

Harper's BAZAAR

ARABIA

ART

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THE EAGLE EYE

Athier Mousawi takes the life cycle of an eagle as the basis for a new set of silkscreen works that investigate nationalism, identity and transformation through vivid complex structures and forms. Arsalan Mohammad meets the artist in London to talk birds, banknotes and bringing the beast out from within...

"Tabdul" (2011)
(All images courtesy
Athier Mousawi)



Athier Mousawi,
Shoreditch House,
London 2012.

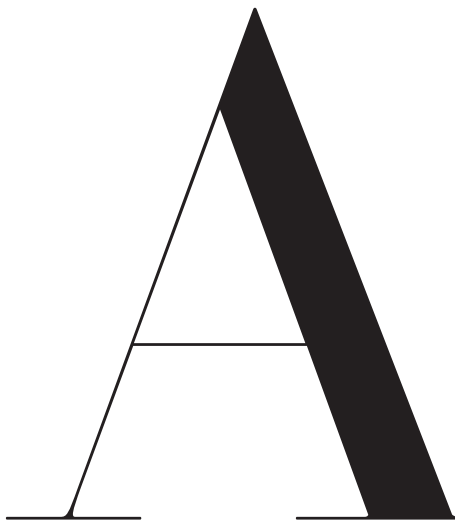
*'I THINK NOW, MY
WORK IS ALL ABOUT
QUESTIONING.'*



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thier Mousawi is a polymath. An artist, teacher, explorer and thinker, his peripatetic lifestyle - shuttling between the UK, Middle East and Paris on a regular basis - sees the genial, Iraqi-born British-educated artist absorbing a world of experience, shared histories and theories. Known as much for his

scintillating outbursts of colour on semi-abstracted canvases, he recently switched his approach in a dramatic about turn, to focus on the monochromatic possibilities afforded by pen and ink drawing. In an intriguing new series of drawings and prints, the artist examines not only questions of national identity but investigates the aspirational symbolism to Arab states of that ubiquitous cipher of freedom, the eagle. We meet in London's Shoreditch House, where Mousawi brings a packed portfolio of new drawings to show me - to explore Mousawi's career to date and discuss the implications of his recent thematic direction...

Before we come to the new series of eagle drawings, can we go back a little? Is it true you used to work at the British Museum? What were you doing there?

Sure, I worked at the British Museum while I was still at St Martins and doing my Master's in Illustration. At the British Museum, I was taking concepts - calligraphy, typography and geometric forms from the Arab-

Islamic world and doing workshops, re-appropriating this Arab world imagery. It was about giving multicultural communities within the UK an idea of the importance of another side of the Arab world, which they weren't really aware of.

So this educational work was a major part of what you were doing as you completed your studies?

Yes, to be honest, at that time, I felt like I hadn't found my feet, I hadn't started really exploring the things that were interesting to me, I didn't really start the process of questioning. I think now, my work is, if I had to define it, all about questioning. These bodies of work have been about posing questions, questions that aren't really answerable, or just pretty nonsensical. A nonsensical question with a nonsensical answer. And then the narrative between the two or the journey from question to answer is where the work is actually produced.

And what would you say these questions are?

Well, in these works, I remember looking at my old Iraqi passport and seeing the Eagle of Saladin and just looking at it. It was so flat and static and I just thought, what is this? These little nuances, we don't question



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them. You look at banknotes, everything on that banknote is about the country where it's from, and it defines you in a very subtle way. Whichever country you are from, there are certain, little nuances that are kind of, quite ambient in terms of the way they exist. You don't question them. So for me, the Eagle of Saladin is one of those; it's a very static, two-dimensional, head-to-the-side eagle. And essentially, it became a symbol of pan-Arab strength in the 1950s and 1960s. Iraq, Syria and Egypt, they all have this eagle. But then, if you break it down, what is an eagle? An eagle is essentially this very free, powerful king of the sky. The sky is the freest place and the eagle is the freest of them all, the most powerful. It nests where it wants. It kills who it wants. It's the king. It's the shark of the sky. But, I know they're about aspiration too, these kind of symbols. You aspire to be as free as an eagle. Or you like the country being represented as being as free as an eagle. But that doesn't always bear a connection, there isn't a direct connection between the people and the eagle, at least not now in Iraq. So that symbol of the eagle becomes a lie, a false representation, a false emblem for the people.

But then you just said it's aspirational, so therein lies the disconnect between reality and ideology?

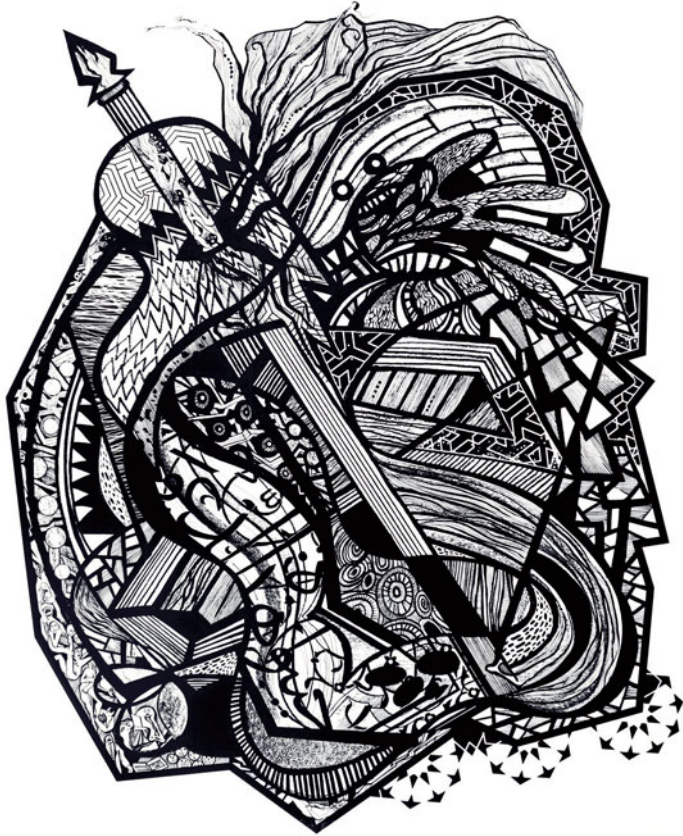
Well... these symbols are for the people. You can't separate one from the other, they define the people of the land. They have to. Like having Saddam on a banknote. That in a way defined the people. They were under Saddam. There are subtle nuances. But the eagle is there and people aren't eagles. And so, this eagle is a lie.

This is still the case in the post-Saddam era?

This is the eagle that's still there now, yes. So, then I started works that posed different questions on the eagle, as a way of finding a non-static, non-two-dimensional flat description, something more interactive. Like, how does the eagle fly? Where does the eagle come from? What does the eagle look like that the eagle was born from? Every eagle must come from an egg, so, this one must have come from an egg too. What did the nest look like? How does this eagle die? There is a perforation on the neck - what does that mean? Does that mean that you can just lift it off? And what if you can lift it off? What's beneath that?

It's very interesting, how it's almost like a mask is there.

Exactly. So this body of works, particularly is about the birth and the destruction of an eagle, the Eagle of Saladin. So the first series, which I will



show you in a moment, is about the eagle coming from the egg. The egg, again, all these questions are part of my - not internal dialogue, but internal exploration. There is no right or wrong, just the artistic journey of a question to an answer. And so from the egg, which is where it must start, to the two-dimensional flat eagle, what does that look like? It's like the beginning of the universe, there's nothing and then there was everything. The idealist would like to imagine if there was the slowest camera in the world, you could really trace what it looked like to go from nothing to something. You know, there must have been some kind of graduation to it.

You just break down this explosion or a sudden emergence, almost atomising it.

Yeah, if you think of it as digital - the way that we imagine an eagle to be, in this scenario, zero is an egg and one is the Eagle of Saladin. What does it look like in between? If you take it from digital to analogue, then there must be a graduation.

Is the large scale of the drawings then, a frame that emphasises the simultaneous micro and macro scale of the idea?

For me, the scale was important. That's way I work, with big paintings. There's mosques near where I'm living near the Musée d'Orsay in Paris where I can go and see the work of these great old Masters. You see the narrative, the forefront, say two figures, the forefront is happening, there's a narrative happening in front of you and if you look around, there's all these sub-plots defined by different shades of colour, different people interacting, different buildings, different this, different that. So you are looking at a world and for me, when I create a painting, a big painting, I want it to be a world. I've always liked, when you look up at a painting and you feel it's making you feel small. It's a physical thing. And then I add detail - you've seen the details within the work?

Yes, I did

Those details are kind of worlds living within worlds. With colour palettes, I love working with loads of different colour palettes.



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Does colour have a specific significance for you? Certain colours, certain combinations of colour?

Yes, it's initially, the colour. Iraqi artists, a lot of them use a lot of colour in their work.

Yes, well, just look at someone like Dia Azzawi, for instance. With you, what is the especial significance in that context, do you think?

Colour is essentially hope. I've used a lot of colour. Where I had a kind of sadness, it's on a smaller scale. But on a big scale, what you are seeing is this hope, it's big, it's colourful, it's bright.

It's emotional.

It's emotional and it raises you up. I'm not focusing on the bleakness in my imagery. Why would I? I'm focusing on the more uplifting, but the conversation that's going on is probably a little bit darker. But when you engage in it, you'll get something different than on the initial encounter. With these works, they have a completely different set of qualities to the paintings.

The paintings are all new as well.

Yea, I've done four paintings

I saw, you sent me a couple of these and then you sent some...







(Above) Athier Mousawi
(Left) 'X=43' (2012)
(below: Installation at
Empire Projects, Istanbul
2012)



So, now looking at the series of eagle drawings. This second one, so, we're seeing the birth and emergence of an eagle...
Again, this is about the birth, two levels of the egg here. This is a mound of land, which has been skewered and lifted up - I have a skewered head in my work quite a lot, it's a strong Shia reference, part of the Shia aesthetic vocabulary. From a young age you have to not just know, you have to remember Hussein's martyring and his head was, he was skewered and they lifted his head up on this pole. And we have to be remembering this. For my father, the skewered head is for him, for my dad, it makes sense when you're in Karbala, in Baghdad. It's part of the stories people tell.

It's part of the common...
It's part of the common knowledge. But for me, it's so graphic, to have to imagine this head being skewered and so it sticks with you and you imagine it and live it. You take it with you to your primary school in the UK where you are living. It's like that part of the imagery that you are meant to take in but in London there is no context for it. So the skewered head, I've always had it in my work, it's about dominance, like I dominated you, conquering in a way. **IHBA**
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