

Riyad Nemah: An Iraqi artist fighting the trauma of war

Jimmy Dabbagh

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 Riyad 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.

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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".

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His latest series of elaborate silk-screen 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,"



Mireille



Ayman

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 cri-

sis," 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 ve-

neer 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."

Jimmy Dabbagh is a journalist based in Beirut and contributes cultural articles to The Arab Weekly.

Nadim Karam, unfazed by Lebanon's crises, returns home to shout

Gareth Smyth

Beirut

Hapsitus, the art-cum-architecture atelier of Nadim Karam, has projects in China, Japan, Singapore, Kuwait, Doha, Dubai and one brewing in London. Apart from the exhibition *Stretching Thoughts*, Karam has no commissions in Beirut.

Yet, despite Lebanon's problems, Karam is not heading to Paris or New York. "True, everything here is uncertain," he said. "Look at the presidency [vacant since May 2014]. Daesh [an Arabic term for the Islamic State] have started entering Lebanon. If you take the data, you'll



Stretching Thoughts, seated 2015

go crazy."

Lebanon's crisis over uncollected rubbish has eased since the summer of 2015, when garbage enveloped the small street near the National Museum where Atelier Hapsitus has been based since 1997. It was piled so high, "it buried cars", Karam said.

But the stench couldn't drive him away from Beirut. "Everything's boiling here; everything is spreading from here," he says. He says his staying in the country encourages the 12 people in Atelier Hapsitus and other young artists and architects not to leave. "They can create from here, grow from here," Karam said. "If there's destruction, hey, we're here to build it back."

It is tempting to see a statement about Beirut in *Neglected Thoughts*, a tangle of metal rods and concrete dominating the entrance to Karam's exhibition *Stretching Thoughts*, in Beirut's Ayyam Gallery.

But Karam is no literal or figurative artist. "All of this steel, you can straighten it and use it. We can build great things in this region," he said. "But I didn't mean specifically rubbish, I'm concerned more with thoughts and how we can stretch them."

Karam is best known in Beirut for the *Archaic Procession* – huge primeval, universal figures, including a wild cat, elephant and angel – that appeared in 1994 and were moved around the city.

This eclectic procession reflected Karam's sense of movement. Born in Senegal in 1957, he studied in Japan, where he met his wife, Kaya, a Zimbabwean of Scottish origin. It also shows a fascination with storytelling that began with his father's recollections of the *hakawati*, the donkey-riding salesman who collected stories on his wanderings.

Karam's exploration of thoughts

continues with the March unveiling in Dubai of *Shout and Silence*, curved stainless steel figures. "It's a progression from *Stretching Thoughts*," Karam explains. "There's abstraction but the themes are more regional, local if you want. I can't see myself still working on the *Procession*, with giraffes. Now the story's in the thoughts."

Specifically in *shouting and silence*?

"The region needs to speak about this," he said. "Sometimes people shout so much from so many sides, it doesn't make any sense. And you have the silence part, because of the dictatorial state and because of what's happening around. Aren't refugees [fleeing Syria] part of the silence?"

How can this be seen in stainless-steel figures? "You try to resolve complexities into a few simple ideas. If you see the shape of *Shout*, I'm talking about the whole world, but at the end it's a simple gesture," Karam said.

With so much public art – current work includes highways in Doha and atriums in Susu, near Shanghai, for the world's largest shopping mall – is Karam still an architect?

Karam is best known in Beirut for the Archaic Procession.

"I'm at the stage of the ugly duckling," he confides. "Architects refuse you because you're an artist, while artists refuse you because you're an architect. You stand in between until everything blossoms into the white swan."

Karam would love to do "iconic" architecture in Lebanon. Some of his designs were intended to stretch imaginations rather than be built: *Hilarious Beirut* in 1993 envisaged



Center: *Spark in Thought Clouds* 2015, Mixed media on canvas with golden leaf. Left: *Jumping Thoughts* 2015, Corten steel finish.

pyramids, zoos and a neighbourhood shaped like a barcode.

But Karam has an eye on the cemetery at Baskinta, the mountain village where his late father was born and where the wider family meets in the summer.

"I go with my [14-year-old son]. We visit my father. I tell my son, this is one day where I'm going to be and you, too. But it's hard to get him to go because it's not a [pleasant] place to visit. You enter a corridor [into the mausoleum], it's dark and wet," Karam said.

Redesign would improve the experience. So what is Karam thinking of? Overhead walkways?

He laughs. "The concept could be sculptural in the sense that it's there and stays, it doesn't move," Karam said. "It's mainly Italians who have designed cemeteries – Aldo Rossi and Massimiliano Fuksas." And the

Japanese, Karam notes, take picnics in cemeteries when the cherry trees blossom.

A design for Baskinta could be "nostalgic", with greenery and an enticing entrance, he said. It would allow spaces for meditation.

"Some cosmic elements have landed, too," Karam said. "The mysticism and paradox of death always haunt us. We don't know what can fall on us, at any time. We're like little stars in a dark sky and we have to make it through and look at the other stars."

Stretching Thoughts is at the Ayyam Gallery until April 2nd.

Gareth Smyth has covered Middle Eastern affairs for 20 years and was chief correspondent for the *Financial Times* in Iran from 2003-07.