



Press Release  
22 February 2019

**Ruya Foundation announces Serwan Baran will represent Iraq  
at the 58th Venice Biennale**

The Ruya Foundation is delighted to announce that Serwan Baran will represent Iraq at the 58th Venice Biennale, presenting a solo exhibition which will run from 11 May to 24 November 2019. This will be the fourth National Pavilion of Iraq commissioned by the Ruya Foundation and follows the critical success of 'Archaic' which Ruya commissioned for the 57th edition of the Biennale in 2017. This is the first time Iraq will be represented by a solo artist at the Biennale.

Iraqi-Kurdish artist Serwan Baran was born in Baghdad in 1968, and is considered part of the 'new generation' of Iraqi painters. He has lived through over 40 years of war in his country and was conscripted during conflicts in the 1980s and 1990s. During his time as a soldier and war artist, Baran was obligated to record the victories of the Iraqi army for government propaganda. His work became more expressionist when he began addressing his own military experience by deconstructing images of generals in grotesque, figural abstractions. Baran describes this artistic period as an attempt to silence "the nightmare inside me".

The large-scale and site-specific works of 'Fatherland' will invoke the feeling of a war zone upon entering, in line with Baran's signature dark and atmospheric style. The exhibition will feature a monumental acrylic painting, *The Last Meal*, depicting a bird's-eye view of soldiers killed during their last meal. Elements of collage will be incorporated, including objects from Iraqi military uniforms given to the artist by families of the deceased. These uniforms were collected from the Iran-Iraq War, the second Gulf War and the war with ISIS.

The exhibition will also include a sculpture, *The Last General*, a life-size clay replica of an army general inside a sunken life boat cast in fibreglass. The figure of the general is sculpted so that half of his body appears decayed, while the other half appears intact and wears a uniform and medals. The sculpture will also include elements of collage, using cloth from military uniforms. Resembling an ancient mummy in a sarcophagus, this clay coloured sculpture is intended as a reminder of the brutality of military leaders, as well as a tribute to perished men who have become part of the soil.

Iraq and the region have endured reigns of terror and authoritarian rule in the

name of nationalist and religious ideologies, often driven by the need to wage war both in competition for, and in defence of, the 'Fatherland'. The term *al-watan* (meaning 'homeland' or 'nation') is used by dictators in demagogic speeches and in fascist literature. The exhibition is a commentary on the masculine and paternalistic dimensions of political culture in Iraq and the region.

In particular, Baran seeks to interrogate the ways in which the notion of the 'Fatherland' has been used to justify the horrors of war, the soldier's efforts, and a leader's tactics. The soldier, often depicted as a valiant and obedient hero, is more often a victim of brutal authority. Through an examination of the abuse of the patria, the exhibition is also an exploration of the nature of man, his indulgence to his violent nature, and to his own dictatorial instincts that find an outlet through war.

Tamara Chalabi, Chair and Co-Founder of the Ruya Foundation and co-curator of the exhibition has said:

*"It is an important development for this pavilion to have a solo artist represent Iraq for the first time. Serwan Baran's work is fitting artistically, both as a deeply personal testimony of his own experiences and a universal commentary on the condition of mankind. I am pleased to also be sharing his singular expressionist style as a painter, in a medium that has great significance within the history of modern Iraqi art."*

Paolo Colombo, co-curator has said:

*"Serwan Baran's large-scale works are forceful denunciations of the horrors of war. They are meant to overwhelm the viewer, as one is overwhelmed in the proximity of a large film screen. His statement is not restrained, and the scale of his works is in perfect tune with the volume of his proclamation."*

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## **Notes to Editors**

### **About 'Fatherland' and the Iraq Pavilion**

Curators: Tamara Chalabi and Paolo Colombo

Commissioner: Ruya Foundation

Address: Ca' De Luca, Corte del Duca Sforza, San Marco 3052, Venice  
Nearest Vaporetto: Accademia or San Samuele

The exhibition will run 11 May - 24 November 2019. Opening hours are 10am - 6pm, every day except Mondays.

Press preview: Wednesday 8 May 2019, 11 am - 3 pm  
Vernissage: Wednesday 8 May 2019, 6 - 8 pm

For all PRESS enquiries please contact Rees & Co:  
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### **About Ruya Foundation**

The Ruya Foundation works to aid and enrich culture in Iraq, and build cultural bridges with the rest of the world. Ruya's aim 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 to benefit from, and participate in, international events. Ruya initiates and commissions creative projects in the visual, audiovisual and performing arts. 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.

Ruya's flagship project is the Iraq Pavilion at the Venice Biennale, which it has commissioned since 2013. In Iraq Ruya runs a contemporary art space in Baghdad called the Ruya Shop, has organised exhibitions throughout the country (including in Erbil) and has organised workshops and talks with international artists and curators including Ai Weiwei, Francis Alÿs and Aneta Szyłak. Ruya also runs art relief projects in the refugee camps of northern Iraq.

Ruya Notebooks, the foundation's educational publishing initiative, translates seminal art texts into Arabic for the first time and distributes them free-of-charge throughout the Middle East. Ruya also holds an extensive and unique database of artists working within Iraq, spanning all disciplines from visual arts to theatre and music.

[www.ruyafoundation.org](http://www.ruyafoundation.org)

### **About the artist**

Serwan Baran was born in Baghdad in 1968. He graduated from Babel University with a degree in Fine Arts, and is considered part of the 'new' generation of Iraqi painters. Baran was taught by Syrian-German artist Marwan. In 2005, Baran left Baghdad and more recently has settled in Beirut. Baran has lived through over forty years of conflict and been creating this type of work for twenty years. Baran has had solo exhibitions at Nabad Art Gallery in Amman (2013), Matisse Art Gallery in Marrakech (2013), among other galleries in Damascus, Tokyo and various Iraqi cities. He participated in the Cairo Biennale in 1999, Al-Kharafi Biennial in Kuwait in 2011 and the fourth Marrakech Biennale in 2012.

This is Baran's first solo show in the West.

The 58th Venice Biennale will run 11 May – 24 November 2018.