



Julie Adnan: From the series *You May Go*, 2010-present. Courtesy of the artist and Ruya Foundation

OPINION

ART FOR SURVIVAL

Amidst the constant turmoil that plagues modern day Iraq, artists continue to create their art. Anna Brady reports on the Ruya Foundation's tireless support of Iraqi artists

“Iraq is complex,” says Tamara Chalabi, chair and co-founder of the Ruya Foundation for Contemporary Culture in Iraq (Ruya). “There’s very little public or private support for artists. But such dramatic times have huge potential for creativity and experimentation. The urgency and fear artists feel is palpable in their work.” An exponent of Iraq’s artistic community, she also believes in creativity as a salve to everyday trauma.

Through the blinkered eyes of the western art market, you’d be forgiven for thinking that the country’s meaningful artistic production stopped with mid-20th century modernists such as Jewad Selim (1919-1961) and Shakir Hassan Al-Said (1925-2004). After that, many believe conflict has killed off any notable artistic endeavour within the country. Since 2012, Ruya’s mission has been to disprove that theory. “The biggest challenge is access and communication,” says Chalabi. The market within the country is, admittedly, non-existent. But there are artists, albeit cut off from the rest of the world and

largely unable to sell their work. Transport is difficult, materials often in short supply. Artistic production tends to cluster around the branches of Baghdad University in Mosul, Basra, Sulaymaniyah in Kurdistan and Hilla in Babylon.

However, Baghdad remains the most prolific and with travel difficult, those in the provinces are often isolated. “There is a talented group of artists in Basra, but Mosul has been badly affected as many artists have fled ISIS control,” says Chalabi, “Sulaymaniyah is very vibrant and Hilla is also active, the most painterly. There’s a certain school there, like St. Ives in the UK, their palette inspired by the lush landscape.”

Jonathan Watkins, director of Birmingham’s Ikon Gallery in the UK, curated the Iraq National pavilion at the 2013 Venice Biennale. It was a “crash course in Iraqi art” and his first visit to the country dispelled the myth that conflict has rendered it culturally barren. “People told me there’s no point going as there’s nothing left, but I found the opposite. What is going on inside was touching, unpretentious” says Watkins. “So much work by Iraqi artists on the outside is very explicit in its political references. Yet what I found in Iraq was work about everyday life in the face of adversity.” Watkins made this more domestic, quotidian work the focus of the 2013 pavilion, which featured only artists still resident in Iraq. The ten names included an installation by WAMI (Yaseen Wami and Hashim Taach, a rare artistic partnership), the photographs of Jamal Penjweny and utterly contrasting paintings by Kadhim Nwir, all avant-garde, expressionism, and Bassim Al-Shaker, far more traditional, almost socialist realist.

Watkins’ impression is that the Iraqi artists living in the diaspora, looking in, produce more politically engaged works, informed by images of conflict that dominate worldwide news, “whereas those inside looking out have to get on with life.” Watkins and other museum professionals have for several years benefitted from the Ruya Artist Database, made publicly accessible in April. It’s a project without end, the aim twofold: to provide Iraqi artists with a platform to communicate their work internationally and introduce curators, museums and collectors to artists unknown outside of Iraq. With over 300

5 CONTEMPORARY IRAQI ARTISTS

artist portfolios currently listed, it spans painting, sculpture and ceramics to video art, installation art and digital art, an art history of Iraq that looks both back and forward.

In essence it confronts isolation, the frustration of many Iraqi artists. While the database provides a virtual shop window, Ruya is increasingly going further in physically putting their work in front of a western audience. In May, the foundation took a small booth at Art16 in London, its first at an international commercial art fair, providing rare market exposure for 12 artists. However, as a not-for-profit organisation, Ruya does not have the money to exhibit at lots of expensive, international art fairs. "So" says Chalabi, "it's essential, funding permitting, to be part of the Venice [Biennale]. And we're gaining traction."

The 2017 Venice Biennale will see the fourth Iraq pavilion, co-curated by Chalabi and Paolo Colombo, art adviser at the Istanbul Museum of Modern Art, around the loaded theme of the 'Archaic'. The poignant choice partly refers to the looting of Iraq's cultural sites, but also the dual interpretation of the term

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archaic, both in the reverential archaeological sense of the ancient period and the idea of something outdated, no longer in use. Colombo and Chalabi will mix ancient artefacts with works by Iraqi Modernists and new commissions, although precise details are yet to be announced. "The choice," says Chalabi, "is not nostalgic but rather reflects the West's binary understanding of Iraq. 'It's

either the biblical, Garden of Eden view or an image of terrorism, death and destruction going on today."

Alongside the *Invisible Beauty* exhibition in the 2015 Venice pavilion, curated by Philippe Van Cauteren, artistic director of S.M.A.K. (Museum for Contemporary Art) in Ghent, Ruya displayed a selection of over 500 drawings made by refugees in northern Iraq. They were the fruit of another Ruya campaign in December 2014, providing drawing materials to adult men and women in refugee camps of Shariya, Baharka and Mar Elia. Over five days, the foundation collected 546 works. A selection were displayed in Venice and Chinese artist Ai Weiwei chose a number for inclusion in a publication, *Traces of Survival*, also launched at the Biennale. "Why not?" is Chalabi's response to presenting the work of unknown refugees in the affluent environs of Venice, on equal footing with the heavyweight darlings of the international contemporary art world.

"We're not a big gallery like Hauser & Wirth or Gagosian, so we have to do things differently," she says. "Our aim is to open up a dialogue, communication and exchange with the rest of the world. Why shouldn't refugees be part of that?" Many question if such luxuries as art workshops are justified in the desperate environs of refugee camps. Of this Chalabi is well aware. "A lot of people think it would be more valuable to spend money on dealing directly with humanitarian issues, such as food, water and medical care."

Such things, says Chalabi, are well provided and when people are stuck for years in camps, having a creative outlet is hugely important.

"Creativity is, after all, a form of survival." ■

www.ruyafoundation.org

JAMAL PENJWENY
(b.1981, Iraq)
Photographer
Based in Sulaymaniyah,
Kurdistan

Shepherd-turned-photographer Penjweny is best known for his series of photographs *Saddam Is Here* (2009-10), in which various Iraqis, from surgeons to farmers, hold a photograph of Saddam's face in front of their own, standing in their place of work. Penjweny's work was featured in the 2013 Venice Biennale pavilion, curated by Jonathan Watkins and the following year Watkins gave him a solo show at Ikon Gallery in Birmingham, UK. A photo-journalist, his work has also appeared in *The New York Times* and *National Geographic*.

HAIDAR JABBAR
(b.1986, Iraq)
Painter

Based in Belgium
Trained at the Institute of Fine Arts, Baghdad, the young painter Jabbar made haunting portraits of his mother as she lay dying which were exhibited in homage to her in Baghdad's RCU (Respiratory Care Unit) in 2013.

His delicately poignant

watercolours of those killed by ISIS were exhibited at the Pavilion of Iraq at the 56th Venice Biennale (2015). Jabbar is currently living and working in Belgium with the aid of a grant from the Ruya Foundation.

HIWA K (b.1975, Iraq)
Multimedia
Based in Berlin

Well known on the international scene, the conceptual artist Hiwa K fled Iraq in 1996, travelling on foot across mountains, through Iran and Turkey to Europe. His work has reflected on various themes such as immigration and Kurdistan society today. He has been exhibited at such festivals as Manifesta VII (2008) and the Venice Biennale (2015) and at institutions including the Serpentine Gallery in London and New Museum in New York. Hiwa K will also be taking part in DOCUMENTA 14 in 2017.

SALAM ATTA SABRI
(b.1953, Iraq)
Painter and Ceramicist
Based in Iraq

Salam Atta Sabrit trained as a ceramicist and lived in the USA and Jordan for many years until returning to

Baghdad in 2005. There, between 2012-2015, he produced his letters from his Baghdad series, 300 drawings recording his struggle to go on creating amid a crumbling city. One hundred of these were exhibited in the Iraq Pavilion at the 2015 Venice Biennale. In 2017, he will take part in Ruya Foundation's Invisible Beauty exhibition at the Kunsthalle in Sao Paolo.

KADHIM NWIR (b.1967)
Painter

Based in Iraq
Nwir's multi-layered abstract canvases have a strange delicacy, all thin washes and spiky, graffiti-like drawings. After training at the College of Fine Arts, University of Baghdad, he was awarded with the first Jawad Salim Award for Painting in 1997. Nwir took part in the Pavilion of Iraq at the 55th Venice Biennale (2013) and the consecutive show at South London Gallery (2014). The precise meaning of much of his work is vague, reflecting on his own consciousness, yet he sometimes employs specific references through stenciled letters and numbers, such as "IRAQ," "2003."



Hussein Shabeeb
Still from *Pass* 2015
Courtesy of the
artist and the Ruya
Foundation