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Interview: Resurfacing art in Iraq Patrick Kane with Dia Al-Azzawi

PK: Among your works collected by the Barjeel Art Foundation is your painting *Mask of the Pretenders* (1966). What is your reflection on this painting now that time has passed and based on your life experience? What was its original meaning and how do you view it today?

DA: In 1968, I was working in an Islamic archaeological site on the outskirts of Karbala city. Once I came across an area named, locally, Al-Joff. It was at the edge of the desert, and as soon as you left this area you entered Karbala city. The contrast between this city with its lavish golden mosque and the desert with its vast emptiness inspired me in this painting, which I named in Arabic, Al-Joff (mask). The idea behind the work was to use Al-Joff, with its minimal landscape, as a mask to a city that is very rich with regard to its historical mythology and its importance in the Iraqi society.

How I view it today? It simply takes me back to the days when I was working in the field of archaeology; to the days when I was working with other artists doing our utmost to push the Iraqi art movement to a new border.

PK: In your experience, how has the institutional base and support for artists changed in Iraq? When you began, what were the options and paths for artists, art instructors or others to seek a career in the arts and how has that changed now for the generations that followed?

DA: My first exhibition was in 1964. At that time, we had no support at all from the government, the sole exception being that the Ministry of Information might, from time to time, buy one painting for the Museum of Modern Art. After the start of the 70s, the government started to become more open and two major projects followed: the *Monument of the Unknown Soldier* by Khalid Al-Rahhal, and the *Monument of the Martyr* by Ismail Fattah. The government also began to support and to finance a number of conferences and festivals of Arab art, and to instigate the opening of Iraqi cultural centres across the world. By the end of the 70s, the government had started to use art as a political tool. This led to a yearly exhibition that gradually became an alternative to that held by the Iraqi Artists Society.

PK: To what extent did the crises that ensued in Iraq from the late 1970s change the government's support for the arts?

DA: **Following the start of the war with Iran in the September 1980, the Iraqi government continued to support international exhibitions as a way to distract from the destruction and consequences of conflict. However, due to the length and cost of the war, by the mid-1980s it had become difficult to maintain this support. Cultural centres were forced to close, and support for artists dwindled.**

PK: The recent showing of your mural *Elegy to My Trapped City* (also known as *Ode to My City*) at Meem Gallery in Dubai allowed us to view again this powerful interpretation of the destruction of Iraq following the invasion by American forces in 2003. Is the form of the large painted mural intended to confront the viewer with a scale that presents more than the eye can take in all at once?

DA: **Because of the scale of the destruction, I felt that I had only one option, to create a large painting that could communicate the pain and loss of thousands of Iraqi people. It would also be better in creating a dialogue with the viewer, to focus their mind on the topics that I was dealing with.**

PK: For me, the use of black and white, the content and general form of *Ode to My City*, calls to mind Picasso's epic mural, *Guernica* (1937). Were you seeking to awaken the viewer's memory of this other work in drawing attention to the plight of victims of the Sabra and Shatilla massacre or of the destructive results of invasions to the residents of Baghdad?

DA: **My understanding is that many artists use black as a dominant colour, Picasso among them. During the 90s, when I was producing work about Iraq under the title *Bilad Al-Awad* (including *Ode to my City*) I started to restrain myself from using the colours that had previously dominated my paintings. This is out of respect to the thousands who lost their lives, but is also to remind the viewer of the plight of the victims, to focus their attention on the topics raised by the art.**

PK: In the *Art in Iraq* series you curated with Charles Pocock, one prevailing theme was your reflection on the changing role and utility of arts in relation to the state. Was there a loss of artistic autonomy as the state dominated production of art during the later period of Saddam Hussein's rule? What is the role of art in exile as a form of resistance?

DA: **The domination of the state produces a lot of a propagandist and shallow works; these are also either neutral toward current events, or representative of a very personal view, so that after many years it has become difficult to find serious works that can reflect the trauma and anxieties of Iraqi society. The real role of artists in exile is to prioritise change, to document these past traumas, but also to celebrate the endurance of the Iraqis.**

PK: What is your reaction to the widespread looting of Iraqi art, archaeological museums and sites that happened while Iraq was under American occupation?

DA: The occupation force disregards the humanity and heritage of Iraqis. It presents a view of itself, one of democracy and human rights that is at odds with its actions. What happened in the Abu Ghraib prison was a shameful act which many international artists have expressed their outrage against, from Marc Quinn, Richard Serra to Botero. I think that the Abu Ghraib images were shocking not simply because they were authorized and legitimized by the government, but also because they portray the real face of occupation.

PK: In the absence of institutions, how does the experience of art shift? What form and expression are found when there is less open support?

DA: Most cultural institutions in Arab countries are very weak and reflect the interests of their governments. However, since cultural organisations must work within the limitations of their society, any future development of the arts will have to emerge out of these factors.

PK: To what extent has the discussion of modern art in Iraq been too focused on Baghdad? How can we understand the artistic experience in other cities and regions?

DA: Baghdad is like Cairo or Damascus. It has always been the centre of cultural activity, and artistic experience from outside the capital has gone mostly unnoticed. This is because most governments in the Middle East place greater emphasis on the capital in all aspects of life.

PK: With all of the life experience you have gained, how has your philosophy of art changed?

DA: The most important thing is not to invest too heavily in the fashions of the moment. I would rather challenge myself through new works, which I feel the need to create.