



Sadik Kwaish Alfraji, *Blind Qasim and His Beautiful Buffalo*, 2021, Indian ink on canvas, 300 x 300 cm

## SADIK KWAISH ALFRAJI

### *Those Houses Behind the Army Canal*

28 February - 1 May 2023

Ayyam Gallery is pleased to present *Those Houses Behind the Army Canal*, a solo exhibition featuring Sadik Kwaish Alfraji's recent body of work. This series is the second chapter of Alfraji's project *Books of Passage*, charting three generations of migration in his family. The first chapter, entitled *The River That Was in the South* (2019) was shown at the Stedelijk Museum in Amsterdam, the Ayyam Gallery in Dubai and the Cairo Biennale.

## About the exhibition

*Books of Passage* consists of three chapters in which the artist explores how identity was formed in his grandfather's, father's and his own generation. As he explores existential questions about the world around him, Alfraji collects and arranges personal and collective memories, in an attempt to understand and dissect them using the tools he works with as an artist.

Alfraji believes that memory consists of several layers which may conflict with each other, or exist as fragments, or be interwoven with each other, and are generally also incomplete due to the emptiness that war, migration, and loss leave behind. A new layer of memory is created, for example, when someone builds a new life in a different place, but it can also be passed on through the language and culture of previous generations. In the three chapters of this project, Alfraji explores the intercultural influences, cultural identity and layered memory of his own family history and also, more generally, of people who have had to flee their country.

The second chapter, *Those Houses Behind the Army Canal* (2021), which was shown for the first time at Kunsthal KAdE, and now shown at the gallery, is about Alfraji's father's generation, who left the south for Baghdad. Once there, they were forced to live in the slums. When the coup took place in 1958, and the Republic of Iraq was declared, the new leader Abd al-Karim Qasim announced a plan to rehouse the inhabitants of the slums. He had The Army Canal dug, beyond which the new neighbourhood Madinat al-Thawra (Revolution City, now known as Sadr City) was built, where every family was given a plot of land. The bright promise of the new neighbourhood soon faded, however.

The new residents had to build their own homes using the cheap materials available to them, the streets were narrow and initially there were no drains, so the entire district flooded with water when it rained. His father's generation who had left the south were stranded in a dysfunctional neighbourhood, a canal separating them off from the rest of the city, which did not fully accept them. Al-Thawra has more than a million residents these days, yet still has no prospects of a better future. The people who live there hope for a better life, and so their children's generation also take the path of migration.

In *Those Houses Behind the Army Canal* the artist tries to capture the history of his father's generation in sketch books, animations, archive material, video footage, drawings and etchings. In order to make this work and better understand this history, he tried to imagine himself in the people's shoes, and in the city, the streets, the trees and the houses. In a series of journals he created a dialogue between his father and himself, imagining himself as his father, deciding to go to Baghdad and build a house there for his family, and how it must have been to arrive there.

Alfraji visualizes the concerns and faces of this generation in screenprints of old portraits he found on the internet and elsewhere, the iconic images and logos there, and videos and drawings of what it looked like at the time, and how it looks today. He does not tell a linear story, instead presenting an accumulation of memories, imaginings and ideas. In one painting a timeless figure looks out over Baghdad, observing the city, unsure of what the future will bring. Perhaps he sees a history that has already been lived yet still persists as an undying fact of life for countless others in the same situation.

## About the artist

Sadik Kwaish Alfraji explores what he describes as 'the problem of existence' through drawings, paintings, video animations, art books, graphic art, and installations. Alfraji's distinct visual language addresses the vulnerability of human existence and speaks of loss, exile, fragmentation and displacement. The shadowy protagonist who often appears in Alfraji's multimedia works represents a black void, a filter that allows him to explore the intricacies of life. By rendering his solitary character as a charcoal-coloured silhouette and minimising the formal properties of his compositions, Alfraji captures the expressed movements and subtle inflections of the body in psychologically laden environments.

Born in Baghdad, Iraq in 1960, Sadik Kwaish Alfraji lives and works in Amersfoort, Netherlands. He received a Bachelor of Fine Art in Painting and Plastic Art from the Academy of Fine Arts, Baghdad in 1987 and a High Diploma in Graphic Design from CHK Constantijn Huygens, Netherlands in 2000.

The artist's solo shows include Kunsthal KAdE, Amersfoort (2022); Museum Flehite, Amersfoort (2021); L'appartement 22 art, Morocco (2020); 21st Contemporary Art Biennial Sesc\_Videobrasil, Brazil (2019), Ayyam Gallery (2019, 2017, 2015, 2013, 2011); Maraya Art Centre, Sharjah (2017); Red Star Line Museum, Antwerp (2016); Galerie Tanit, Munich (2016); Beirut Exhibition Center, Beirut (2014); Stads Gallery, Amersfoort, Utrecht (2010); Station Museum, Houston (2008); Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam (2007).

Selected group exhibitions include 2139, Jeddah (2022); Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam (2021); Cairo International Biennale, Egypt (2019); 9th Asia Pacific Triennial Of Contemporary Art, Australia (2018); Katzen Arts Center, USA (2018); the Katzen Art Center, American University Museum, Washington (2017); Iraq Pavilion of the 57th Venice Biennale, Venice (2017); British Museum, London (2017, 2015); TRIO Biennial, Rio de Janeiro (2015); P21 Gallery, London (2015); 56th Venice Biennale, Venice (2015); Abu Dhabi Festival, Abu Dhabi (2015); Maraya Art Centre, Sharjah (2015); LACMA, Los Angeles (2015); FotoFest Biennial, Houston (2014); Samsung Blue Square and Busan Museum of Art, Seoul & Busan (2014); Ikono On Air Festival, online and broadcasted (2013); Mori Art Museum, Tokyo (2012); Institut du Monde Arabe, Paris (2012); Centro Cultural General San Martin, Buenos Aires (2012); and Mathaf: Arab Museum of Modern Art, Doha (2010).

Alfraji's works are housed in private and public collections including Stedelijk Museum, the British Museum, London; National Museum of Modern Art, Baghdad; The Art Center, Baghdad; National Gallery of Fine Arts Amman; Shoman Foundation, Amman; Royal Association of Fine Arts, Amman; Novosibirsk State Art Museum, Russia; and Cluj-Napoca Art Museum, Romania; Los Angeles Country Museum; Mathaf: Arab Museum of Modern Art, Doha; and Museum of Fine Arts, Houston.

A monograph on the artist edited by Nat Mueller was published in 2015 (Schilt Publishing, Amsterdam).

## About Ayyam Gallery

Founded in 2006, Ayyam Gallery is a leading arts organization that manages the careers of diverse established and emerging artists. Blue-chip art space in Dubai, a series of collaborative projects in the United States, Europe, Africa, and Asia, and a multinational non-profit arts program have furthered the gallery's mandate of expanding the parameters of international art. With its widely respected multilingual publishing division and a custodianship program that manages the estates of pioneering artists, Ayyam Gallery has also contributed to recent efforts that document underrepresented facets of global art history.

## Exhibition Facts

Exhibitions Dates: 28 February - 1 May 2023

Regular Hours: Mon - Fri: 10 am - 7 pm

Sat: 12 - 6 pm

Location: Ayyam Gallery, B11, Alserkal Avenue, Street 8, Al Quoz 1, Dubai

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