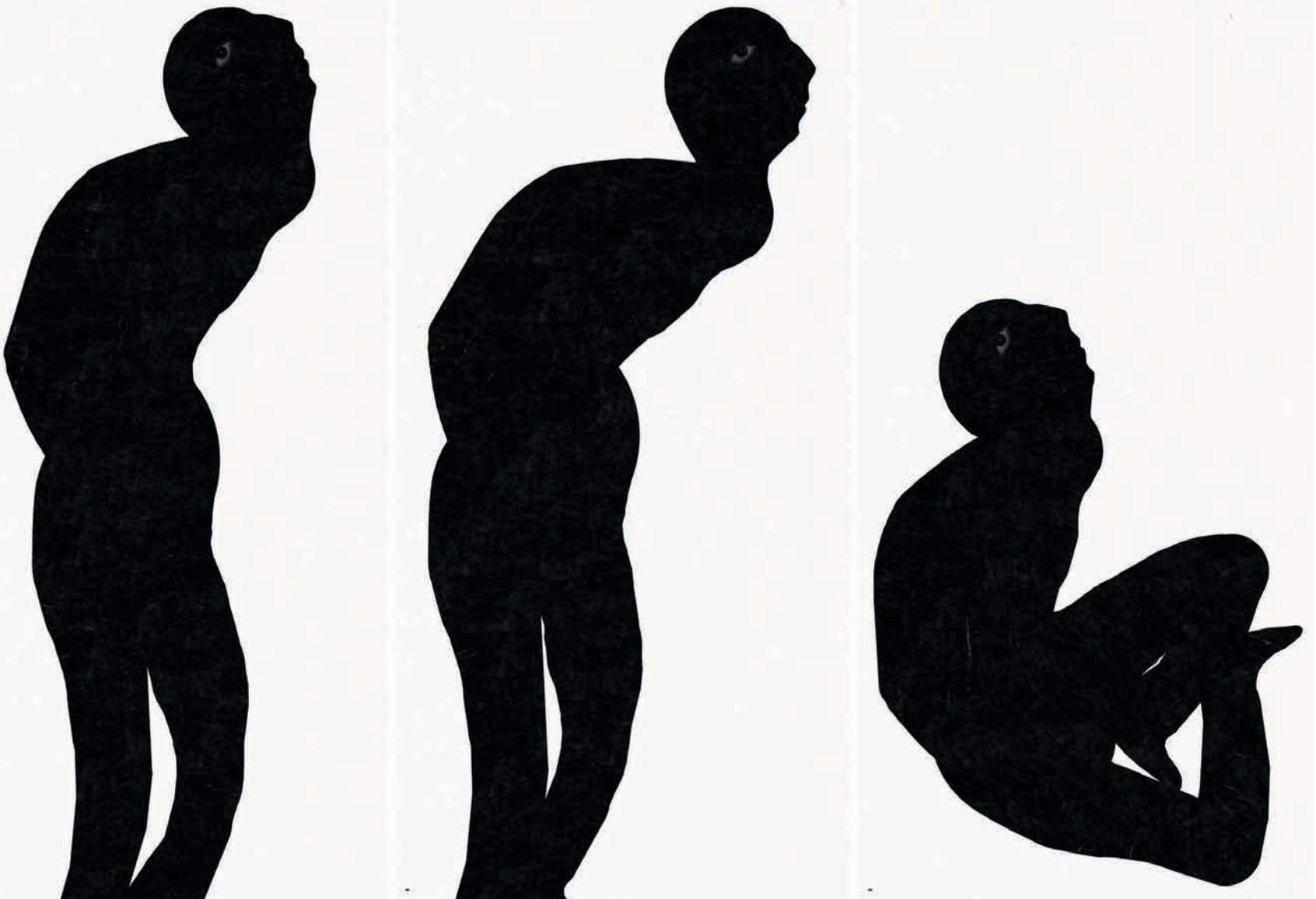


A QUESTION OF EXISTENCE

SADIK AL-FRAJI





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Existentialism, Expressionism and empathy form the haunting silhouettes that comprise Sadik Al-Fraji's touching practice. **Rania Habib** meets the probing Iraqi artist.

here are several factors that have shaped the exceptionally warm, affable and simultaneously sombre person that is Sadik Al-Fraji. One of those is his visits to the Al-Rashad Psychiatric Hospital, located on the outskirts of Sadr City north of Baghdad during the early 1980s. Al-Fraji faked official papers that passed him off as a researcher in order to observe the mental patients at Iraq's largest mental institution. He visited the hospital daily over the course of two months, witnessing human beings existing at the peak of what he calls the futility of life. "The patients are all about existentialism," says Al-Fraji. "Their mind is futile, their manners are futile and they are the definition of futility." The artist – consumed with existentialism and engrossed in the search of the meaning of life – recognises the pointlessness of solving the question and hence, his obsession with the mental patients of Al-Rashad. "My life changed then," recalls Al-Fraji. "In a mental asylum, every excess of life is present and you find yourself facing the truth behind what it means to be a human being. You see humans as they are."

Other things that have deeply affected Al-Fraji are all instinctively linked to his profound kinship with existentialism. One of these is the number of sad and lyrical occasions that infuse Middle Eastern and Muslim culture, such as the festival of Ashura in Karbala, during which the faithful celebrate the 10th day of the Muslim month of Muharram and mourn the martyrdom of Hussain Ibn Ali, the grandson of the



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Opening spread:
Waiting for Godot. 2011. Six
lambda prints.
100 x 200 cm each.
Edition of six.

This spread:
Stills from *The House That My
Father Built*. 2010. 620 x 400
cm painting and 6’12 minute
film animation projected on a
700 x 900 cm surface.

Prophet Mohammed (PBUH). Though recognised for its participants’ self-flagellation, the festival is also replete with art depicting the fall of Karbala, theatre plays and the striking voices of the *munshideen* (reciters), all of which filled Al-Fraji’s head. Equally as life-changing for the artist was the Iran-Iraq war that ravaged his beloved homeland from 1980–88. Al-Fraji had just entered his 20s, citing those years as the peak of his productivity. “Imagine being in that phase of your life and being open to everything and having a war break out,” he says. “Imagine seeing all of this death and blackness; how do you think it will shape someone? Death becomes a being, with feet and breath and it fills the air around you. You can’t really imagine it, you have to live it. Death was walking around on the streets.”

The final aspect that has shaped Al-Fraji is the refuge he sought in a library of 4000 books that he amassed while growing up – a part of which was sold when money was tight for the Al-Fraji family under the American embargo of Iraq, another part of which was looted. From the writings of Egyptian authors Naguib Mahfouz and Ihsan Abdel Qudous, Al-Fraji moved on to the philosophy of Jean Paul Sartre, Simone de Beauvoir and Martin Heidegger, among others, and was affected for life. “Every time I think of Heidegger’s question of Being, ‘when I think that I am here, I think I could not be here,’ it scares me,” he says. “It is kind of like rediscovering my existence every day and it creates a stupor. Existential questions leave you perplexed and this perplexity is what you see in my figure today.”

“The moments that leave the biggest mark on you are those that you can see from an out-of-body experience.”



TAKING SHAPE

Al-Fraji’s signature artistic form is black, tall, lanky, hunched and haunting. Occasionally – and increasingly – the figure has human eyes and hands, lending it an even more tragic aura. The shape is rooted in and inspired by the works of German Expressionists. “I was so taken by these artists,” says Al-Fraji. “They aren’t strangers to me, they are my friends. The amount of pain in their beautiful works speaks to me and their pain is my pain. They taught me that it is possible for art to meet with the mind and that the link between art and emotion is intense. Without that relationship, art would not be something I want.”

A qualified graphic designer with a BA in Plastic Arts and Painting from Baghdad’s Academy of Fine Arts, Al-Fraji continuously honed his skills, developing this figure until 2005, when it began to resemble the form that it is today. “It is me, without any masks,” admits Al-Fraji. “He doesn’t have to be so dark, but why is he so dark? I don’t know. All my life, I have been in love with black.” According to the artist, ‘he’ is the centre of everything, just like the human mind. “Everything meets in this figure and he is that moment of stupor and perplexity that is central to existentialism,” explains Al-Fraji. “He could be me or anyone else and he is, quite simply, the idea of existentialism, free of any other thoughts.”

Al-Fraji, who lives in Amersfoort in The Netherlands, is no stranger to these moments of stupor, one of which inspired his seminal work, *The House That My Father Built*, unveiled at *Told/Untold/Retold*, one of the opening exhibitions of Doha’s Mathaf: Arab Museum of Modern Art in 2010. An emotionally humbling work, it was born months after Al-Fraji returned to Baghdad in 2009 to visit

This page:
(Detail) *At Lunatic
Asylum*. 1985. Etching.
24 x 20 cm.

Facing page:
Stills from *Born April
9th*. 2007. Video.
1 minute loop.

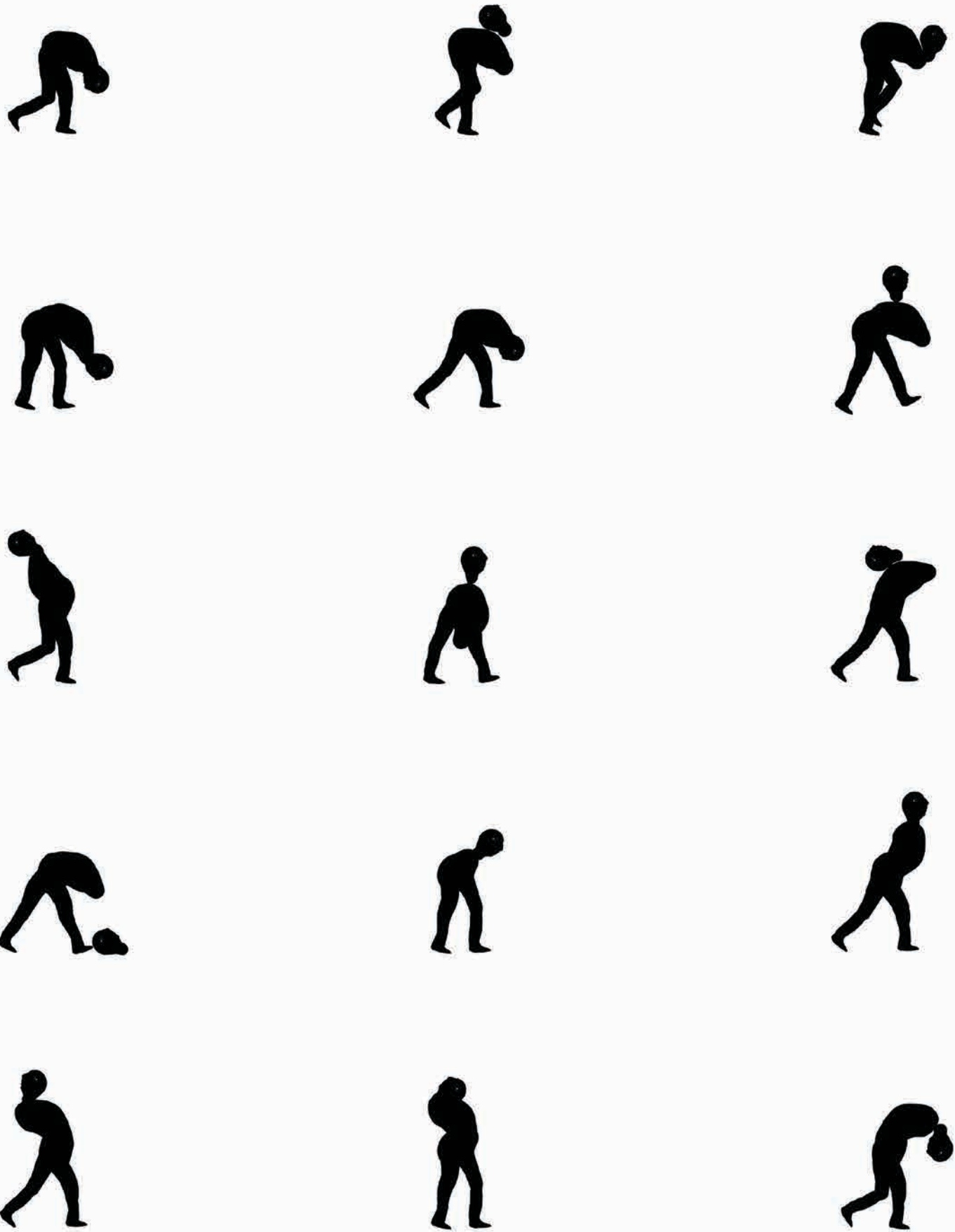


his ailing father, having been away from the country for 20 years. "But death was faster than me," he recalls. "My brother called me from the cemetery as they were burying my father. I asked my brother to put the phone on my father's chest and I cried, asked him for forgiveness for leaving Iraq and creating a hole in his heart and I read him *Surat Al-Fatiha* [from the Qur'an]." Two months later, Al-Fraji finally made it to Baghdad and entered his father's bedroom and stood, stupefied, in front of his clothes. "The moments that leave the biggest mark on you are those that you can see from an out-of-body experience and that is what happened at that moment," he says. "The world fell away." A multimedia installation comprising a painting of his signature figure and a film animation depicting Al-Fraji's illiterate parents, his father's simple room and clothes and a host of childhood memories and memorabilia, *The House That My Father Built* is set to the haunting and poignant music of composer David Darling. The work resonated with audiences in a way that only genuinely heartfelt works can, and the artist remembers seeing people cry after viewing the piece. "I was rested knowing that my message was delivered," says Al-Fraji.

FREEDOM FIGHTER

It was in Doha that the artist met co-founder of Ayyam Gallery Khaled Samawi, who has represented him since, exhibiting his works in the gallery's Damascus branch in 2011 (*Waiting for Godot*), their DIFC branch in Dubai in the same year (*Nothing, Nobody*) and its London space in 2013 (*I Do Not Feel That I Am Free*). Though physically disconnected from the Middle East, living





This spread:
Stills from *Sisyphus Goes on Demonstration*.
2011. Video installation. 10 minutes. Edition of three plus
one artist's proof. Image courtesy Ayyam Gallery.



in Amersfoort with his wife Abeer and their two children, he says, provides him with a quiet and safe life – something that is of utmost importance to Al-Fraji after the wars and hardships that he endured in Iraq. His works sometimes seem politically charged, but Al-Fraji explains that though they allude to specific situations, they are merely a reflection of his feelings towards them. *Born April 9th*, a work from 2007, references the day Baghdad fell to the coalition forces and the statue of Saddam Hussein was famously toppled. The silent video installation was created for the Stedelijk Museum in The Netherlands and presented on 11 screens; it features images being projected on the artist's head and body and they include those of Hussein, soldiers, newspaper headlines, Western politicians, etc. When Al-Fraji visited Baghdad in 2009 after his father's death, he cut his planned 14-day trip down to a week: "I couldn't breathe," he recalls. "My chest was tight because of the amount of pain weighing on me. I went to see Baghdad but I did not find it – the city I knew does not exist anymore."

Other works, such as *Sisyphus Goes on Demonstration* (2011) directly reference Al-Fraji's preoccupation with existentialism while rooting itself in current Middle Eastern affairs, all the while going as far back as Greek mythology to bring the story to life. Sisyphus – who was condemned to the lifelong punishment of rolling a massive boulder up a hill, only to watch it roll back down – becomes an accurate symbol of human suffering in the hands of Al-Fraji. The artist's statement on the work reads: "You are to suffer, to carry your burden and the weight of your existence on your back forever. And on this rough road you are to travel. You walk, with blackness round your eyes blocking your entire vision and a hole in your head preventing you from knowing. You are not to learn, to see or to understand. You are to travel the path of Sisyphus, this is your fate and this is how you are destined

This page:
In the Name of Freedom.
2007. Indian ink and rice
paper on canvas.
300 x 300 cm.

Facing page:
Still from *An Introduction to
the Philosophy of Freedom*.
2005. Video. 13'10 minutes.

All images courtesy the artist
unless otherwise specified.



“The most beautiful illusion in a person’s life is the illusion of freedom.”

to exist. Note 1: We are all Sisyphus. Note 2: Sisyphus, at this moment, has the face and the tongue of an Arab. Note 3: Sisyphus can go on a demonstration and cry out loud against his destiny.”

Godot to Come Yesterday, from 2013, is the artist’s take on Samuel Beckett’s seminal absurdist play *Waiting for Godot*. The 13-minute digital animation, which features two of Al-Fraji’s figures, was built from drawings he created. Though he works with a variety of media, he says he is a traditional artist at heart. “The movement of the figures in this work is digitised, but the details in the figures had to be drawn,” he says. Some details that appear in today’s figure are apparent in Al-Fraji’s earlier drawings and etchings, such as *At Lunatic Asylum*, which he made for the mental patients of the Al-Rashad Psychiatric Hospital. Though most of the drawing is swathed in grey, the hands and eyes of the characters appear in clearer detail – these are the hands and eyes that express heart-breaking emotion in Al-Fraji’s otherwise all black figures of today.

Existential pursuits are not complete without the element of freedom, yet Al-Fraji is harshly aware of the lack of freedom human beings live with. *An Introduction to the Philosophy of Freedom* (2005) is a cold and unforgiving hypnotic 12-minute video that sees the artist write statements such as ‘I have to breathe’, ‘I have to dream’, ‘I have to desire’, ‘I have to forget’ ‘I have to s***’ and ‘I have to die’ in a notebook to the sound of a male voice whispering ‘I have to’. “The most beautiful illusion in a person’s life is the illusion of freedom,” says Al-Fraji wistfully. “We carry this illusion to the grave. It’s an important one to have in order to continue living.” 🗨️

Godot to Come Yesterday runs until 9 January at Ayyam Gallery in Jeddah. For more information visit www.sadik.nl and www.ayyamgallery.com