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BIENNIAL & MUSEUM ACQUISITIONS ISSUE

BEYOND NOSTALGIA

Sadik Kwaish Alfraji's latest exhibition conjures the deeper questions behind a sense of place

interview by Rima Nasser



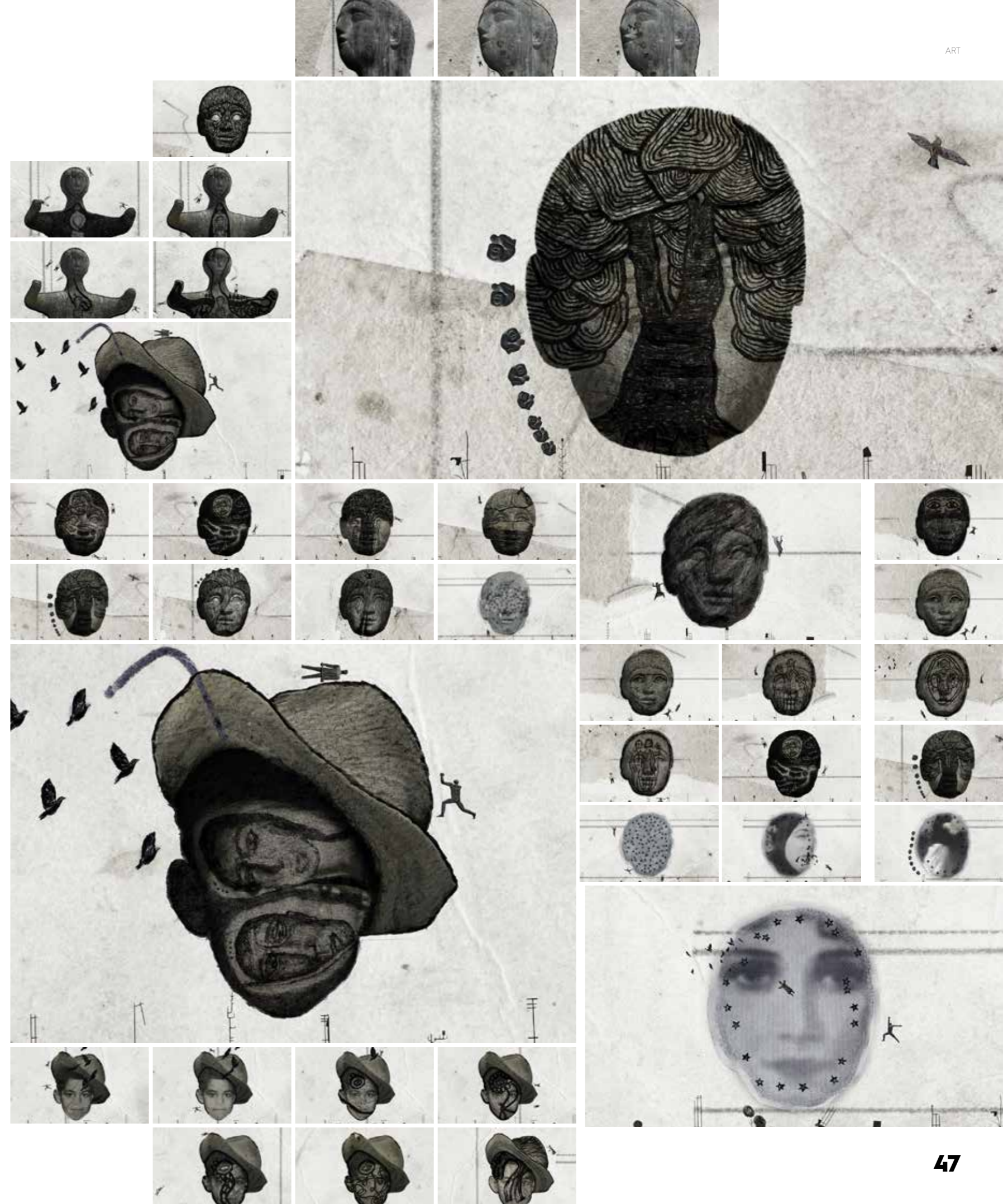
With its fountains, small water features and cafés, Hadiqat al Umma was once a peaceful garden oasis in the centre of a bustling Baghdad. Around it thrummed traffic-filled streets that were home to theatres, cinemas and shops plying their trade in books and music. From the latter, sometimes, when the wind turned a certain way, the strains of legendary singer Umm Kalthoum would come wafting through the garden.

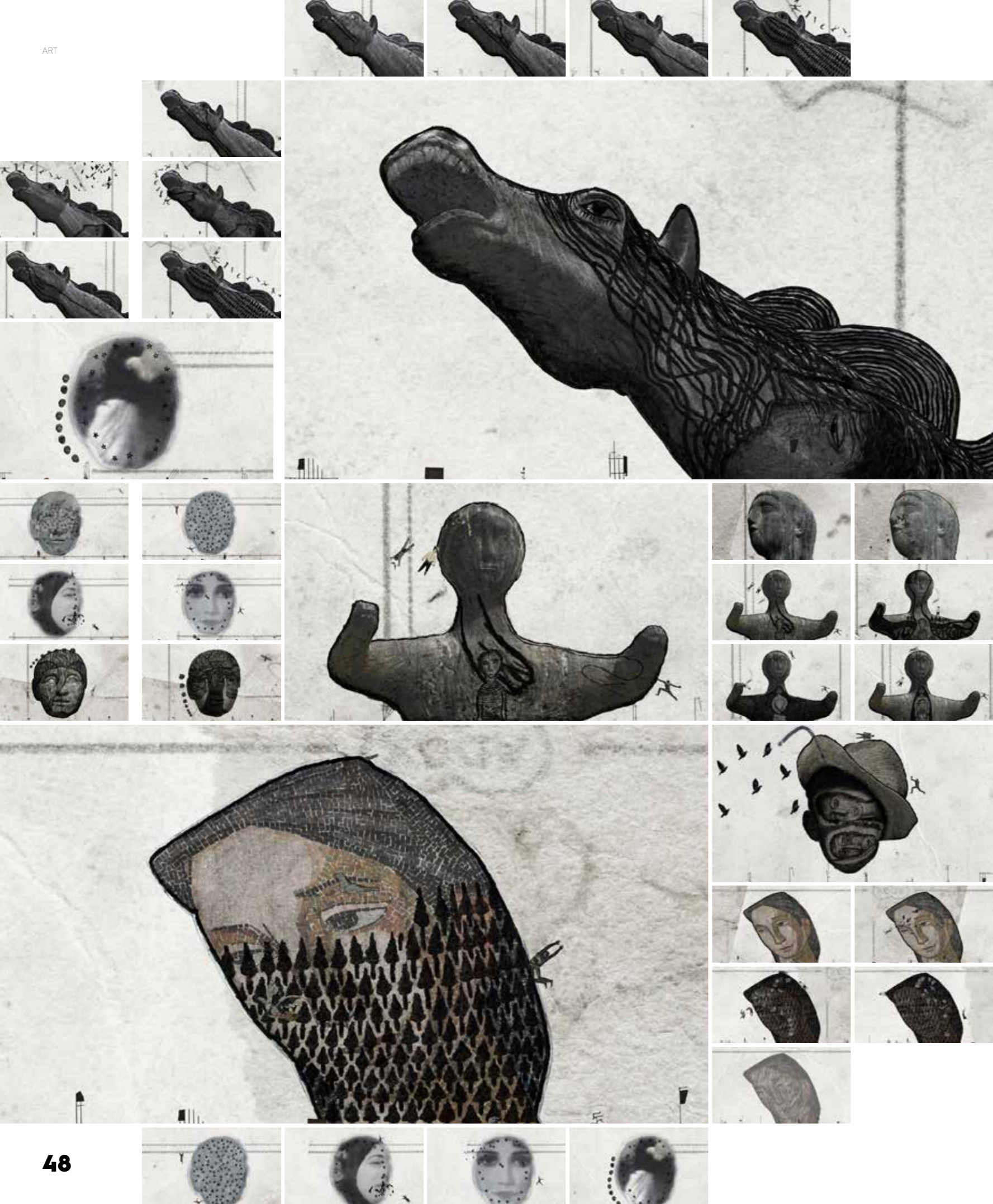
For Iraqi artist Sadik Kwaish Alfraji, the recollection of this place is entrenched in his memory, beginning with visits as a child in the 1970s and later passing through as a student on his way to the Institute of Fine Art. Nothing was quite the same though, after the Iran-Iraq war of the 1980s. "Hadiqat Al Umma still exists, but it's not the same atmosphere," says Alfraji, whose nostalgia for this garden informed his latest solo exhibition *Once Upon A Time: Hadiqat Al Umma*, which ran from March 4 to May 6 at the Maraya Art Centre in Sharjah.

This panoramic multi-media installation featured nine screens, on which Alfraji's black-and-white charcoal animations were projected onto photographs. A closer inspection revealed that these photographs featured Alfraji's face, as well as elements of artworks found in the garden: the Freedom monument of Jawad Saleem, the Revolution mural of Faeq Hassan and a sculpture by Khalid el Rahal. All three pay tribute to motherhood, and this was a theme also present in Alfraji's installation. "If you look closely, you see a kind of story between a man and a woman who meet each other. You see them becoming a family, so even this female lover is going to be a mother," he says.

left: Sadik Kwaish Alfraji

opposite page: Sadik Kwaish Alfraji, still images from *Once Upon A Time: Hadiqat Al Umma*





opposite page: Sadik
Kwaish Alfraji, still images
from *Once Upon A Time*;
Hadiqat Al Umma

Alfraji's use of black and white is a recurring element, something he says he used a lot in the early 1990s in Baghdad. "Black and white was the best style to fit with my feelings. Yes, I was sad, but I was also angry about everything – the dictatorship, existence itself, society. Everything around me felt wrong," he says. That he continues to use it is, he adds, because that person is still a part of him. "Maybe I am wearing a smile, but that person in Baghdad who left Baghdad is still inside me. This is why I'm talking about that time until now."

Today Alfraji lives and works in Amersfoort, in the Netherlands, having left behind his native city in 1991, following the second Gulf war. His homeland has featured prominently in his work but for the artist this looking back at his roots is something more than nostalgia. "Yes, Hadiqat Al Umma is a place, but in the deep, behind this, my work does not belong to a place. I think I see myself as belonging to the major problems, questions and feelings of human beings," he says.

Alfraji provides the analogy of a novel, saying that when you read it, you know the writer is describing a place, but ultimately it is about the ideas and the feelings. He recalls his previous exhibition *The House That My Father Built (Once Upon a Time)* at Mathaf in Qatar and observing two Japanese visitors who lingered for six hours. "This really surprised me," he says. "When I got closer to them I saw they were crying. Why would people from Japan look at *The House That My Father Built* and cry? Because they didn't see the house and they don't know my story; this is what I mean."

Although he claims that he is continually thinking of "the endings of things," Alfraji is mulling the continuation of the sentiment behind *The House That My Father Built* and *Hadiqat Al Umma*. "I have a very strong feeling that I am going to make something with this series *Once Upon a Time*," he says. ■