



Press Release

Iraq Museum loans ancient and retrieved artefacts for the first time for the Iraq Pavilion at the 57th Venice Biennale

The Ruya Foundation is pleased to announce further details for the National Pavilion of Iraq at the 57th Venice Biennale in May 2017. The exhibition, 'Archaic', will show the work of eight Modern and contemporary Iraqi artists in dialogue with 40 ancient Iraqi artefacts drawn from the Iraq Museum and spanning six millennia, from the Neolithic Age to the Neo-Babylonian Period. Most of these objects have never left Iraq, excluding a few that were recently recovered after the 2003 looting of the Museum. The exhibition will also be accompanied by a new commission by internationally acclaimed Belgian-born artist Francis Alÿs on the subject of war and the artist. 'Archaic' will be the third occasion on which the Ruya Foundation has commissioned the National Pavilion of Iraq at Venice.

The tension in the term 'Archaic' is drawn from its multivalent references to the ancient and primordial, as well as what is currently out of use. The exhibition will draw out this tension to emphasise its particular relevance to Iraq, a country whose existing political, administrative, social and economic reality is arguably as 'archaic' as its ancient heritage. The exhibition will be co-curated by Tamara Chalabi (Chair and Co-Founder of the Ruya Foundation) and Paolo Colombo (Art Adviser at the Istanbul Museum of Modern Art). The curators have said:

"In exploring Iraq's artistic heritage from the Neolithic Age to the present, 'Archaic' will also explore the different ways in which Iraq's ancient past has affected its Modern and contemporary visual languages, examining the opportunities and restrictions presented to the nation by its immense ancient inheritance, in the context of today's fragile reality."

There will be 40 ancient objects on display, from as far back as the Halaf Period (6,100–5,100 BCE) and as far forward as the Neo-Babylonian Period (635–539 BCE). Artefacts in stone, glass and clay will incorporate cylinder and stamp seals, cuneiform tablets, medical objects, a musical instrument and figurines of animals, deities, people and boats, as well as everyday objects such as jugs, sieves and toys. A number of objects were returned to the Museum from the Netherlands via an Interpol directive in 2010. They include a Babylonian stone weight measure in the shape of a dove and an exquisite clay figurine depicting what is presumed to be a fertility goddess dating from around 5,000 BCE. The artefact selection was made by co-curator Tamara Chalabi in collaboration with Qais Hussein Rashid, the Director of the Department of Antiquities at the Iraq Museum, his team and archaeologist Lamia Gailani Werr.

Other intriguing highlights will include a contract of adoption from the Babylonian Period, which is remarkable for the fact that both tablet and envelope have remained intact together, as well as decorative stamps used by each witness to sign their names. Also displayed will be a distinctive cylinder seal from the Akkadian Period depicting three parallel scenes from *Gilgamesh* and a circular clay school text from the Babylonian Period that was used to teach writing.

The ancient artefacts will allow the exhibition to examine the archaic as a signifier for universal themes that are a precursor to any civilization. The curators have identified seven such themes and each contemporary work can be seen through the prism of one of them. They are water, earth, the hunt, writing, music, conflict and exodus. All works will be displayed in custom-designed vitrines, mirroring the museum-style display associated with the exhibition of antiquities, as well as the land-mapping practices of archaeologists. They will also mean that each presentation can be read as an individual chapter as well as in the wider context of 'Archaic'. The exhibition space – a historically listed, disused library, added during a 19th-century neo-gothic expansion of the Palazzo – will also echo the 'archaic' theme.

The work of eight Iraqi artists will be on display. Of the six living artists, five will create new work for the Pavilion. Many 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 as such installation, video and photography will be represented alongside more traditional media such as painting and sculpture. Works by contemporary artists Sherko Abbas (b. 1978), Sadik Kwaish Alfraji (b. 1960), Ali Arkady (b. 1980), Luay Fadhil (b. 1982), Nadine Hattom (b. 1980) and Sakar Sleman (b. 1979) will interplay with works by two Modern Iraqi artists, Jewad Selim (1919–1961) and Shakir Hassan Al Said (1925–2004). As pioneers of the Iraqi Modern tradition, Selim and Al Said 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.

Painter and sculptor Jewad Selim is widely recognised as the father of Iraqi Modern art and was highly influential across the region as a whole. He was one of the first Iraqi artists to study fine art in Europe and his experience at the Slade School of Fine Art in 1930s London meant that he combined Modern European influences with initial artistic training at the Iraq Museum. Selim wanted to create a new vernacular language for Iraq and is known for paintings that combined abstract forms with Mesopotamian iconography, as well as the Liberty Monument in Baghdad, which celebrates the 1958 revolution. Two important Selim works will be shown, including *The Hen Seller* (1951), which has not been displayed in public since its first showing in Iraq in the 1950s.

Shakir Hassan Al Said was a painter, sculptor and writer and a student of Selim's. He too was deeply concerned with finding a new language for Iraqi art and together the pair established the Baghdad Modern Art Group in 1951. This group reflected a growing nationalist and anti-colonial sentiment. A number of Al Said's paintings from the 1960s will be on display. He developed an intense interest in the divine and turned towards Sufism, abstraction and a fascination with the Arabic script. It is noteworthy that in 2003, alongside the lootings at the Iraq Museum, the Saddam Art Centre was also looted and the Selim and Al Said galleries emptied. This act represented a violation of uniquely Iraqi heritage and it is telling that international notice of the lootings has focused on Mesopotamian objects, which can be said to be items of world heritage.

The exhibition will display the connection between contemporary and Modern art in Iraq, showing how that connection can further elucidate the relationship of both to the archaic. Both Nadine Hattom and Sakar Sleman will present new installation works. Hattom's will take its point of departure as her own family heritage and the significance of water, while Sleman's will look at the significance of the earth and its connection to people and to herself. Hattom is an Iraqi-Australian artist, based in Berlin. Her practice is based in photography and sculpture and brings together everyday objects to reflect on language, identity and representation. Her Pavilion commission will explore the traditions of the Mandaean community, a religious group from southern Iraq to which her family belongs. The Mandaeans particularly revere John the Baptist and many of their cultural practices relate to water. Hattom's installation will explore this theme through objects that evoke the memories of her father and mother as well as the collective Mandaean memory. They will include photographs from a family album, inks and clay.

Sakar Sleman's installation will use soil and stone from the Kurdish mountains near her home to create a diorama of the world according to the artist. It will serve as a meditation on nature, and her relationship to it, as the origin of mankind. The abstractness of Sleman's work, seen in her recurring references to the circular shape, is also linked to her preoccupation with women and their unheard voices in society. Sleman is based in Kurdistan and her work often combines text and slogans with land installation and found objects to focus on political and socio-cultural day-to-day life in Iraq.

Three of the contemporary artists will present film works, one focusing on the transmission of historical information in Iraq, another engaged with traditional writing practices and the other focused on music and travel in Iraq. Sadik Kwaish Alfraji creates artist books and animations. His Pavilion work will combine drawings with an animation that interrogates the way in which Iraqi school text books relay the narratives of the country's past. Figures will walk through the ages and across manuscripts in the film, which will also touch upon fable, archaeology, religious lore and the hunt. Alfraji left Iraq in the 1990s after remaining in the country and producing work throughout the Iran-Iraq War. He is now

based in the Netherlands and though greatly influenced by the European tradition, particularly the German Expressionists, his work retains a focus on Iraq.

By contrast, Luay Fadhil's film will be concerned with a different Iraqi tradition for the transmission of written information, an archaic practice that continues to exist in Baghdad today. Scribes set up makeshift offices outside public buildings to draw up official documents for visitors and passers-by. The film will focus on a man who visits one of these scribes daily in an attempt to communicate with his recently deceased wife, uniting Iraq's present with its ancient history as the birthplace of writing. Fadhil is based in Baghdad and began working in film in 2009. Since then he has won awards at the Gulf Film Festival and the Dubai International Film Festival, amongst others.

Sherko Abbas is a multimedia artist who works in video, performance, text and installation. Abbas is based in Sulamaniya but the principal footage for his installation was taken by his sister, a cellist in the Iraqi National Orchestra, on the occasion of its visit to the Kennedy Centre in Washington in December 2003. A split-screen presentation will display rehearsal footage in conjunction with scenes depicting the travel methods required to reach the United States. Numerous methods were used for the journey, including the use of military planes, addressing ideas around nomadism. The vitrine installation will also include sheet music, programmes and other historical records of this cultural exchange, which took place at a time that was particularly pertinent to relations between the two countries. The US invasion of Iraq had taken place in March of that year.

The final contemporary artist in the selection is Ali Arkady, a photojournalist who has been reporting since 2010 on the volatile political realities of Iraq and has reported regularly from the front line since the 2014 ISIS attacks. A collection of his latest works from the ongoing Mosul campaign against ISIS will be on display, divided into three sections: images depicting how war affects soldiers, images depicting how war affects the land and images depicting how war affects civilians, focusing particularly on migration and thus being especially pertinent to the ongoing refugee crisis.

Francis Alÿs

'Archaic' will be accompanied by a new project by artist Francis Alÿs, who was born in Antwerp and is based in Mexico City. In February 2016 Alÿs undertook a trip to Iraq facilitated by the Ruya Foundation in which he visited refugee camps in the north of the country. He followed this with an extraordinary visit in November 2016 to the Mosul front line in the company of a Kurdish battalion, during the Liberation of Mosul offensive. The main line of enquiry for this new installation will be the role of the artist in war. The work will incorporate drawings, paintings, photographs and notes from Alÿs' experience in Mosul. A video work will feature people on the move, against a backdrop of coalition bombing, continuing an investigation into the artist's role as witness that was instigated during Alÿs' first trip to Iraq and, in particular, his interactions with children in refugee camps.

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Notes to Editors

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About the National Pavilion of Iraq

Curators: Tamara Chalabi and Paolo Colombo
Commissioner: Ruya Foundation
Local commissioner: Vittorio Urbani

The exhibition will be housed in the third floor of:
Palazzo Cavalli-Franchetti, Grand Canal, San Marco 2847, Venice
Nearest Vaporetto: Accademia (the palazzo is on the other side of the bridge)
Opening hours: 10am – 6pm every day except Mondays
Press preview: Wednesday 10 May, 11am – 1pm

The exhibition will be accompanied by a catalogue published by Mousse, including essays by Zainab al-Bahrani, Venetia Porter, Nada Shabout and Robert Storr, amongst others.

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, Ruya's 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. The 2015 Pavilion exhibition, 'Invisible Beauty', transferred to S.M.A.K. (Museum for Contemporary Art), Ghent (2016) and the Erbil Citadel, Iraq (2017). 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 2015 Ruya launched the first drama therapy project in Baghdad, supported by the Prince Claus Fund, and in 2016 it 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. In January 2017 Ruya launched a publishing education initiative, Ruya Notebooks.

www.ruyafoundation.org

About the curators:

Tamara Chalabi was born in Beirut to Lebanese and Iraqi parents. She studied at Cambridge and later at Harvard where she earned a PhD in History and the Middle East. She specialises in contemporary Middle Eastern art and culture. Her first book *The Shi'is of Jabal 'Amil and the New Lebanon: 1918-1943* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2006) was a pioneering study of politics and culture at a crucial period of change in Lebanon. *Late for Tea at the Deer Palace; the Lost Dreams of my Iraqi Family* (HarperCollins, 2010) uncovered the lives of four generations of Chalabi's family at the forefront of Iraqi political life. In 2012, Chalabi co-founded the Ruya Foundation with Shwan Taha and Reem Shather-Kubba. As Chair of Ruya, Chalabi steers the Foundation's main programme and she was closely involved with the mounting of the last two Iraq pavilions at the Venice Biennale.

Paolo Colombo has been Art Advisor at the Istanbul Museum of Modern Art since 2008 and during this time he has also been a curator for the 2nd Mardin Biennial in 2012 and the 3rd Thessaloniki Biennale in 2011. From 2001 to 2007 Colombo was Curator of the Museo Nazionale delle Arti del XXI Secolo (MAXXI) in Rome. Before that he was Director of the Centre d'Art Contemporain in Geneva for over 10 years and in 1999 he curated the 6th Istanbul Biennial. Colombo has worked on exhibitions including 'Ed Ruscha MixMaster' at Pinacoteca Giovanni e Marella Agnelli, Turin (2015); 'In Praise of Shadows' at the Irish Museum of Modern Art, Dublin, which toured to the Istanbul Museum of Modern Art, Turkey and the Benaki Museum, Athens (2009); and 'Francis Alÿs' at MAXXI, Rome (2003). Colombo was Associate Producer for the award-winning films *The Edge of Heaven* (2007) and *Soul Kitchen* (2009).

About the artists:

Sherko Abbas (b. 1978, Sulaymaniya) is a multimedia artist who lives and works in Sulaymaniya, Iraq. Abbas works with video, performance, text and found objects and in 2013 he was awarded a scholarship from the Kurdistan Regional Government to pursue an MFA at the University of Goldsmiths, London. This funding was cut short by the conflict with ISIS in 2014 so despite completing his degree Abbas has yet to receive his MFA. Abbas' work has appeared in various group shows internationally including 'Estrangement' at The Showroom, London (2012); 'Dire Straits' at

Import/Export Studio, Kassel (2012); 'Freedom at the Barricades?' at the Vaxjö Konsthall, Sweden (2014); and Alternativa 2015 in Gdansk, Poland.

Sadik Kwaish Alfraji (b. 1960, Baghdad) is a leading contemporary artist from Iraq's diaspora. Alfraji left Iraq in the 1990s and fled to Amman, Jordan before eventually settling in the Netherlands, where he now lives and works in Amersfoort. Trained as a painter and printmaker, he also creates animations and artist books. During the Iran-Iraq War (1980-1988), Alfraji produced a series of etchings of patients at Al-Shamma'iya Psychiatric Hospital in Baghdad. His recent work is dominated by the presence of an oversized, melancholy silhouette. Alfraji has exhibited his work internationally and recent solo exhibitions include 'Biography of a Head' at the Beirut Exhibition Centre, Lebanon (2014) and 'Ali's Boat' at the Red Star Line Museum, Antwerp (2016). His work has been selected for major group exhibitions including 'Who Said Tomorrow Doesn't Exist' at the TRIO Biennial, Rio de Janeiro (2015); 'From the Figurative to the Abstract: Modern Art from the Arab World' at the British Museum, London (2015); and 'Islamic Art Now: Contemporary Art from the Middle East' at LACMA, Los Angeles (2015). The animation *Ali's Boat* (2014), an elegy to Alfraji's homeland, was acquired by the British Museum.

Francis Alÿs (b. 1959, Antwerp) lives and works in Mexico City. His multifaceted projects – including public actions, installations, video, paintings and drawings – have involved traveling the longest possible route between locations in Mexico and the United States; filming his efforts to enter the centre of a tornado; and carrying a leaking can of paint along the contested Israel/Palestine border. The artist's work was the subject of a major solo museum exhibition, *A Story of Negotiation*, from 2015 to 2017, at Museo Tamayo Arte Contemporáneo, Mexico City; Museo de Arte Latinoamericano de Buenos Aires (MALBA) - Fundación Costantini, Buenos Aires; Museo Nacional de Bellas Artes de la Habana, Havana; and Art Gallery of Ontario in Toronto. Over the past decade, Alÿs has had solo exhibitions at venues including the Museum of Contemporary Art, Tokyo, in 2013; Tate Modern, London, in 2010 (which travelled to Wiels Centre d'Art Contemporain, Brussels and The Museum of Modern Art, New York and MoMA PS1, New York); Hammer Museum, Los Angeles (2007); and Portikus, Frankfurt (2006). Alÿs' work can be found in public collections worldwide, including the 21st Century Museum of Contemporary Art, Kanazawa, Japan; Musée d'Art Moderne de la Ville de Paris; The Museum of Modern Art, New York; Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York; Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam; and Tate, London.

Ali Arkady (b. 1980, Khanaqin) is a photographer and filmmaker and became a photojournalist in 2010. Arkady's work has been published by international news outlets including *CNN*, *The Washington Post* and the *Guardian*. He has documented, amongst other incidences, the daily life of a maimed Iraqi soldier, the youth-led arts scene in Baghdad and the wave of protests against government corruption in Baghdad in 2015. After ISIS took control of vast areas of northern Iraq in 2014, Arkady began reporting regularly from the frontline. He was embedded with the Iraqi Security Forces in the recent operations to expel ISIS from Mosul. In 2015 and 2016, he led a UNHCR community project, teaching photography to Yazidi women in Iraq's refugee camps.

Luay Fadhil (b. 1982, Baghdad) is a film-maker based in Baghdad. After training as a construction engineer, Fadhil began working as a film director in 2009. He has since directed seven short films including *Lipstick* (2012), about sex education classes at a boy's high school in Baghdad, which won the Gold Award at the Festival International du Film Oriental de Genève 2014. His most recent film *Cotton* (2013), about a young girl living in Najaf, a holy city for Shi'a Muslims, won Best Director and Best Script for Short Films at the Gulf Film Festival 2014, and Best Director at the Dubai International Film Festival 2014 and the Erbil Film Festival 2014.

Nadine Hattom (b. 1980, Baghdad) is an Iraqi-Australian visual artist who lives and works in Berlin, Germany. Hattom's practice is based in photography and sculpture. The artist often brings together landscape images and everyday objects as a reflection on language, the multiplicity of identity and notions of representation. Recent work includes 'Shadows' (2016), in which Hattom digitally removed soldiers from freely available military landscape photographs of Iraq taken during Operation Iraqi Freedom. 'Mayssa and Fethiya' (2014) was a project depicting the lives of two Syrian women living in Jordan near the Syrian border. Hattom has exhibited her work internationally in exhibitions including 'Crossing Over' at Artefatto 2014, Trieste; 'Other Shadows Embrace Mountains' at Grosser

Wasserspeicher, Berlin; and 'Traces' at the Marrakech Biennale 2016. Hattom has received grants from the Cultural Affairs division of the Berlin Senate Chancellery in 2013 and the ifa (Institute for Foreign Relations), Berlin in 2015.

Shakir Hassan Al Said (1925–2004) was an Iraqi painter, sculptor and writer. Born in Baghdad, Al Said was an early pioneer of modern Iraqi art. He studied Social Sciences at the Higher Institute of Teachers in Baghdad, before training as a painter at the Institute of Fine Arts in Baghdad. There he learnt from the school's founder, Jewad Selim. Al Said eventually moved to Paris to pursue further studies at the Académie Julien, the Ecole des Arts Décoratifs and the Ecole Supérieure des Beaux-Arts. Al Said co-founded the Baghdad Modern Art Group in 1951 with Jewad Selim and Jabra Ibrahim Jabra. He wrote their manifesto, which highlighted their commitment to creating a modern and specifically Iraqi art. In the beginning of the 1960s Al Said turned towards Sufism and abstraction, producing large wall paintings with Arabic lettering. In 1971 he founded the One Dimension Group, which emphasised the formal qualities of the Arabic script as a motif for making artworks. He died in Baghdad in 2004.

Jewad Selim (1919–1961) is widely regarded by art historians as a pioneer of Modern Iraqi Art. Born in Ankara, Turkey, Selim was one of the first Iraqi artists to study at fine arts institutions in Europe in the 1930s, under scholarships granted by the Iraqi government. He studied in Paris (1938–1939) and Rome (1939–1940) but the outbreak of war in Europe forced him to return to Iraq. There he founded the Institute of Fine Arts in Baghdad. In 1946 Selim returned to his studies at the Slade School of Art in London (1946–1949). Upon his return to Iraq, Selim became committed to the idea of producing a modern Iraqi art and visual culture. He drew on the artistic movements that he had encountered in Europe, while also developing motifs from ancient Mesopotamian civilisations and the Islamic arts. With his student and colleague Shakir Hassan Al Said and the artist Jabra Ibrahim Jabra, Selim co-founded the Baghdad Modern Art Group in 1951. Selim was commissioned to produce the Liberty Monument, commemorating the 1958 Revolution, which is one of Baghdad's most iconic landmarks. Selim died in Baghdad in 1961.

Sakar Sleman (b. 1979, Sulaymaniya) is a painter and installation artist who lives and works in Sulaymaniya. Her work focuses on political, religious and day-to-day issues in Iraqi society and women in particular. She often uses texts and short slogans, combined with installation and found objects. In the installation *Read* (2016), Sleman used books to explore the role of religion and plurality in Iraq in a period of religious fanaticism. Many of Sleman's installations have been site-specific, such as her land art project on the Goyzha and Azmar Mountains above Sulaymaniya in 2014, and the exhibition 'Two Generations' in the yard of the Amna Suraka Museum, an old prison where people were tortured and killed under Saddam's regime. Sleman has also worked on projects in refugee and IDP camps in northern Iraq. Her exhibition 'Mass Migrations' with the Sardam Gallery in Sulaymaniya was mounted in collaboration with Syrian refugees from the Arbad refugee camp. In 2015 she worked with Yazidi women who had been internally displaced on a street art project.