



مؤسسة رؤيا
RUYA FOUNDATION

Press Release
10 January 2017

**Venice Biennale exhibition 'Invisible Beauty' to be re-staged for the first time
in Iraq at the historic Erbil Citadel**

19 January – 16 February 2017

Private view: Thursday 19 January, 11 am – 1 pm

The Ruya Foundation is pleased to announce the first re-staging in Iraq of 'Invisible Beauty', the exhibition originally shown as the National Pavilion of Iraq at the 56th Venice Biennale, where it attracted over 20,000 visitors between May and November 2015. After transferring to S.M.A.K. (Museum for Contemporary Art) in Ghent in May 2016, the exhibition will be re-staged in the Erbil Citadel in January 2017 in an 18th-century merchant's dwelling, the Salih Chalabi House. The Erbil Citadel was placed on the UNESCO World Heritage List in 2014. The historic landmark is a walled fortified settlement that sits on top of an ovoid-shaped tell and dominates the Erbil cityscape. 'Invisible Beauty' will be the first time that an international exhibition has been held in the space and the show has been reformulated to suit its new environment, with all of the works displayed on locally crafted furniture.

'Invisible Beauty' is curated by Philippe Van Cauteren, Artistic Director of S.M.A.K. (Museum for Contemporary Art). It will feature five contemporary artists from across Iraq and the diaspora. The artists work in a range of media and the exhibition will include works that were produced specifically for the exhibition as well as works that were rediscovered after long periods of inattention. The exhibition will be accompanied by a display of over 500 drawings made by refugees in northern Iraq. World renowned contemporary artist Ai Weiwei selected a number of these drawings for *TRACES OF SURVIVAL: Drawings By Refugees in Iraq Selected by Ai Weiwei* (Mercatorfonds, 2015).

'Invisible Beauty' refers both to the unusual or unexpected subjects in the works that will be on display and to the inevitable invisibility of Iraqi artists on the international stage. The relationship of art to survival, record-keeping, therapy and beauty are among the many themes raised by the exhibition. The endlessly interpretable title is intended to reveal the many different ways of approaching art generated by a country that has been subjected to war, genocide, violations of human rights and, in the last three years, the rise of Isis. The systematic demolition of the cultural heritage of Iraq by Isis, seen in the destruction of centuries-old historical sites at Hatra, Nimrud and Nineveh and the events at the Mosul Museum, has made it more important than ever to focus on artists continuing to work in Iraq.

Curator Philippe Van Cauteren has said: 'Invisible Beauty is like a fragile membrane that registers the oscillations of an artistic practice permeated by the current condition of the country and the state of the arts.'

Chair and Co-Founder of the Ruya Foundation Tamara Chalabi has said: 'We are happy to be able to bring this international exhibition to Iraq, where the artists can be shown in their local environmental context. 'Invisible Beauty', restaged at the Erbil Citadel, will provide the public with a curatorial interpretation of local work that was previously unavailable.'

The artists in the exhibition will comprise two generations of Iraqi photographers, in the shape of Latif Al Ani (b. 1932) and Akam Shex Hadi (b. 1985), multimedia visual artist Rabab Ghazoul (b. 1970), ceramicist and sculptor Salam Atta Sabri (b. 1953) and painter Haider Jabbar (b. 1986). This selection was chosen by Van Cauteren following a journey to Iraq in 2014 that was organised and facilitated by Ruya and carried out in company with Tamara Chalabi, the Foundation's Chair and Co-founder. Van Cauteren and Chalabi also visited Iraqi artists working in the US, Turkey, Belgium and the UK.

Both Al Ani and Atta Sabri are based in Baghdad, whilst Shex Hadi is based in Sulaymaniya and Jabbar and Ghazoul work outside of Iraq, in Belgium and Wales respectively. A great number of Iraqi artists continue to practise an orthodox aesthetic tradition that is constrained by classical education methods. The artists in 'Invisible Beauty' represent a break from these traditional constraints, both in terms of style and media and in terms of wider social concerns such as gender and age. All of the artists relate to the political situation of Iraq in their work, negotiating between ethics and aesthetics, social concerns and artistic values. With the artists' ranging ages, the exhibition will in some ways represent a mental and emotional history of Iraq and will seek to ask what the word 'contemporary' can mean for a nation that lacks a well-developed cultural infrastructure.

TRACES OF SURVIVAL: Drawings By Refugees in Iraq Selected by Ai Weiwei

The exhibition will be accompanied by a display of drawings made by refugees in northern Iraq. In December 2014 Ruya launched a campaign to provide drawing materials to adult men and women in refugee camps. Ruya visited Camp Shariya, Camp Baharka and Mar Elia Camp and over five days the Foundation collected 546 submissions, including drawings, poetry and prose. A selection of these drawings will be on display, with all 546 being shown by way of a rolling slideshow. A number of the images were selected by Ai Weiwei for a major publication, *TRACES OF SURVIVAL: Drawings by Refugees in Iraq selected by Ai Weiwei* (Mercatorfonds, 2015). Proceeds from the book go back to those who created the content. The Ruya Foundation has since returned to Camp Shariya to roll out the project on a regular basis, now known as CREATIVITY FOR SURVIVAL.

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Notes to Editors:

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Exhibition dates: 19 January – 16 February 2017

Private View: 19 January 2017, 11 am – 1 pm

Opening Times: 9.30 am – 6.30 pm (except 19 January, 2 pm – 5 pm)

Address: Erbil Citadel, Historic Centre Downtown Erbil, Erbil Iraq

About the Ruya Foundation

The Ruya Foundation is an Iraqi registered non-profit, non-governmental organisation founded in 2012 with the aim of aiding and enriching culture in Iraq, and building cultural bridges with the world. Ruya's initial goal is to promote culture in Iraq at a time when

priorities are focused elsewhere, and to build a platform that will enable Iraqis in the arts, the young in particular, to benefit from and participate in international events. In addition to supporting local projects, its aim is to create a network of intercultural events that can contribute to the development of civil society in Iraq.

Ruya initiates and commissions creative projects in the visual, audiovisual and performing arts. Ruya was the commissioner of the National Pavilion of Iraq for the 55th and 56th Venice Biennales in May 2013 and May 2015. It will once again commission the Pavilion for the 57th edition, in which Paolo Colombo and Tamara Chalabi will co-curate an exhibition entitled 'Archaic'. For the 2015 Pavilion Ruya collaborated with international artist Ai Weiwei on a major publication *Traces of Survival: Drawings by refugees in Iraq selected by Ai Weiwei* (Mercatorfonds, 2015). In March 2015 Ruya staged the first drama therapy project in Baghdad, supported by the Prince Claus Fund. In April 2016 Ruya launched the first publically accessible online database of contemporary Iraqi artists, which can be found at www.ruyafoundation.org/en/artists. In addition, the Ruya website is a live platform for Iraqi art. Interviews with emerging and established artists both in Iraq and the diaspora are published regularly to encourage dialogue, the exchange of ideas and promote the possibility of collaboration.

www.ruyafoundation.org

About Erbil Citadel

Erbil Citadel is a UNESCO World Heritage Site. It is a fortified settlement on top of an imposing ovoid-shaped tell (a hill created by many generations of people living and rebuilding on the same spot) in the Kurdistan region, Erbil Governorate. A continuous wall of tall 19th-century façades still conveys the visual impression of an impregnable fortress, dominating the city of Erbil. The citadel features a peculiar fan-like pattern dating back to Erbil's late Ottoman phase. Written and iconographic historical records document the antiquity of settlement on the site – Erbil corresponds to ancient Arbela, an important Assyrian political and religious centre – while archaeological finds and investigations suggest that the mound conceals the levels and remains of previous settlements.

<http://whc.unesco.org>

About the artists:

Latif Al Ani (b. 1932) is considered the founding father of Iraqi photography. He produced most of his sizeable oeuvre between the end of the 1950s and the late 1970s, until it became impossible to take photographs in public because of the increasingly authoritarian environment of the Saddam Hussein regime and the Iran-Iraq war. Al Ani's documentary photography provides a broad picture of daily life in Iraq at that time and depicts an aspect of Iraqi society that has now been lost. Al Ani started his career as a photographer for the Iraqi Petroleum Company and most of the pictures he took before 1958 are still in the possession of a new subsidiary of the company. Over the course of his career Al Ani had solo exhibitions throughout the Middle East and was also active in Europe and the United States. His work displays his interest in archaeology and modern life, as well as architecture, where the two meet. This dualistic approach unites both modernising trends and age-old traditions as themes in Al Ani's work. In December 2015 Al Ani was made a Prince Claus Laureate at a ceremony in Amsterdam in honour of his 'dedicated and meticulous record of everyday life between the 1950s and the 1970s'.

Salam Atta Sabri (b. 1953) is a lecturer at the Folkloric Art Institute in Baghdad. From 2010 to 2015 he was the director of the National Museum of Modern Art in Baghdad, which lost 75% of its collection to looters in 2003. Atta Sabri returned to Baghdad in 2005 after living in the US and Jordan for 16 years and his work deals directly

with the experience of returning to a country so changed by conflict. Despite working in the arts all of his life and initially training as a ceramicist, Atta Sabri kept all of his own works of draughtsmanship (some 300 drawings) out of the public eye until exhibiting a selection of them in the Iraq Pavilion at the 56th Venice Biennale, 2015. Atta Sabri has since taken part in the major group show 'The Bottom Line' (2015) at S.M.A.K., Ghent and 'A Line is a Line is a Line' (2015) at CC Strombeek, Grimbergen. In June he exhibited at ALTERNATIVA 2016, the international visual arts festival in Gdansk, Poland.

Rabab Ghazoul (b. 1970) is a visual artist interested in exploring the performative and the conversational, in the context of how we negotiate the political. She works within and beyond the gallery, often drawing on participatory processes to explore the nuance of private and public affiliation – how we navigate, consciously or otherwise, the politics around us. Born in Iraq but having lived in the UK since 1979, Ghazoul's geographical relationship with her birthplace continues to play an important part in her work. She creates videos, installations, text-based works and performances, as well as interventions and encounters within public space. Dialogue informs much of her work and she also makes frequent use of text, either archival, sourced, written, or generated. Ghazoul has had solo exhibitions at g39 and Chapter Arts Centre in Cardiff and has taken part in a number of international group exhibitions. She works as a socially engaged artist, campaigner and social activist, developing grassroots projects that challenge cultural and economic inequity.

Haider Jabbar (b. 1986) started his career in film, where he was an art director on short films and feature films. He studied a traditional art course at the Baghdad Institute of Fine Arts but succeeded in evading the restrictions of the prescribed canon. Jabbar considers himself a member of a generation whose lives have been pointlessly devastated by decades of conflict and as a result his paintings have a very intimate and direct style. He has had two solo exhibitions in Baghdad but recently took up residence in Belgium, after travelling to Europe from Baghdad in the summer of 2015, following the Venice Biennale. He is continuing to develop his artistic career in Belgium and was Artist-in-Residence at S.M.A.K. (Museum for Contemporary Art), Ghent from May to September 2016.

Akam Shex Hadi (b. 1985) is a photographer from Sulaymaniya. He stages his photographs, but they are nevertheless markedly documentary in nature. Shex Hadi has taken part in several festivals in Asia and the Middle East, including the Chobi Mela International Photography Festival in Bangladesh in 2013. He has also won several prizes for his work, including the T.A.W. Larsa Prize for Creative Photographers. Shex Hadi has continued to collaborate with Ruya on its CREATIVITY FOR SURVIVAL programme in the refugee camps of northern Iraq. His work is also currently part of a major group exhibition, 'Uncertain States: Artistic Strategies in States of Emergency' at the Akademie der Künste, Berlin, running until 15 January 2017.