

Riyad Nemah: An Iraqi artist fighting the trauma of war

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Beirut - Decades of turmoil and tyranny in Iraq have spurred the emergence of a wave of artists, a great number of whom were cast into exile and whose creative output often bears the traumatic marks of the suffering they endured.

For Riyadh Nemah and many other Iraqi artists, the effects of the longstanding conflict that has become embedded in their work has influenced a burst of imaginative responses that highlight the resilience of the creative spirit in the face of tragedy.

Nemah belongs to a generation of visual artists who surfaced during Saddam Hussein's totalitarian reign.

"Participating in art exhibitions was almost a non-existent [option] for us, the artists who had taken a political stance against Saddam, since most of the activities were related to the glorification of Saddam and his wars," Nemah said.

Nemah and fellow artists found alternative ways to hone their skills.

"We were a group of friends going around cafés looking for models to draw. We sketched away from the government's (eyes) and the visitors of the cafés were our primary subjects, especially the characters with distinct features," he recalled

"We often had disagreements with the people we were drawing because they were fearful of security surveillance and Saddam's informers who were scattered everywhere. They thought we were informants."

As the situation in Iraq escalated and an exodus began, the choice to remain in the country grew grim.

"It wasn't an easy option for us. The choices were to either stay and suffer or a final departure from the country. I was forced to leave, even though I would have had no desire to leave such a beautiful and rich country if it wasn't for the power struggles and unrest," Nemah said.

"Only the poor and helpless remained in the country. They are the ones suffering the consequences of having an intransigent tribal government who failed the country and sent it back to the Middle Ages," he added, suggesting that there was a scheme "to empty the country of its artists, scientists and creative people".

Nemah relocated to Syria, Jordan and, eventually, Beirut, the site of his recent work.

His latest series of elaborate silkscreen and mixed media portraits, on view at Beirut's Art on 56th gallery, invite the viewer into a vivid world of contrasting colours and seemingly marginalised characters. Daubs of paint appear to stream across the canvases as they nearly submerge the faces of his subjects, who stand in virtual anonymity and opposition to the visual chaos. All that remains are their intense gazes that pierce forward, confronting the onlooker.

“I always have the desire to summon political personalities but I am reluctant to defame political figures, I am more interested in using innocent people as my subjects,” he said. “They are normal people. They are not the people that make the decisions.”

Using photographs of his close friends and strangers encountered in Beirut as a base, Nemah disguises his subjects in outfits that betray their identity and suggest a different and emotionally charged narrative. Some figures appear dressed as soldiers of war fervently smeared beneath layers of red paint, while another adorns a military headscarf peering directly from beneath colliding coats of paint.

“Unfortunately when dealing with any Iraqi experience, the public mind deals with it in accordance to the logic of adversity and crisis,” he said. “I’m sure if I painted a beautiful red flower, the flower would become covered in blood!”

This misinterpretation carries into the present body of work as well, as he says: “When I draw a soldier, it is (meant to be) an expression of the fragile human state... My concept leans towards humanity.”

Nonetheless, there is a heroic quality about the people who inhabit Nemah’s works. They settle into the frames of his canvases, standing resistant and unfazed as they witness what appears as untold conflict and destruction illustrated by the artist’s careless and frantic brushwork. Beneath the veneer of paint, his subjects seem to adopt a streak of humanity on their faces.

“I’ve been out of Iraq for about 18 years,” Nemah said. Yet, he also acknowledges that shards of his past in his homeland are also present within the psyche of his characters.

“Of course it has to do with memory. I am like those people. I want to summarise those people in me (because) they are a part of me... Even though each of them has his own story, they are somehow me.”