

art  
paper

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Lawrence Abu Hamdan, *The Freedom of Speech*, Installation at the Armory show 2015, Galeri NON booth



## DUBAI

## Journey of the mind

In his new body of work Iraqi artist **Sadik Alfraji** reimagines a world of possibilities that fulfill his otherwise unattainable dreams

by Marina Jordan



above: Sadik Alfraji, *Ali's Boat Story*, graphite pencil on notebook paper, 2014

opposite page top: Sadik Alfraji, *Don't Put All Your Dreams in One Boat*, 270 x 300 cm, Indian ink, charcoal, printed paper on canvas, 2014

opposite page bottom: Sadik Alfraji, *Take Your Boat and Abandon Your Home*, from *Ali's Boat* series, 270 x 678 cm, Indian ink, charcoal on canvas, 2014

"All grown-ups were once children... but only few of them remember it," wrote Antoine de Saint Exupery in the introduction to his illustrious novel, narrating a little prince's quest for truth about our existence. From planet to planet, the character traverses a variety of landscapes and meets a number of stereotyped figures epitomising the seven capital sins. Punctuated by humorous anecdotes, the child-like narrative unravels as an existentialist exploration when read by adults, much like *Driven by Storms* (Ali's Boat). Sadik Alfraji's solo exhibition currently on view at Ayyam Gallery's Al Quoz outpost in Dubai. Curated by Nat Muller, who also edited Alfraji's first monograph, *Driven by Storms* alludes to the absence of freedom in our choices, and therefore in our existence. It also symbolises a journey to the unknown, much like Alfraji's creative process, always punctuated by unravelling opportunities.

The gallery's entrance is claimed by a black wooden boat leaning on the floor, a prelude to Alfraji's latest body of work that was instigated by a letter from his nephew Ali, also displayed on the gallery walls. Next to his drawing of a boat, the young boy addressed his uncle with a plea to escape the horrors of Iraq. In response, Alfraji crafted a universe pairing mobility and the impossibility thereof, elaborating on dreams as oftentimes the only means to embark on a voyage.

Facing the stranded boat, a monumental canvas of black and white introduces Alfraji's emblematic child-like figure, whose identity has shifted from autobiographical to a portrayal of Ali. Once clumsily towering, as if incapable of fitting into the canvas, the character now adopts an upright posture, facing the viewer. With only his eyes, hands and heart apparent while blackness swallows the rest of his body, Ali resolutely stands next to a floating boat that sags under the weight of piling loose heads. *Don't Put All Your Dreams in One Boat*, Alfraji cautions through the title. The use of a proverbial allusion here, paired with an eerie backdrop of starry skies, injects both humour and hope to the painting, appeasing the existential heaviness.

Contrasting in size and thereby demanding a more intimate approach, a wall installation of 99 small size prints from the artist's sketchbook documents his fantasies of Ali travelling. As if at the back of a classroom, each piece is pinned to the wall and paired in sequence, based on similarities in text and shape – trees, boats, and the board game of snakes and ladders, evoking the tumultuous journey strewn with pitfalls that life is.

At this point, the music resonating from the back of the space becomes sharper and its piercing melancholy takes over. It accompanies Ali's Boat, a five-minute-long stop motion animation consisting of over 3,000 frames drawn by the artist. With a highly detailed, constantly transforming scenery as background, Ali's floating figure motions through the screen, travelling. Palpable and at the same time ungraspable because of their dramatic antagonism, emotions come spilling out at the sight of Alfraji's video. Sadness and serenity struggle, creating a dynamic of opposites that threads throughout the whole exhibition – black figures on immaculately white landscapes, large scale works facing smaller sized pieces, floor installations opposing hanging works, and a variety of media that eventually sees the union of both characters, in ideology and child-like aesthetic alike. Sadik and Ali coalesce into one being that absorbs their inverted dreams – Ali yearns for the outside world while his uncle fantasises about a return to his homeland. The resulting imaginary world they both find themselves drifting across reveals the hopeful possibility of escape. Staged around a strikingly simple and yet humanising visual narrative, the show is read like a children's book: with unwavering hopes of a positive outcome. ♦

