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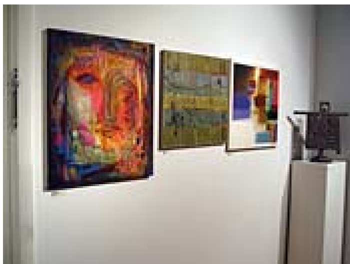
Print Article

THE IRAQI CENTURY OF ART
by Ben Davis

Exterior of Pomegranate Gallery, at 133 Greene Street in Soho

Interior of Pomegranate Gallery


Installation view of works in "Oil on Landscape: Art from Wartime Contemporaries of Baghdad," at Pomegranate Gallery

As'aad Saghir
Power Lines
2006

Mohammed al Hamadany's 25-panel painting *Night of Fire* is the single most portentous work of art to be seen recently in New York. The piece was on view at Pomegranate Gallery in SoHo as part of "Oil on Landscape: Art from Wartime Contemporaries of Baghdad," May 24-June 21, 2008, featuring art from artists currently living in the Iraqi capital.

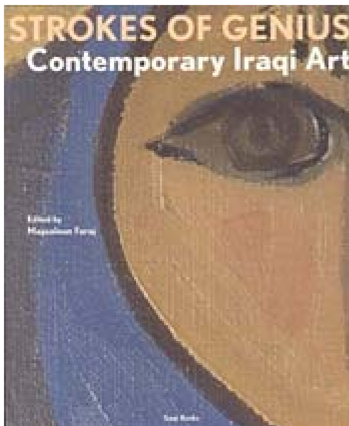
The small group of works in that show was brought to the U.S. by ex-Navy lieutenant Christopher Brownfield in 2006-07. Brownfield found the works in question hidden in the back of a shop in the Green Zone which, in his description, otherwise sold clichéd "Lawrence of Arabia"-style images of Iraq as souvenirs to soldiers. After winning the trust of the gallery owner, Brownfield essentially smuggled them into the country, and is now acting as agent for the artists abroad.

I am admittedly fascinated with Pomegranate, which specializes in work by artists from Iraq -- I wrote up their very first show, "Ashes to Art," in 2006, which featured a variety of works by established Iraqi artists [see "Return Fire", Feb. 10, 2006]. The styles of works in the current show, by Fadhal Abbas, Sat'aar Darweesh, Sadik Jaffar and Ahmed Nousaife, are familiar -- an eclectic mix of realism and a modest expressionism.

The centerpiece, however, is *Night of Fire*, and in any number of respects Al Hamadany's painting is the most ambitious statement yet to come out of post-invasion Iraq (of course, there are very real limits on what can come out of post-invasion Iraq). The artist himself has described the work as offering an "an Iraqi perspective of 'Shock and Awe'," a mediation on the brutality unleashed by the invasion. Installed in the primary alcove of the gallery along three walls, the work has a central panel that concentrates on a distorted rendering of the famous toppling of Saddam Hussein's statue in Firdos Square in 2003. Here, the sculpture is almost unrecognizable as a tumbling blob, a darkness simultaneously being pulled down by and collapsing on top of ghoulish figures in the bottom left corner, rendered as jagged, primitivist red outlines. In the turbulent area above the statue float a series of collaged elements, including an image of a Babylonian statue and a reproduction of the Mona Lisa, torn in half. In orange, a lance of Arabic characters also stands out -- the jumbled letters alif, ra, ayn and qaf, spelling "Iraq."

This central piece is flanked on either side by 12 narrow vertical panels. Heavily patterned and dripping with slashes of black, sandy red, brown, glowing yellow and orange, these panels feature, among other things, boxy geometric heads, staring blankly; the red outline of a woman's body, naked and decapitated; a crushed doll and shreds of clothes, collaged into the surface; large stitched-together cuts that resemble sutures; severed hands scattering dominoes; and a distorted Iraqi flag with two dramatic black handprints on it. The faces seem to be petrified bystanders, though their boxy shape and simplified features also mirror the other recurring motif, the tumbling

Fadhel Abaas
A Meeting of Friends
2007



Strokes Of Genius: Contemporary Iraqi Art (Saqi Books, 2001)

Mohammed al Hamadany
Night of Fire
2007

Detail of the central panel of Mohammed al Hamadany's *Night of Fire*

dominoes. Observing the whole piece, the alternation of hot colors against the browns and blacks makes it seem as if you are peering through windows onto a burning and ruined mental landscape.

The obvious newsworthiness of a show benefiting contemporary Iraqi artists, as well as the intrigue of Brownfield's story, has led to a welcome flurry of news coverage for the gallery, which was given spots on the BBC, NPR, ABC News and in *New York* magazine. "Oil on Landscape" has received somewhat less attention, however, in the art world. I believe that this is for a simple reason -- from a contemporary art perspective, a painting like Al Hamadany's is difficult to read.

Standing in front of *Night of Fire*, one casts about for a satisfactory reference to compare it to. It lacks the spidery intellectualism we've come to take for granted in contemporary painting. The imagery's rough edges and political content put you in mind of Leon Golub -- but Golub made defiant partisanship an esthetic in itself, while *Night of Fire*'s political ideas are much more muddy and buried. The darkling neo-expressionism of Anselm Kiefer or the mystical signs-and-symbols approach of Antoni Tàpies may come closest, particularly since both artists specialize in meditations on national consciousness. And yet despite its scale, Al Hamadany's painting lacks the grandiosity and genre-busting self-confidence of these European figures -- an essential part of what makes them seem contemporary, as if they are both reclaiming the past and overcoming it.

So where does this work fall? What kind of development is this for Iraqi art? To understand it, what is needed is a detour through the country's art history, and an understanding of how it relates to politics. The following I have gleaned from a number of sources, most notably the collection of essays in *Strokes of Genius: Contemporary Art from Iraq*, published by the iNCiA in London in 2001.

One thing is important to remember: A hundred years ago, when Picasso and Braque were sharpening their Cubism in Paris, Iraq did not yet exist as a nation. It was a series of departments in the Ottoman Empire. The British created Iraq at the end of World War I, drawing its modern borders and installing the Hashemite dynasty of King Faisel to put an Arab face on their rule. For some Iraqis, mainly the fragile middle class, the modernizing influence of the Europeans was welcome, particularly against the background of hundreds of years of stagnation under the Ottomans. It was in this context that the first Western-influenced art came to Iraq.

This art had a strange origin. The early artists, academic realists like Abdul Qadir al Rassam, had been Iraqi officers in the Ottoman army. They learned Western draftsmanship at the Military College in Istanbul, where it was taught to represent terrain for military purposes. Inspired by what seemed like a liberating new way of looking at the world, distinct from the older craft traditions of Iraq, these figures returned to Baghdad to teach. "Among the intellectuals and educated members of the upper classes their efforts were well received," writes Ulrike al-Khamis of this early period. "To attract the general public, however, was a more difficult task not least because of the prevailing religious views and social conventions."

It is important to understand the social background, however. As a tool of British interests, the Faisel monarchy actively cultivated a class of landowners -- the sheiks, to whom the government awarded vast estates -- and urban elites as allies. As part of this process, Faisel sponsored the new artists, benefiting them with scholarships to study in European capitals throughout the interwar period (in fact, Faisel advisors like Nuri al Said -- later to become a notorious

Detail of the central panel of Mohammed al Hamadany's *Night of Fire*

Detail of the central panel of Mohammed al Hamadany's *Night of Fire*

Five panels of Mohammed al Hamadany's *Night of Fire*

colonial collaborator -- shared a class background with the artists, having also trained at the Military College in Istanbul).

At the same time, the British were intent on extracting every ounce of benefit from Iraq, and they were disliked by the vast majority of Iraqis. There were strike waves, mass rebellions by peasants, tax riots and armed revolts in the Kurdish north throughout the '20s and '30s. In his account of Iraqi art history, Rashad Selim gives a telling snapshot of the British empire's early impact on Iraqi culture: "Local textile production, traditional clothing and design were the first to collapse to the industrial output of Britain's spinning mills; literally loosening the fabric of identity. Thus the appearance of the Western-suited 'effendi', a new and portentous national character took centre stage as teacher and symbol of the shedding of the old ways." Stuck in this position, a cosmopolitan Iraqi avant-garde would have an uphill to fight in order to take root.

The conflagration of World War II brought with it a number of changes. While the cream of the European intelligentsia fled to New York, laying the groundwork for the explosion of the American scene, Iraq experienced its own small version of this phenomenon, albeit of a more diffuse character given that the Middle East was nearer the heart of the war. In 1941-42, a wave of Polish soldiers -- "Anders Army" -- swept from Russia through the Persian corridor and across the Middle East under British Middle East Command. Among them were a few Polish painters, identified as one-time students of Pierre Bonnard, who lingered and made a huge impact on their counterparts in Baghdad.

More decisively, however, the war led to the acceleration of decolonization throughout the world. Already in early 1941, years of accumulated Iraqi grievances came back to haunt the British when Rashid Ali led a nationalist coup in Iraq, forcing them to fight a three-month campaign to reoccupy the country. Against this background of increasing agitation for independence, at the end of that same year, the very first Iraqi art society was founded: the "Art Friends Society," led by Akram Shukri (Shukri had been, in fact, the very first Iraqi artist to receive a grant from the monarchy to study abroad in England, ten years earlier).

Before the formation of the Art Friends Society, as Lorna Selim recounts, "There was little nurturing of individualism apart from a monthly sketch club where students could present their works for appraisal by the teachers." The formation of an independent society of Iraqi artists dedicated to concentrating their knowledge and sharing their craft was a definitive step towards coalescing an authentic scene. In short order, members of this society, notably Faiq Hassan and Jewad Selim -- both European trained, and professors at the state-sponsored Fine Arts Academy -- created their own independent tendencies, and the ingredients for a true local avant-garde were in place. Hassan's group, the "Société Primitive," later better known as the "Pioneers," represented the eclectic interpellation of early modernist styles that became characteristic of one long-lasting current of Iraqi art, creating Iraqi-themed Impressionism, Cubism and the like.

It is Jewad Selim, however, who seems to have gone farthest in capturing the political currents of the moment. The '50s were the era of Arab self-assertion, with Nasser nationalizing the Suez Canal in Egypt and the Baath party in Syria and Iraq agitating for the creation of a pan-Arab superstate to unite the Middle East. Selim acutely felt the isolation of contemporary art in Iraq, and actively set himself to broaden its relevance beyond the elite: "To that end," recounts Selim's British-born wife, Lorna, "Jewad, for the first time ever, delivered one of his art lectures in the Fine Arts Institute in the Iraqi dialect rather than the usually required, formal classical Arabic." The

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same year, Selim founded the "Baghdad Group of Modern Art," which launched the first real manifesto of Iraqi art. In Lorna Selim's words, the manifesto "referred to Iraq's ancient heritage, and in particular, to the achievements of the famous 13th century Baghdadi miniature painter Yihya al-Wasiti. It proposed picking up the evolutionary threat of art in Iraq at the point at which it had been severed by the devastating Mongol invasion of Baghdad in 1258 and to build on the historical achievements up to that point. Thus a new art of distinct and at the same time contemporary Iraqi character was formulated."

In many ways, the high point of these developments came at the end of the decade. In 1958, the pro-British monarchy was toppled, and Abdul-Karim Qasim took power. Jubilant mass demonstrations broke out throughout the country, and for this reason, in the account of the *People's History of Iraq*, "both the Iraqi and the international left described it as a *revolution* rather than a coup d'etat." Qasim was in some ways a classic populist strongman, but the first years of his rule did issue in land reform, progressive taxation and nationalization of the oil companies, seeming to mark a new beginning for Iraq. In early 1959, Qasim commissioned Jewad Selim to create a "Monument to Freedom," commemorating the achievements of the revolution. Cast in Italy and debuted in 1960 on the anniversary of the monarchy's overthrow, drawing on ancient Assyrian and Babylonian bas-reliefs as well as Selim's studies of Henry Moore and Picasso, the monument served as a giant billboard for the cultural synthesis that Selim had advocated, both modern and defiantly indigenous -- and initiated a tradition of large-scale nationalist monuments that Saddam Hussein would make into a caricature.

Selim died of a heart attack in 1961. In 1963, Qasim was killed in another military coup. The United States, the rising foreign influence in the Middle East, disapproved of the anti-Western posturing of the government and its threat to Western oil interests, and American intelligence sped along a coup by Qasim's Baath party rival, Abdus Salam Aref. According to Roger Morris, summarizing the events recently in the *New York Times*, "Using lists of suspected Communists and other leftists provided by the C.I.A., the Baathists systematically murdered untold numbers of Iraq's educated elite -- killings in which Saddam Hussein himself is said to have participated." In *Strokes of Genius*, Rashad Selim (Jewad Selim's nephew and a contemporary artist himself) writes that these bloody events marked a turning point for Iraqi art. In his words, they "destroyed the leftist element within government with which the majority of progressive intellectuals and artists were associated."

Subsequent years brought an exhausting series of coups and the fatal disarray of the Iraqi left, ultimately leading to the consolidation of the Saddam Hussein regime in 1979. Though many artists chose the path of exile during this period, the successive governments of Iraq all happily sponsored visual art. "Through the strife to come," Rashad Selim tells us, "visual art enjoyed paradoxically a good deal of freedom denied to many of the other arts due literally to silence and the generality of its critical language." In particular, Hussein's Baath Party -- by now far removed from the pan-Arabism of its founding -- was a force desperately in search of the semblance of popular support, and to this end, it increased art patronage throughout the '70s, promoting Iraqi artists both at home and abroad. Of special note from this era was the "One Dimension Group," which Shakir Hassan al Said founded with other artists to explore the mystical and graphic potential of Arabic calligraphy as a vehicle for modern art.

However, in key respects, the attenuation of truly popular political movements remains decisive for understanding Iraqi art today. Never-ending internal strife meant that civil society was constantly under threat, even as artists remained completely dependent on the state.

Detail of Mohammed al Hamadany's *Night of Fire*

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Years later, Iraqi artists would tell *Artnet Magazine* correspondent Steve Mumford that their long-enduring commitment to abstraction stemmed, in part, from the fact that abstraction was a safe way to avoid censorship [see "Baghdad Journal," Jan. 11, 2003]. During this period, political art was mainly solicited from above, in the form of competitions and monument commissions.

Some measure of institutional stability in Iraqi society was achieved in the 1980s -- but only through the state of permanent mobilization yielded by the Iran-Iraq conflict. The U.S. was involved here as well. Jarred by the overthrow of the C.I.A.-backed Shah in Iran in '79, the U.S. openly armed and backed Hussein. At the same time, pursuing what would become its long-running policy of "dual containment" -- that neither of the two countries should be allowed to consolidate power in the region -- the U.S. also channeled arms to Iran behind the scenes through Oliver North's "Iran-Contra" shenanigans. The result was one of the bloodiest conflicts of modern times, with one million casualties. For art, predictably, this harsh reality resulted in an exodus of talent from Iraq. Though the government inaugurated ostentatious new projects like the Saddam Arts Center and sponsored a variety of shows and galleries, the experiments with conceptualism and new media that characterized the '80s internationally could not find much fertile soil inside Iraq.

Vast debts incurred during the war led to Saddam Hussein's aggression in Kuwait in 1992. The economic sanctions imposed by the U.S. for the rest of the decade, viewed by Iraqis as collective punishment, ravaged the country's infrastructure. Along with killing 500,000 children, the sanctions also managed to choke off what was left of the cultural circulation that had long been the lifeblood of the Iraqi art scene. While in the China of the '90s, Western capitalists were finding their way to the bohemian enclaves outside Beijing, nurturing the ironic postmodern painting styles that are today so beloved at auction, Iraqi artists faced massive demoralization and material hardship.

Yet still the "Eighties Generation" of artists, as those working during this period are called, persevered. In the account of Hana Mal Allah (herself one of Iraq's most accomplished contemporary artists and teachers), the period saw Iraqi artists turn further inwards towards their own Mesopotamian history, "a conscious return to the roots made more palpable existentially and creatively by the precarious realities that have continued to bear on every aspect of their lives," thus becoming more hermetic still. Mal Allah's essay, tellingly titled "Consciousness of Isolation," was published in 2001. In the final paragraph, one finds this sentence: "The artists of the eighties generation continue to draw vital inspiration and indeed comfort from the Iraqi Archeological Museum."

Then came the 2003 invasion. One can only imagine the immense heartache of these artists, who had endured conditions of bitter hardship, sustaining themselves with pride in their cultural history, when Baghdad's museums were ransacked amid the chaos of March. It is a theme today's artists return to again and again. The invading American forces tore into Baghdad with a careful plan to defend the Oil and Interior Ministries. They left the incalculably valuable treasures of Iraq's museums unguarded. The message was not lost on the locals.

A previous show of "Iraqi Contemporary Art" at Pomegranate featured the gentle, folk-art-style paintings of Amal Alwan, accompanied by a statement that gives some sense of the war's impact on artists: "Three days before the war of occupation of the US on Iraq, we left for Syria," Alwan writes. "When we returned to AlKarada our house had been looted. We began working to furnish it, but two months later it was destroyed by U.S. bombing. In 2004, we

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decided to leave Iraq. We went to Amman and applied for permission to enter the U.S. It was not granted, so we stayed in Amman." The cultural hemorrhage has been bitter. Even distinguished artists like Mal Allah, who stuck it out through the worst of the sanctions, have joined the ranks of the five million Iraqis displaced since the start of the war.

Mohammed al Hamadany, however, remains and, apparently, continues to paint in the most trying of circumstances. In 2008, an ethnically cleansed Baghdad has achieved some measure of precarious stability (though not peace) -- but only through having U.S. forces turn it into a city of concrete barriers that choke off circulation and vitality within the sprawling metropolis. An intrepid reporter for *New York* magazine managed to round up an Arabic translator and call Al Hamadany on his cell phone in Baghdad. This quote gives some sense of his situation: "Right now, while I am speaking to you, there are rockets going over my house! The situation is very, very bad. The infrastructure is zero. Electricity is zero. I work with all the difficulties to put food on the table for my children."

This despair is encrypted in the surface of *Night of Fire*. The artist's own brother, a Baathist minister of planning, was executed by Saddam Hussein in 1979. Like many Iraqis, he was happy to see the dictator fall. Yet today, every poll indicates that the majority of the country believes that life was better under the Hussein regime and views the American presence bitterly (in the present media climate, it is probably worth repeating the lede from this *Washington Post* article, Dec. 19, 2007: "Iraqis of all sectarian and ethnic groups believe that the U.S. military invasion is the primary root of the violent differences among them, and see the departure of 'occupying forces' as the key to national reconciliation, according to focus groups conducted for the U.S. military last month.") For his part, Al Hamadany deliberately depicts those toppling Hussein's monument as shrieking ghouls -- not as bringing liberation but as part of a continuum of despair. As the artist says of the scene, "the same people also clapped when the statue went up."

But even as the 25-panel painting captures its moment, reading it requires understanding it in relation to the complex history of Iraq. Al Hamadany's wounded modernist styling is connected to the long history of Iraqi artists and expressionism, with its overtones of a colonized people seeking self-determination and modernization. If in the New York of 2008, it seems a bit out of time, this has a two-fold significance. On the one hand, it speaks of the withdrawal entered into by Iraqi art under pressure from the instability and brutality of Iraqi politics. On the other, it's important to understand that what appears as conservatism is also a defiant choice. As Mal Allah writes, Baghdad-based artists of her generation have an attitude that "wavers between that of the inferiority complex" -- a consciousness of being cut off from the wider cultural dialogue of those who have fled the country -- "and that of the superiority complex," that is, pride at having made the decision to stay and defend their tradition.

Finally, however, *Night of Fire* is not just a belated echo of Western styles, but also reads as something of an elegy to Iraq's own avant-garde, with its unique triumphs and struggles. In the panels' rhythmic patterning, featuring boxy faces woven into architectural patterns, there seem to be echoes of the synthesis of Iraqi folk culture and ancient reliefs advocated by Jewad Selim and others. In the cascading Arabic characters reading "IRAQ," there is the memory of artists' like Shakir Hassan al Said and their exploration of calligraphy as a vehicle for a uniquely Arab modernism -- even if it is now shown as an emblem cut free, floating in the miasma of the post -invasion disaster. In the flotsam of the shattered Mona Lisa combined with fragments of Mesopotamian culture, there is the

memory of the cultural interpentration that nurtured the Iraqi scene, as well as the horror of its loss.

All this, and more, from Iraqi art history reverberates in the background of *Night of Fire*. In the end, however, given how intertwined the destiny of Iraq has been with the machinations of the West, it is not only Iraqi art history, but our art history as well. We have a lot to learn from it.

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Abdul Qadir al Rassam
A military encampment on the banks of the Euphrates
1936

Faiq Hassan
At the Market
1958
Collection of the Museum of Contemporary Arab Art, Doha

Jewad Selim
Monument to Freedom
1959-61

Shakir Hassan al-Said
Objective Contemplations
1984
Collection of Institute du Monde Arabe, Paris

Hana Mal Allah
The Looting of the Museum of Art
2003
Pomegranate Gallery