

The work of Iraqi artist Sadik Alfraji narrates the modern history of his homeland through poignant renderings.
Maymanah Farhat writes on the artist and his many tales

MASTER Storyteller

Take Your Boat and Abandon Your Home from *Ali's Boat* series. 2014. Indian Ink, Charcoal on Canvas. 270 X 678 cm.





*Ali's Boat:
Diary 1. 2014.
Indian Ink
and Charcoal
on Notebook
Paper. 10 x
16 cm.*





From a dimly lit studio in Amersfoort, the Netherlands, Sadik Kwaish Alfraji shows me a set of drawings that he has completed for the 2017 Iraq Pavilion at the Venice Biennale. Although it is nearly eight in the evening there and the lack of sunlight makes it difficult to see black and white images over Skype, I notice the details of meticulous illustrations that are based on mythological stories like the *Epic of Gilgamesh* or reproductions of historical objects from old books. As he moves through a stack of works on paper, explaining each one, Alfraji pauses to share a 1967 textbook for Iraqi middle school children in which he found several pictures for his project. Aged and worn from years of use, the pages of the Arabic-language paperback are now adorned with small tabs that he attached in order to remember his selection. I think to ask him if he had a similar copy as a young student in Baghdad—where he was born and lived until the 1990s—but my thoughts are quickly taken elsewhere when he describes another aspect of his latest commission.

A few weeks away from the opening of the biennial, Alfraji is in his studio day and night attempting to finalise the series. *I am the Hunter, I am the Prey* is a multimedia work that examines the reciprocal nature of desire as an essential part of human experience. In this sense the concept of ‘hunting’ is greater than the search and capture of some thing, and includes the opposite position. Drawing from a range of sources spanning the history of civilisation, he finds inspiration in everything from ancient warfare to the features of the body. For the artist, any evidence of human interaction reveals a pursuit, which manifests as a duality, whether in the realm of emotions or physical experience. “Even love is a form of hunting,” he explains, stressing that both sides of the hunter/prey dichotomy involve active and passive roles.

In addition to the textbook and drawings, *I am the Hunter, I am the Prey* includes a video animation and a mixed-media artist book. Its many visual references respond to the theme of the pavilion, which brings together a multigenerational group of Iraqi artists under the broadly interpreted title *Archaic*. By combining different forms of imagery Alfraji constructs a multisensory space that transports the viewer. Given the scale of his projects, it is surprising that he works alone except when producing animations. “I envy an artist who goes into the studio, paints a canvas, then shows it in a gallery,” he confides while detailing the many steps—and hours—that are needed to make such intricate work. Despite the amount of time and labour that are required, Alfraji has produced several large-scale installations in the past two years.

An example is the series *Ali’s Boat*, which debuted at Ayyam Gallery’s Alserkal Avenue space in 2015 and subsequently travelled to venues throughout the Middle East and Europe. In the

cavernous Dubai gallery, mural-sized paintings complemented drawings, video animations, and a fisherman’s boat that lay on its side in the center. Black and white drawings of a man’s face in profile were placed in Plexiglas boxes on the floor as though floating in water. Across the room, Alfraji’s protagonist appeared in a large painting as a shadowy figure next to a small boat transporting a pile of stones. Brought together like the vignettes of a novel, these various works demonstrated the artist’s strength as a storyteller, an essential facet of his work that was first identified by Nat Muller—the curator of *Driven by Storms (Ali’s Boat)*—in her introduction to his 2014 monograph. The fact that Alfraji draws and paints like a writer can be attributed to his upbringing in the Iraqi capital—a place that is celebrated for its rich literary heritage. In Baghdad he left behind a massive personal collection of novels, art publications, volumes of poetry, and philosophical texts.

One of three artist books from *Ali’s Boat* was acquired by the British Museum and featured in *Moving Stories: Three Journeys*, a recent exhibition exploring the difficulties of migration. In a simple sketchbook transformed by 99 Indian ink and charcoal drawings, Alfraji recounts the poignant story of his nephew who dreamed of sailing away from war-torn Iraq with the hope of joining him in the Netherlands. Each drawing depicts a scene that fills two pages. Rendered with expressive and angst-filled lines, the work not only describes Ali’s longing for respite but also the artist’s own sense of missing home. At the British Museum the book was on display in a glass case while its pages were reprinted and hung as a grid, which emphasised the arduous steps of migration.

What distinguishes Alfraji’s work is his ability to use the formalism of drawing in a way that is approachable yet breaks down complex notions such as the unshakeable feeling of loss that is part of exile. His figurative style is intentionally simplified, patterned after modernists who relied on instinctive approaches when seeking to represent the subconscious mind. At Sharjah’s Maraya Art Centre in March, Alfraji debuted a video installation that combines drawings, scenes from old Egyptian and Iraqi films, Arabic songs, and pictures from his childhood. A remarkable solo exhibition organised by Laura Metzler and Alexandra MacGlip, *Once Upon A Time: Hadiqat al Umma* was structured around a massive semicircle that enveloped the viewer as nine video animations were projected onto floor-to-ceiling screens. Describing his memories of a popular park in Baghdad, the work shows Alfraji as a young boy in a cowboy hat during one of many childhood outings. Images of mid-century sculptures that are scattered throughout the park float across the simulated expanse as though passing through the mind’s eye, while interspersed drawings expand his narrative. A stylised self-portrait sculpture placed in front of the panorama anchored the exhibition by offering a bittersweet tribute to the city’s weathered monuments — objects that have inspired Iraqi artists and poets alike. ■



(Detail) Once Upon a Time: Hadiqat Al Umma. 2017. 9 channel HD video with sound. Duration: 8'10." A work commissioned by the Barjeel Foundation and supported by Ayyam Gallery. Courtesy of the artist

Facing page:
The Tree
I Love at
Abu Nuwas
Street. 2017.
Charcoal, ink
and oil stick
on hand
made paper.
20 x 30 cm.