



The Iraqi artist and curator Dia al Azzawi at the Art Sawa gallery in Dubai.

Iraqi art: An estranged and isolated place

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Kareem Risan's art of emigration

On a recent Wednesday evening, the Iraqi artist Dia al Azzawi gestured at a chicken and said: "What do you see, hope or destruction?" Under normal circumstances, this would have been an odd question. But this was the Art Sawa gallery in Al Quoz, at the opening reception for *My Home Land*, an exhibition featuring the work of a group of emigrant artists referred to as "the Iraqi Diaspora". The question of hope vs. destruction was everywhere you looked.

Of the seven artists whose work was on display that night, none are able to call Iraq their home - at least, not in any physical sense. "My homeland is for me historical, not geographical," said the artist Ahmed al Bahraini, who divides his time between Qatar and Sweden, and who hasn't been back to Iraq since he left in 1993. Al Azzawi, the show's curator, left Iraq in 1976, and now lives in London. Others have settled as far afield as Canada and the US. A sense of physical estrangement - made permanent by ongoing conflict - formed the underlying theme of the exhibition.

"We, who left our homeland each carrying his reasons and dreams, were also tormented by the illusion of return," al Azzawi wrote in his programme notes. "We often think of her ... believing that what is in our memory is enough to return us to that beautiful time." A hirsute and unassuming 71 year old, al Azzawi (described by one artist as "the godfather" of Iraqi art) hit upon the idea for "My Home Land" about a year ago. All of the artists he recruited for the show had produced work while still living in Iraq, and all were known to him beforehand, but he was curious about what they would do when asked to take an imaginary journey home. He wanted to see if time and distance would produce interesting "distortions," he said, in the way artists responded to the situation in Iraq. There was also the question of nostalgia, how memories of "that beautiful time" might hold up in the face of a seemingly endless parade of dreadful news stories. His brief to the artists was short and simple: "Just do what you feel."

Surprisingly, perhaps, the resulting show contained little in the way of moral outrage. The overall impression was one of melancholy and exhaustion. Much of the work had a grubby, neglected quality to it, such as Kareem Risan's *Clay Walls*, free-standing panels that had been painted in places, but also chipped, stained and scratched. There were moments of grim humour: Mahmoud Obaidi's *Manual Search Engine for Missing Iraqis*, for example, comprised a wheel attached to a rusty handle - you spin the wheel to reveal a series of index cards. "Without electricity, you cannot run the internet," Obaidi explained. "So I invented this machine, Iraqi Google, to help."

Then there was the chicken, a mixed-media piece created by Ghassan Gha'ab. The bird was nestled on a patch of straw, staring straight ahead. It was a little bloated, its feathers sparse enough to reveal the ugly mottled skin below. And yet, if you leaned in, you saw the chicken was incubating an inordinate number of eggs. Further down, at the base of a U-shaped pedestal, there was a small upward-facing mirror. Blocks of charcoal and a mangled toy car had been stuck to the underside of the nest, and the mirror reflected this. The bird's name was Hope.

When asked about the moral ambivalence of the work on display - and whether this might hint at a sense of guilt among the artists, who were addressing horrors from which they had the means to escape - al Azzawi frowned and, for a moment or two, fell silent. Around him, a mature and well-dressed crowd nibbled appetisers and chatted above recorded Arabic music. "No, not at all," al Azzawi said finally. "I could be killed tomorrow by a bomb, but what good would that do anyone?" Later, he stood before one of his own pieces, a map of Iraq framing the relief of a lion - a common theme in Babylonian art - which had been pierced by arrows. "Look," he said. "This wounded animal."

Of all the works at Art Sawa, only one came close to suggesting hopefulness. It was made by al Bahraini, and comprised five sculptures, each made up of six clear Perspex panels, which had been bolted together and engraved with images (flowers, fishes, butterflies). Al Bahraini, who was born in 1965 in a village on the Euphrates, explained that these things captured his childhood memories of home. "In the summertime, Iraqis sleep on the roof," he said, referring to the butterflies. "The moment I woke up in the morning, when I opened my eyes, that's what I saw." When it was pointed out that such sentiments were otherwise in short supply at the exhibition, al Bahraini smiled. "There has to be beauty," he said. "There has to be balance."

Obaidi, in theory anyway, agreed with this remark. "We were told to make five objects for the exhibition," he recalled of his early conversations with al Azzawi. "When I'd finished my fourth I thought, OK, let's do one optimistic piece." Obaidi, who lives in Toronto, left Iraq in 1991, when he was in his mid-20s. Since then, he has been back to the country only once, to attend his mother's funeral. When asked to point out his fifth and final object - the optimistic one - Obaidi shook his head. "I couldn't do it," he said. "I tried, but I just couldn't remember anything beautiful."