



Press Release

Ruya Foundation announces artists for National Pavilion of Iraq 2017 and a collaboration with Francis Alÿs

The Ruya Foundation is pleased to announce the participating artists for the National Pavilion of Iraq at the 57th Venice Biennale in May 2017. The exhibition, 'Archaic', will display the work of eight Modern and contemporary Iraqi artists in dialogue with ancient Iraqi artefacts. It will also include a new commission by internationally acclaimed Belgian-born artist Francis Alÿs on the subject of war and the artist.

The exhibition will be curated by Tamara Chalabi, Chair and Co-Founder of the Ruya Foundation, and Paolo Colombo, Art Adviser at the Istanbul Museum of Modern Art. It will interrogate the notion of the 'archaic', which has a dual meaning whereby it can simultaneously refer to an ancient cultural heritage and a fragile contemporary political entity. The exhibition will draw out this duality and explore the opportunities and restrictions presented to artists in Iraq by the country's momentous ancient inheritance.

The exhibition will present works by Iraqi artists living in both Iraq and the diaspora. Luay Fadhil (b. 1982) is based in Baghdad, Sherko Abbas (b. 1978) and Sakar Sleman (b. 1979) are based in Sulaymaniya, and Ali Arkady (b. 1982) is based in Khanaqin. Both Sadik Kwaish Alfraji (b. 1960) and Nadine Hattom (b. 1980) are Baghdad-born but are now based in the Netherlands and Germany respectively. The two Modern artists represented in the exhibition will be Jawad Salim (1919–1961), widely considered the most influential artist of the Iraqi Modern period, and Shaker Hassan Al Said (1925–2004), his pupil and friend.

Of the six living artists, five have been commissioned by Ruya to create new work for the Pavilion. A great number of artists working in Iraq today continue to abide by an orthodox aesthetic tradition that has been limited by mid-century education trends and the lack of cultural exchange in Iraq in recent decades. All of the Ruya Foundation's work seeks to nurture and promote artists who move beyond these paradigms and the selection of contemporary artists for the Pavilion reflects that mission. Hattom and Sleman will both present installation work, Abbas, Alfraji and Fadhil will present video work and Arkady will present photography.

Each of their Pavilion works will engage with Iraq's heritage and history, creating different resonances with the archaic theme. These themes will interplay with the two Modern Iraqi artists, who were amongst the first to strive for a new kind of Iraqi art in the 20th century that would both engage with the European avant-garde and create a distinctly Iraqi vernacular responding to the country's unique ancient heritage.

Francis Alÿs' (b. 1959) commission will accompany the main exhibition and has been the product of a longstanding dialogue between the artist and the Ruya Foundation. In early 2016 Ruya organised a visit for the artist to Baghdad and the refugee camps in northern

Iraq. He followed this visit with another expedition in October 2016 in which he was embedded with a Kurdish battalion on the Mosul frontline, during the ongoing campaign to liberate Mosul. The main line of enquiry for his new work will be the role of the artist in war, whilst he will also examine themes of nomadism. Alÿs was born in Antwerp, Belgium and is now based in Mexico City.

Further details of the artist commissions, along with information about the ancient artefacts on display, will be announced in 2017.

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Notes to Editors

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The 57th Venice Biennale will run 13 May – 26 November 2017 with previews Thursday 10 May – Friday 12 May 2017.

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. It is also committed to nurturing a multicultural dialogue through the arts.

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 56th and 55th Venice Biennales in May 2013 and May 2015. Ruya collaborated with international artist Ai Weiwei on a major publication *Traces of Survival: Drawings by refugees in Iraq selected by Ai Weiwei* (2015). In March 2015 Ruya launched 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 those based in the diaspora are published regularly to encourage dialogue, the exchange of ideas and promote the possibility of collaboration.

www.ruyafoundation.org