

Iraqi immigrant to open art show at D.M. Social Club

Reporter's note: It's been seven years since the Iraqi-born artist Amer al-Obaidi started a new life here in Des Moines. He plans to display his latest artwork in a month-long show that opens with a reception at 7 p.m. Friday at the Des Moines Social Club. So I figured now is a good time to revisit the story I wrote on Nov. 16, 2008, just a few months after al-Obaidi's plane landed in a leafy city that to him seemed surprisingly quiet. -- MM

There's a good chance that artist Amer Saleh al-Obaidi will be awake tonight.

He'll shuffle around his apartment in plastic sandals, coasting on coffee as thick as the paint in tubes on the living room floor. He might hear footsteps from the neighbor upstairs. A car might pass outside on Hickman Road.

But other than that, the Iraqi refugee who settled in Des Moines three months ago will work alone. He'll combine a few green squares and blue curves into the image of a woman, maybe a swoop of white for a pigeon or two.

He might even paint another herd of gray horses, like the ones he brushed onto a canvas in 1975 and that auction house Christie's sold last month for \$43,750 - the equivalent of about seven years' rent for the apartment he shares with his wife and daughter.

He won't see any of that money - the painting left his hands long ago - but it doesn't bother him. His new life isn't posh, but it marks the end of more than two years in limbo, the haphazard result of meetings with the U.N. Refugee Agency, background checks by the U.S. Department of Homeland Security and help from Lutheran Services in Iowa.

But unlike everything else in the 65-year-old artist's life, his paintings haven't changed. He chooses the same bright colors he used before the war. He assembles the same basic shapes that he did before his wife lost most of her sight. Before a bomb killed their son. Before they started over in Iowa.



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(Photo: Register file photo)

A look back at Baghdad

Amer's story begins in Baghdad, where he was born in 1943. He grew up in a large Muslim family, studied art and designed illustrations for newspapers, magazines, even a few things for kids. He taught at a school in Saudi Arabia and gradually climbed his way into the administrative ranks of the Iraqi government's best art museums.

He organized national festivals, painted murals in airports across the country and crisscrossed the world to display his work in Cairo, Sao Paulo, Moscow, London and Paris.

Along the way he married Sawsan Abdulkarim, a schoolteacher with a mischievous laugh, and raised two children: a son, Bader, who was born with Down syndrome in 1978, and a daughter, Bedor, now 18, who came along a dozen years later.

The family lived in a big house in central Baghdad. Their dogs, Blackie and Night, romped around the courtyard, where red and purple carnations bloomed in the garden.

Bader played soccer, listened to Michael Jackson albums and learned to paint like his

dad. Bedor took ballet and danced through the house in pink leotards. Sawsan raced around town in her Chevy, one of only two sports cars like it in the whole city.

But then things changed.



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Violence disrupts quiet

After U.S.-led forces invaded Baghdad in 2003, the city sank into turmoil. Gunfire rang out in neighborhoods that were once quiet. Electricity dwindled to a few hours a day or fizzled out completely. Security checkpoints turned 15-minute errands into harrowing five-hour ordeals.

Although the violence complicated things for everyone, some suffered more than others.

"Life for everybody - from Christians to artists to women - it's precarious," said Jeffrey Weiss, peace education director for the Des Moines branch of the American Friends

Service Committee. "If you look at who the refugees are, there are certainly a lot of those people who lived in a secular society and are worried about the constitution. A secular government was replaced by what looks like a theocracy of some kind."

In January 2006, the al-Obaidi family stopped by a clothing store in the Sadiya neighborhood on Baghdad's south side. Bader waited in the car while his parents and sister went in to shop.

He was killed a few minutes later when a car bomb exploded nearby.

A piece of shrapnel hit Sawsan's foot. The wound eventually developed gangrene, forcing doctors to amputate her leg from below the knee. Stress from the ordeal sent her diabetes spinning out of control; she lost sight in one eye and sees only shadows in the other.

Life was simple, she said last week at her kitchen table. "But when my son died, it was very different."



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Home was their museum

The family hunkered down for a few months in Baghdad, but when bullets started showing up in their backyard, it was time to go.

So they sent Blackie and Night to live with another family, packed a few bags and made a final lap around the home they had filled with artwork over the course of 35 years. Gilt-framed paintings crowded the walls. Ceramics perched on pedestals behind the couch. Amer's mural of a blue mosque, a frequent backdrop for snapshots of the kids, covered one side of the living room.

"It was like a museum," he said.

The family gave a set of keys to a neighbor, piled into the car and headed west to Syria less than 48 hours after they had decided to leave.

They lived in a villa outside Damascus for a year and half, but still worried for their safety. They applied for refugee status from the United Nations, which approved their request and assigned their file to the United States. Staffers from Lutheran Services

and the State Department finally decided the al-Obaidis would join the 124 other Iraqi refugees who came last year to a place called Iowa.

"Where is this, in Brazil?" the artist wondered when he learned the news.

The U.N. staffer, a Syrian, wasn't much help. He had never heard of it, either.

Quiet once more

When the family's plane landed in Des Moines on Aug. 13, Sawsan's ears picked up what her eyes couldn't sense.

"It's a quiet city," she said. "Where are the people? It's only cars, only buildings." But she noticed it was friendly, too. A caseworker from Lutheran Services settled them into their apartment, introduced them to a family doctor and helped Bedor enroll in English classes at Des Moines Area Community College.

"She really has an opportunity to do a lot here. I think she has a bright future ahead of her," Lutheran Services program director Jill Stuecker said of the 18-year-old former ballerina, who wants to study journalism at the University of Iowa.

Someday she may fly back to Baghdad to sell the old house, but her parents have no plans to return. There are too many problems there, according to the friends they call with prepaid phone cards. Even with the promise of a new U.S. president, whom they like, they doubt anything will change very soon.

Sawsan is particularly adamant about the family's direction. She encourages her daughter to hang out with her new English-speaking friends rather than the other Iraqis who stop by for tea or Amer's thick Turkish coffee.

"My daughter ... her future is here," Sawsan said.

Her own days in the apartment are long, especially since she's confined to her wheelchair, but she listens to classical music and teaches her husband how to cook.

"I am housekeeper 33 years," she said. "He is housekeeper now."

Amer pulled a pan of noodles out of the oven and blew on a spoonful of sauce for her to try. She took a big whiff, tasted it and grinned.

"It's very good," she said. "My husband is good man. He is magic."

Amer raised his eyebrows and turned to the reporter who had stopped by for lunch.

"You should speak in the newspaper about the Iraqi cooker, not the Iraqi artist," he joked. "All the restaurants will come to make contracts with me."

Maybe, but it's art, not food, that keeps him up at night. Stacks of sketches cover the couch and paintings lean against the wall. Paints and brushes clutter the carpet beneath an easel he received from the American Friends Services Committee. Weiss' brother, Daniel, teaches art at Johnston High School and had some supplies to spare.

"It was a very good gift," Amer said. "It helped me to begin."



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(Photo: Register file photo)

Art show in Houston

As the artist unrolled a painting of a white horse, the only canvas he included in his two-bag limit on the flight from Syria, he explained his plans to restart his career. He displayed some paintings at an American Friends event last month, received a tentative invitation for a show next year in Houston and hopes other events will follow.

But even though he has traveled the world - about 30 countries at last count - the United States is still unfamiliar territory. The test for a driver's license baffles him, and he's just beginning to master the bus routes for trips to

Walgreens and Hy-Vee.

"I didn't see all the world, because I never saw America," he said.

That changed in August - and he likes what he sees so far.

"We've met good people here," he said. "We can live a good life here."