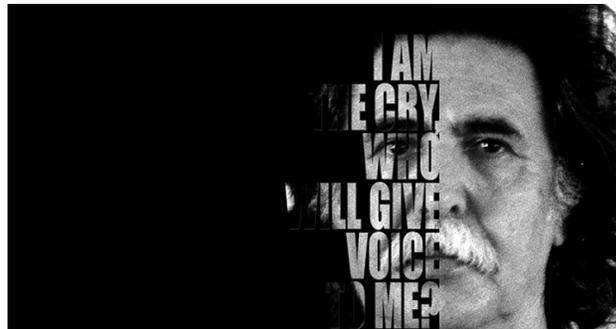
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Interview with Dia Al Azzawi



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An Excavation of the Hidden Protest

By Valerie Didier Hess

The title of this very much-anticipated retrospective show of your entire oeuvre taking place both at Mathaf and Al Riwaq Gallery in Doha, 'I am the cry, who will give voice to me' refers to the title of a poem by Fadhil Al-Azzawi. Why was this particular title chosen? I understand that this phrase was supposed to be the title of your last exhibition in Baghdad in 1975, but it was changed to 'Human States' ('*Halaat Insaniyya*')?

Fadhil was and is one of the modernist poets of my generation. He was both a novelist and journalist at the same time, and politically, he was a leftist. What he wrote reflected what was happening at that time. With regards to my exhibition in 1975 and its title change, I served the Iraqi army for the third time in 1973–1974 as I was deployed to fight in Northern Iraq against the Kurdish *peshmerga*. Thereafter, I decided to do something that reflected my agony during this time of military service. When I came back to Baghdad, I started to produce some of the works that you will see at the exhibition that are entitled '*The Cry no. 1*'; '*The Cry no. 2*' etc. Here the 'cry' refers to agony and to the human suffering, rather than specifically alluding to the fighting between the Iraqi army and the Kurds. In other words, the cry represents here the human state in front of tragedy and by changing the title of the exhibition to *Human States*, it became a more global rather than localized tragedy. I presented around 30 or 35 gouaches at the 1975 exhibition, as well as a few oil paintings, amongst which 15 or 18 original gouaches from that show will be displayed at Mathaf. Fadhil Al-Azzawi's poem reflects a 'hidden protest' of what is going on in Iraq and to some extent in the Middle East (Iraq, Syria, Palestine). This is why you will find two parts in the exhibition: one that mainly focuses on Palestine starting with Tel Al-Zataar in the 1970s, followed by

the *Sabra and Shatila* prints and painting and more recently I did a painting of five children playing football in Gaza who were killed during their game. There will also be a four-metre high sculpture of Handala, the figure created by Palestinian cartoonist Naji Al-Ali, entitled *Good Morning Beirut*, which will be the centerpiece of that section of the exhibition. At the same time, the second part is very important as it is about Iraq, in which you'll find many works with titles relating to *Bilad Al Sawwad*.

Looking now at the exhibition's subtitle, '*Dia al-Azzawi: A Retrospective (from 1963 until tomorrow)*', suggests that your artistic career started specifically in 1963, the same year of the collapse of the first Ba'ath government in February, the year after you graduated from the Baghdad University with a degree in archaeology and the year preceding your studies at the Institute of Fine Arts of Baghdad. Are there other reasons for choosing 1963 as the start date? Tell us about the earliest painting that features in the exhibition, the *Villagers* of 1963?

I did not choose the date of 1963, it was chosen by Saleem! In some ways, my career started in 1964 when I presented for the first time five paintings at the seventh exhibition organized by the Iraqi Artists' Society. After that, I became a member of the Impressionist Group and I also participated in many annual exhibitions. Although I was not a member of the Communist party, the Ba'ath coup of February 1963 led me to have no trust whatsoever for the Iraqi political system and it pushed me more towards keeping a moral stand against injustice in general terms. This is also when I started working closely with the Palestinian intellectuals, and I was looking at what was going on in the camps and the different events around that.

Actually, the 1963 *Villagers* painting reflects more the fruit of my studies rather than that of the 1963 political events. At that time, I studied

archaeology in the mornings and art in the evenings. Hence in the mornings I got the influence of the ancient Iraqi civilization and in the evenings that of Modern Iraqi Art and Western Art. It is the contrast and the fusion of both that led me to become closer in thinking and in style to Jewad Selim. Selim sought to combine Iraqi civilization and Islamic art with a modern approach, hinting here and there to Picasso and to other Western artists. This painting is very close in style to Jewad Selim's although it was painted at a time when I was a member of the Impressionist Group of Baghdad that had been founded by Hafidh al-Droubi in 1953. Al-Droubi was very open-minded and he never stopped me being influenced by Jewad Selim and sometimes also by Kadhim Haidar. With regards to Mahmoud Sabri, I was more influenced by his political stance rather than his artistic style.

The year 1968 seems to have been critical in shaping your artistic practice and in encouraging you to fuse politics into your artworks, further to meeting Muzaffar al-Nawab, a leading leftist figure of Baghdad's intellectual and cultural scene in the 1960s, combined with the political tension and frustrations following the defeat of the Arab powers by Israel in 1967. Would you agree with this statement?

When I went to college, Droubi had a studio that was opened to anyone to do whatever they wanted: theatre, music, arts. During my first year at college, he was very helpful to me and, by the second year, I had enrolled at the Institute of Fine Arts. This is actually when I was first exposed to Muzaffar Al-Nawab as he was also part of the Impressionist Group, although I did not meet him in that context. At that time, Al-Nawab was studying Arabic in the same college as me but I did not exhibit with the Impressionist Group when he was part of that group. It was only later in 1968 that I met Muzaffar at a dinner hosted by Hafidh Al-Droubi.

The 1950s brought a new promising atmosphere in Iraq politically, culturally and even artistically but suddenly something happened and revenge was on the politicians' minds, meaning that the 1960s was a vindictive time, instead of being a time to work together to make things better and to build a country. The sectarian mentality became more prominent and is even more pronounced today, where everyone tries to gain as much as he/she can for his sake and not for the country's. That's why I got closer and closer to Muzaffar's views.

He was a member of the Communist party but he encountered difficulties within the group, inducing him to quit the party. Yet his poems kept a strong relation with the suffering of the people, especially with that of the people of Southern Iraq rather than Baghdad. He had an unprecedented knowledge of the Southern Iraqi dialect and managed to create a very avant-gardist writing style. Some of his poems were about love but politics was the bone of the structure of his poems. When I met him in 1968, there was also Yusuf al-Sayigh who was another prominent poet and who was also part of the Communist party at that time. I developed a good relationship with both al-Nawab and al-Sayigh in the 1960s and, even after Muzaffar's escape from jail and flight, first to Beirut then to Damascus, I maintained a strong link with him wherever possible.

One of the highlights of your mini-retrospective show at the booth of Dubai's Meem Gallery during the Frieze Art Masters in October 2014 was a painting, the title of which can be translated as 'A wolf cries' or 'Crying wolf', painted in 1968. The title refers to a poem by Muzaffar al-Nawab, but what is its significance?

If you look at my works executed in 1967, you will find that many titles refer to the notion of tragedy, such as 'defeated warrior', 'bloody monument', 'suffering', so this painting's title is

not only a direct reference to the poet. Furthermore, you will find other works painted in 1968 with titles that allude to the 'cry of the wolf', 'martyred body' or 'sacrifice', and that are not related to al-Nawab's poetry. The 'cry' in the 'wolf' painting is that which embodies the notion of tragedy. The work is in fact more related to the political events that happened in 1968 than to al-Nawab's poetry.

When you actively started your artistic career in the early 1960s, the Baghdadi art scene was bubbling following Iraq's golden years of the 1950s with the creation of the Baghdad Modern Art Group in 1951 by Jewad Selim and Shaker Hassan Al Said, which laid the foundations for Modern Iraqi Art. How influential were these two artists, and particularly Jewad Selim as he died prematurely and tragically in 1961 and you produced a few works, amongst which is a cigar box, titled 'Homage to Jewad Selim'?

I met Jewad Selim briefly right before he left to Italy to produce his huge monument. As mentioned above, because of my morning and evening studies, my style became closer to what Selim outlined in his manifesto of the Baghdad Modern Art Group, that he had founded in 1951¹⁴. However, I didn't think it was right for Selim to claim that there was such a thing as 'Iraqi Art' as that term was too limited, because we need to talk about 'Arab Art' rather than 'Iraqi Art'. With regards to the cigar box entitled '*Homage to Jewad Selim*', it is one of many works I created under that title, in addition to paintings, prints and a *daftar* (or artist's book).

I worked with cigar boxes because I was once given a few boxes from a close Qatari friend who likes smoking cigars. One day, I was bored with painting so I added collage and colours to one of these cigar boxes – it became more of an 'objet d'art' rather than just a cigar box. On three or four occasions, I even combined the cigar box with poetry books.

Aside from fellow Iraqi artists, Rafa Nasiri, Mohammed Muhriddin, Ismail Fattah, Hachem al-Samarchi and Saleh al-Jumaie, you were one of the founders of the New Vision Group in 1969 and you briefly joined the One Dimension Group founded by Shaker Hassan Al Said in 1971. What was your relationship with Shaker Hassan?

Shaker Hassan and Kadhim Hayder had the same background as me in that they studied at the art college after secondary school, explaining why they are more intellectual than other artists. Shaker wasn't very influential on me but I think he is one of the most important figures of the Baghdad Modern Art Group because of his ideas and his style. He is completely different in that he is so far removed from Jewad Selim's style, whilst others tried to imitate Jewad, like Lorna for example. Before Shaker left Baghdad to go and study art in Paris he was very much like a 'hippy', many of his close friends were poets and intellectuals and one of them was a well-known rebellious figure, called Hussein Merdan. When Shaker came back to Baghdad, for some unknown reason, he became more religiously influenced in that he talked more of Islam in religious terms, yet he kept these thoughts far away from his paintings.

How did you decide to join forces with Shaker Hassan Al Said under The One Dimension Group?

When you talk about The One Dimension Group, it was actually the idea of Jamil Hamoudi, who invited Shaker Hassan, Abdulrahman Al-Gailani, Rafa Nasiri¹ and myself to his house for our first meeting. The idea was to prepare a documentary exhibition on artists that used calligraphy in their works, ceramics or any other medium, as opposed to creating an artists' group. We divided the tasks between ourselves and I was responsible for collecting material from ancient Iraqi civilizations (in particular examples of Assyrian art) that integrated calligra-

phy in ancient sculptures or reliefs. Shaker had the responsibility of preparing the exhibition catalogue. When the exhibition opened, we discovered the catalogue and the first two pages were Shaker's own thoughts about *The One Dimension* but explained with his own words, which gave the wrong impression that those were the ideas shared by everyone in the group. I was very cross with him and my biggest mistake was that I did not write anything until many years later to react against this. Therefore, I soon left the group but Shaker failed to keep it going, and after three years the whole thing came to an end.

One of the groundbreaking principles of the New Vision Group was to break the boundaries between different Arab people, and consider Iraqis, Syrians, Lebanese, Egyptians, Moroccans, etc., all part of the same 'Arab' culture. How did the New Vision Group formulate this principle and were you aware of the works being produced by other pioneer Modern 'Arab' artists?

In 1968 or 1969, there was supposed to be a big gathering or conference in Cairo for artists and intellectuals so I thought it was the right time to prepare a catalogue and a manifesto outlining the need for Arab Art – everyone thought it was a good idea. You should have access to the complete translation of the manifesto in the Doha exhibition. In the manifesto, the importance of using cultural heritage is highlighted but it also clearly warns to not become a slave of it. In any case, the conference in Cairo was cancelled but the manifesto articulated that there was a strong belief in Arab art. I was the first Iraqi artist to exhibit my works outside my country, in Beirut. Youssef El Khal, founder of Gallery One in Beirut, was invited by Saïd Madloun (one of owners of Al-Wasiti gallery) on a short visit to Baghdad during 1965. At that time, I had my first exhibition, and he liked the work and suggested to exhibit my works in his gallery

in Beirut in 1966 and soon after I also had a solo show at Sultan Gallery in Kuwait in 1969. In the 1960s, Lebanon and Kuwait were the only two countries that promoted and bought Arab artists at the time, without looking at the artists' passports, although nowadays this seems to have become a fashion in the Gulf region!

From then on, I became familiar with the work of Adam Henein, Ahmed Shibrain and Ibrahim El-Salahi. I admired El-Salahi because he was so different from the others. He was very influenced by local African art fused at the same time with Arab calligraphy. This approach differs from that of Ahmed Shibrain who used calligraphy as the main element of his composition, as opposed to having it only as a part of the composition, as in El-Salahi's work. Furthermore, I admired and still admire Adam Henein's sculptures. We also had the '*Hiwar*' Magazine that played a pivotal role in showcasing Arab art at the time, occasionally featuring special editions on one particular artist such as Adam Henein, El-Salahi and Ismail Fattah. This contributed to nurturing the mentality of Arab art, which the manifesto of the New Vision Group advocated and which still encapsulates what I believe in today.

As for the Modern Lebanese artists, the movement in Lebanon had a very different approach with regards to the question of identity. The notion of identity is crucial in modern Iraqi art, starting with the Baghdad Group that sought to create Iraqi art, followed by the New Vision Group that advocated an Arab art, which tackled our identity by including references to our heritage and history. I don't think this was the question in Lebanon so I didn't feel I was close to the movement there. Only later, I met Lebanese artists such as Shafic Abboud and I admired his art, despite it being completely different to what my thinking was in creating a movement with references to our heritage. His

art seemed much more 'European' and it did not contain any reference to ancient cultural heritage.

How did the concept of an Arab Art Biennial come together and what role did you play in its formation?

In 1971, a festival for Iraqi poetry (*'Al-Marbid'*) was held for the first time in Iraq in Basra, featuring a small exhibition of Iraqi art including collaborative posters in a limited edition of fifty copies between artists and poets: I worked with Yusuf Al Sayigh, Hachem Al-Samarchi with Buland Al Hudairi, and Rafa al-Nassiri with Fadhil al-Azzawi. This was a groundbreaking event at the time and when we returned to Baghdad, the Minister of Information met us one evening, following an election in which the Iraqi Art Society had voted for Ismail Fattah as its President and I was elected as its secretary. He asked us to organize a similar festival to *Al-Marbid* but this time dedicated to art. I suggested to host a festival called *'Al-Wasiti'*, which quotes the name of the 13th century Iraqi artist, who was famous for his illuminated manuscripts. The ministry's administration predicted it would take a year or more to organize such an event but I told them we could pull it off in just four months. We got the minister's approval and Fattah, for example, managed to produce a two-metre high sculpture of Al-Wasiti in only two months. In reality, the first time I had physical contact with other Arab Artists was at this Festival in 1972. That was the first time I met with Belkahia, Hariri and Kacimi for example. Simultaneously, the Union of Arab Artists had recently been established and Damascus and Baghdad were quarreling over the location of its headquarters, which ended up being in Baghdad because the Iraqi government simply had more money to spend on arts and culture at the time. The Union was led by Palestinian artist Ismail Shammout, preceded by Dr Khaled Al-Jadir. The First Arab Biennial in Baghdad in 1974 was very

organized and professional, and a wide range of artists participated. I was invited to help with the preparation of the Second Biennial that took place in Rabat (1976) by the Minister of Culture of Morocco. It wasn't a brilliant exhibition; for example, the art that Egypt presented was more that of the art of teachers rather than of creative artists. The quality of the art was even weaker in the Third Biennial in Tripoli (1978) and thank goodness there was no Fourth Arab Biennial!

In the early 1970s, there was a frenzy amongst Iraqi artists to 'exit the canvas', one of the characteristics of modernism. Did you also feel the same desire and is this one of the reasons behind your use of eclectic media in your artworks?

I became aware of the medium of acrylic paints only in the early 1970s because Baghdad at the time did not have much contact with the West, as opposed to other cities in the Middle East such as Beirut and Cairo. The only English magazine we had access to was 'Studio International' but, as I did not speak English, I just enjoyed looking at the images in the magazine. I also frequently visited the American Cultural Centre in Baghdad, which gave me access to Western classical books in their impressive library. The desire to 'exit the canvas' comes from the artists' determination to challenge themselves with different media in the hope of creating something new. This is the reason why we had such a succession of various groups of artists in Iraq that consisted of friends who worked together and dialogued between themselves through their art. When we formed the New Vision Group, we knew we needed to first work together before accepting the general term of art and what we were trying to achieve. By hosting exhibitions of sometimes five artists, or at other times seven artists, this enabled us to come together and present our different approaches in our artworks. For example, Rafa

Nasiri has a very different style and approach to mine, but our differences made us more diverse in our productions and experiments. In a way, it pushed us to be more pro-active and more active than the pioneer Iraqi artists. When Shaker was trying to keep the Baghdad Modern Art Group alive after Jewad Selim's death in 1961, he failed but it was also an incredibly rich time in terms of artistic creation. After the success of Kadhim Haidar's fantastic Martyrdom series exhibition in 1965, he joined artist Faisal Laibi Sahi and others in the Academician Group that held one exhibition in 1971 before dissolving. Faiq Hassan left 'Ar-ruwwad' or 'Pioneers' group to later form another group called 'Az-zawiya' or 'The Angle', alongside artists Ismail Fattah, Mohammed Ghani Hikmat and Kadhim Haidar.

From 1968 to 1976, you were the director of the Iraqi Antiquities Department in Baghdad. What did you do on a daily basis and how did this experience in the museum world influence your artistic career?

I like the fact that I am described as a 'director' because that may be the theoretical term used for the job title but it was not the job in practice. My role was to exhibit and display the artifacts of ancient Iraqi art in various museums. During that time, I spent one year in Mosul in the newly established art museum, that comprises mainly of artifacts from Assyria and Hatra, and part of the job involved digging up the big Assyrian 7th century winged bull, which we see being drilled through by a man in the video released by ISIL. They are filmed destroying some of the sculptures despite the fact that the mayor of Mosul had said it was all plaster, which reflects that he was not even aware of what was in the museum. I then spent time in Hatra, which had been controlled by Iraqi archaeology ever since the beginning, so it is rare to find artifacts from Hatra outside of Iraq, as opposed to other places such as Babylon, which

explains why many of the latter's artifacts are now housed in European museums. I also worked for over a year in the new building of the Museum of Ethnography in Baghdad. I was basically doing the work of an interior designer in that I designed the display cases and chose their colour, and then I had other archaeologists who did the captions and research of the works displayed. I had to gather artifacts from around Iraq for the new Museum of Ethnography, which enabled me to become more aware of my country's cultural heritage, such as *kilims* and folkloric art mainly from Southern Iraq. This experience increased my interest in folkloric art and tales rather than in the actual archaeological history and civilizations. For example, in my series of prints relating to Imam Al Husayn's martyrdom, I am inspired by the subject not from a religious point of view but rather I am more interested in depicting it as a folkloric tale, that hence offers some references to my heritage. When I went to Beirut in the 1960s, a local newspaper that used to produce a limited edition of 500 illustrated books annually, was keen to publish my drawings. However they insisted on using the Persian text as well as the Arabic text next to the illustrations, which I refused because it became too sectarian. I therefore took my drawings back and these will be featured prominently in the Doha exhibition.

In the summer of 1975 in Salzburg, you were introduced to the printing medium, traditionally a medium available to and destined for the mass market. From then onwards, you produced several series of prints and lithographs, as well as a wide variety of poets' books and artist's books or 'dafatir' that you illustrated. Besides being a means to reconcile word and image, did you seek in this medium a 'louder' political voice as an artist?

Yes indeed. It was Rafa Nasiri who convinced me to go to Salzburg, as he himself had been a year before. It also meant that I could go and visit the museums nearby in Vienna, where I discovered the work of Gustav Klimt and Albrecht Dürer. When I had mastered the printing medium, it allowed me to offer something different within the circle of Arab art. I also became more aware of Islamic manuscripts after settling in London, discovering the collections of Islamic manuscripts in Dublin (Chester Beatty Library), in Paris (Bibliothèque Nationale de France) and in London (British Library). I thought it was a good idea to somehow integrate those in my work as it offers other references to our heritage, rather than just incorporating Assyrian or Sumerian motifs. From that time onwards, I started to work on '*daftar*' (plural '*dafatir*'), the term I use to refer to a copy of an original artist's book, as in Arabic the translation of 'book' [*kitab*] confusingly alludes to any standard book that is available on the market.

Following the persecution of leftists, intellectuals and artists in Iraq, you left Baghdad in 1976 and settled in London, where you have been living and working for the past forty years. How did this transition from Baghdad to London happen?

It was not straightforward to leave Iraq as an Iraqi at the time and it was definitively not easy to get a passport for various reasons. In 1976, I asked the government for a study leave but they refused so I resigned from my position. I was encouraged to travel around Europe following my visit to Salzburg as I had won the first prize at the summer academy exhibition. The prize was a one-month stay in Rome, all expenses paid. I travelled around Rome then I spent three or four days in Morocco, before traveling to London where I visited the exhibition of the World of Islam Festival. When I got back to Baghdad, I knew I wanted to leave, although my family was against my move to Lon-

don. I had made the assumption that I wanted to study museology in London but a friend of mine suggested that I study art. I therefore met the Head of the Painting Department of the Royal College of Arts and I was asked to bring three original works (which will be exhibited in Doha) in order for the teachers to question me on how I had created them. I answered what I could with my broken English and one of the professors, who was Polish, asked me whether I wanted a 'piece of paper' or whether I wanted to be an artist. When I replied that I wanted to be an artist, he told me to take my things and go [laugh]!

Hence you were hired as an art advisor to London's Iraqi Cultural Centre from 1977 to 1980. What did this involve and how active was the Iraqi Cultural Centre at the time? What was the perception of 'modern Iraqi art' in London in the 1970s and were people even aware of it?

At the London Iraqi Cultural Centre, I was determined not only 'to arrange', or now they say 'to curate' exhibitions of Iraqi artists, but I also organized several shows of Arab artists. For the first time, you could find a work by Boullata hanging next to one by Belkahia, or an Ismail Fattah placed side by side with a Baya, for example. This greatly helped me to gain confidence in my own beliefs at the same time as enabling me to stay in contact with the Arab World. I also featured exhibitions that showcased art from third world countries in Africa and South America, which received fantastic reviews. Another show I curated was a very important exhibition of posters produced by artists from around the world, related to the theme of 'Freedom of Expression'. It was also very successful and five years later, I received a letter from MoMA in New York as they wanted to buy the original works of the first five winners, but those works disappeared or were perhaps destroyed in Baghdad. The Iraqi Cultural

Centre did not aspire to be a commercial gallery but rather it provided an exhibition space for the Arab communities. Although it had good contacts with various journalists, commercially it was not very successful, similar to the Kufa Gallery.

The Kufa Gallery was founded by Iraqi architect Mohamed Makiya, who had moved to London in the 1980s. What was your involvement with Kufa Gallery and how fruitful was this encounter with Mohamed Makiya's circle?

The aim of the Kufa Gallery was to promote Arab artists, predominantly Iraqi artists. Exhibitions featuring Rafa Nasiri, Saleh al-Jumaie, Ismail Fattah, Mohammed Ghani Hikmat, Lorna Selim and some of Jewad Selim's original works took place there but it soon became a centre for Iraqi immigrants in London. Art became secondary, as it got more and more involved with political activities in opposition to the Iraqi government. Makiya was above all an architect – he did not have much impact on my work. Although he was part of Jewad Selim's first generation group of artists, he was influenced more by his Islamic cultural heritage as opposed to the Sumerian civilization.

I know you studied archaeology at university, but were you exposed to any other subjects of world art history? Did you have access to books or images relating to Western Modern Art and if so, who were you aware of and did this influence your work at all? Where and when was your first 'live' encounter with Western Modern Art?

The Gulbenkian Foundation both financed and founded the building of the Arab Artists Society in Baghdad and funded the National Museum of Art (also known as the Gulbenkian Gallery at time) in 1962. At the opening of the latter, it exhibited highlights from the Gulbenkian Western Art Collection, featuring mainly American art.

That was my first 'live' encounter with Western Art as I had not studied abroad like some of my artists generation such as Rafa Nasiri or Mohammed Muhridin. The Gulbenkian Foundation later acquired one of my paintings for its collection now in Lisbon, and that painting has been lent to the Doha exhibition. It is true that various Western artists indirectly influenced me. Catherine David actually asked me whether I was inspired by the work of Francis Bacon for some of my 1972 and 1973 paintings, especially with regards to my use of space in those specific examples. In fact, I was more aware of Picasso than Bacon at the time but undoubtedly, for me, Bacon is one of the most important artists in the world.

How did your move to London, one of the global platforms of art, impact your artistic development?

The funny thing is that after spending only two years in London, I produced the drawings for my series of the 'Seven Golden Odes' [*Al-mu'allaqat al-sab'a*], which is intrinsically related to Arab manuscripts more than any thing. I worked in the Arts Centre Studio with a dear friend of mine, the late Hugh Stoneman. Once in London, I was indeed more aware of the global art scene but it also prompted me to be more and more drawn to Arabic calligraphy, especially in the 1980s. At that time, I used Arabic calligraphy as part of the composition rather than using it as the core element of the composition, which is very different from the work of the Egyptian artist Ahmed Moustafa or the Tunisian artist Nja Mahdaoui. They are more calligraphers than painters and that is how they were described in several exhibitions. In contrast, I did calligraphy as a painter – I don't know how to write calligraphy within the rules of calligraphy. In the early 1980s, I also participated to several exhibitions at Wada Faris' gallery in Paris, but it was always a challenge for me to protect myself from being directly influ-

enced by Western Art, which might explain why I turned towards calligraphy shortly after moving to London.

Do you think you would have been so dedicated to looking back at your country's cultural heritage had you not been exiled to the United Kingdom and had you stayed in Baghdad? In that way, do you see yourself as seeking to not only bridge the contemporary and the ancient, but also bridging the West and the East?

Yes definitively. Had I not moved to London, my work would without doubt have been very different as my exile made me more aware of what I was doing and it induced me to create works that would be accepted by other cultures. In the introduction of the exhibition catalogue of a show I had in Washington D.C. that talked about the use of calligraphy in my works, the curator wrote that he could not see Arabic calligraphy in my works but rather a series of 'signs'. That statement gave me more confidence in what I was doing as it had become too easy to integrate Arabic calligraphy. For example, I find the work of Khaled Ben Slimane as a ceramicist too naïve in its use of calligraphy. By trying to produce an art that is acceptable to everyone was not only my attempt to bridge the contemporary and the ancient, but also to bridge Western and Eastern art. However, it is a very difficult task, and that's the reason why I challenge myself all the time to do something different and innovative.

In 2014–2015, the Islamic State undertook a 'form of cultural cleansing', to use the words of UNESCO Director General Irina Bokova, as they looted, destroyed and vandalized museums, churches and archaeological sites particularly in Iraq and Syria. They caught the world's attention when they released a video on 26th February 2015 in which they violently destroyed Assyrian artifacts from Mosul Museum. As a former director of the

Iraqi Antiquities Department in Baghdad, as an artist and as an advisor to one of the most important institutions in the region, what are your reactions to this and does your recent sculpture of the *Iraqi Thieves Wagon* (2016) refer to this?

As I was seeking to pursue my innovations, I thought it would be easier to produce sculptures, using a new technique with a 3-D printed model. The *Iraqi Thieves Wagon* actually refers to what happened in Iraq in 2003 and not to what happened in Mosul in February 2015. In 2003, the Iraqi Museum was destroyed and looted by Iraqis not by foreigners; they also raided universities, libraries and colleges. I therefore produced a large bronze sculpture from a smaller model of the concept that was realized from 3-D printing. Catherine David was not keen to include it in the Doha exhibition because of its monumental size taking up too much space, especially given the fact that a lot of my paintings are very large. Although it was complicated from a logistics' point of view, I explained to her that this was my manifesto: the *Iraqi Thieves Wagon* refers to the 2003 lootings but it also stands for the continuation of the 2003 events and what they instigated, in that our cultural heritage is still savagely being destroyed up until today. In this two-metre high sculpture, I included references to the large sculpture produced by Ismail Fattah that disappeared in Baghdad after 2003 as well as hinting at the three paintings by Faiq Hassan that were stolen at the same time from the Museum of Modern Iraqi Art in Baghdad by including three empty frames that everyone will distinguish as alluding to those three missing works.

I understand you met H.E. Sheikh Hassan Al Thani, founder of the Museum of Modern Arab Art in Doha (Mathaf) in 1994 and that you played a pivotal role in putting together the museum's phenomenal collection. That same museum is now hosting the most com-

prehensive retrospective exhibition of your work, in collaboration with Al Riwaq Gallery: did you ever expect this to happen?

No, I did not. I met H.E. Sheikh Hassan Al Thani through a friend and he collected everything at that time. It was the Qatari artist Youssef Ahmed who first advised him on collecting Arab Art and I encouraged him towards Iraqi art and then more generally towards Arab Art, but at that time, his idea of a museum was not very clear. Prices for Arab art were so low back then: one of the first auctions we attended was in the mid-1990s when Sotheby's sold the collection of the Lebanese journalist Riyad Al-Rayess. For example, a painting by Kayyali sold for \$25,000 or \$30,000 at that sale. It was acquired by an English collector who walked past the window and saw the painting. In Damascus, you would hardly pay \$2,000 or \$3,000 for the same work! We never talked about hosting a retrospective exhibition for my work as I focused more on providing studios for the artists we invited to Doha, such as Salem al-Dabbagh, Saadi al-Kaabi and Ismail Fattah, from whom H.E. Sheikh Hassan Al Thani purchased artworks.

You had an exhibition in Beirut in 1991 and a couple of others in Amman and Damascus in 1994, around the same year you were introduced to H.E. Sheikh Hassan Al Thani's ambitious plans for the museum in Doha. How did this return to the Arab World in the 1990s, after being exiled in London for 25 years, affect you and affect your work from that time?

My first comeback to the Middle East was actually in 1983 when my *Sabra and Shatila* triptych was exhibited in Kuwait and I also took part in an exhibition in Abu Dhabi around that time. When I visited Doha for the first time, I went to the old souq where I saw a lot of fabrics that are traditionally used for the Bedouin women's clothes. Those fabrics reminded me of Iraq and I decided to integrate them in my works, which

explains the collages of vibrant colors omnipresent in my 1990s paintings. I was exposed to photographs of the desert rose, which led me to create several artworks on that subject. The desert rose pinpointed to the notion of identity, being one of many visual references to different local areas within the Arab world, that I then sought to merge within my modern artwork whilst aiming to making it acceptable for everyone – whether it is accepted globally or not, I don't know!

How do you think you have influenced aspiring artists of the Arab diaspora or what legacy do you hope your work will give to future generations of artists?

The legacy I hope to offer is two-fold: on the one hand, to keep young artists far from the commercial side and to support them, such as Nazar Yahya, Mahmoud Obaidi and Kareem Risan, for example, in the 1990s, who struggled when the Iraqi dinar was very low and were forced to leave Iraq, so I used my friendship with collectors to help them out. On the other hand, I hope that I succeed in making the younger generations more conscious of and more directly involved with their own cultural heritage, rather than looking at the works in lovely magazines or in lavish books on Western Art.

Seeing more than 350 of your own creations carefully curated in two exhibition spaces in Doha, representing more than 50 years of your artistic career, what are your thoughts when you take a step back, observe with a critical eye and understand the evolution of your work? Can you fully appreciate your pivotal role within the context of the development of Modern Arab Art?

No, I don't think I am satisfied with what I've produced for the last fifty years. My work is an accumulation of knowledge, visions and experiences, but you don't just become a successful

artist by reading two chapters in a book. So I hope I can have more years to pursue my work and experiments. The reality is that today's generation of young artists is not very creative: although there might be some promising young artists in Syria, Palestine and Egypt, the contemporary art scene in Iraq is completely dead and it is not very encouraging.

Why do you say the contemporary art scene in Iraq is 'dead'?

Bear in mind that in the late 1970s, as far as I know, no student could go to study art in the academy in Baghdad unless they were members of the party or unless someone wrote a letter for them. We therefore find ourselves with an army of artists who are not creative enough to be artists but who are more qualified to teach rather than to actually produce art. You will find hundreds of artists creating Iraqi art everywhere in the world but if you put it all together, rarely will you find someone that you can confidently say that he will become a prominent artist in ten years.

Looking back at what you've produced in the past 50 years, would you consider your oeuvre as being a visual encyclopedia, fusing poetry and history, of some of the Arab world's key political events and tragedies of the 20th and 21st centuries, an example of which is your monumental painting of *Sabra and Shatila*?

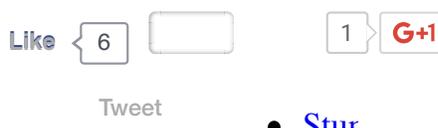
I do not think of my oeuvre as a visual encyclopedia of politics and I hope that history will encourage me a little, by preserving my name for many years to come. Sabra and Shatila was exhibited for the first time in Kuwait in 1983, which was my first show in the Arab world since I had moved to London. The Kuwait Museum wanted to buy this painting from me but I refused to sell it, yet I agreed to lend it to the museum for five years. When I got it back after the agreed period, Saddam Hussein stormed into

Kuwait just one week later and the area where my painting had been hanging for the past five years was bombed by the Iraqis, so I was lucky to get my painting back! *Sabra and Shatila* was only published for the first time in Saeb Eigner's book in 2010, which coincided with the opening of the Arab Art Museum in Doha (Mathaf). Nada Shabout curated the inaugural show and a few of my *Sabra and Shatila* prints were displayed, so that painting suddenly drew a lot of attention. The acquisition of the *Sabra and Shatila* triptych by the Tate Modern in London awakened a thirst for Arab art from other leading global art institutions. Furthermore, the retrospective shows at the Tate for Saloua Raouda Choucair and for Ibrahim El-Salihi proved to be very important and encouraging for the arts in the Middle East.

'Dia al-Azzawi: A Retrospective (from 1963 until tomorrow)' - what do you have planned for us 'tomorrow', what is your next project or what medium have you not tried out yet?

Funnily enough, I had suggested 'tomorrow' as a joke to Catherine David and Saleem Al Bahloly for the end date of my works presented in the retrospective but they thought it was perfect and kept it for the title of the show! I am currently planning to work on sculpture in view of putting together a major exhibition of my sculptures that I hope will reflect the same quality of my previous works - I am very well known as a painter but less as a sculptor.

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