

Tabloid

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Ahmed Al Bahraini with his sculpture at the Green Art Gallery, Dubai

Art for the children of Iraq

We are contributing just a brick to the re-building process, say Iraqi artists who are raising funds for MSF through an exhibition in a Dubai gallery

In today's world, the word Iraq immediately brings to mind images of death and destruction. But not for everyone. "To us and to any other Iraqi, the name Iraq brings up images of beauty and history, the rivers, the *1001 Nights*. Whatever has happened during the last two decades has created a time zone of emptiness. It is not something we will carry in our memory. This is just a little episode in our long history," say Ahmed Al Bahraini and Nazar Yahya, two contemporary Iraqi artists showing their work in Green Art Gallery, Dubai. They are part of a five-member group displaying their art together.

Yahya lives in Jordan and Al Bahraini lives in Qatar. "We had left Iraq not because of political reasons. We wanted to experiment with art and continue to work, but Iraq's economic situation did not allow this," they explain through a translator.

Even as expatriates, they have been deeply

affected by Gulf War III. "We may have left Iraq but Iraq has never left us. It will *never* leave us. We will go back and be a part of the re-building process as soon as we can. Of course, the war has impacted our work 100 per cent," they underline.

That is clear. Yahya's acrylic on canvases are worked in dark moody browns and blacks, often bloodied by a splash of red. Many of the canvases have been deliberately ripped, leaving gaping bullet holes and jagged scars.

"My work, like that of any other artist, is driven by my feelings. My canvas symbolises something that was once beautiful, like a child or our museums. Now, that has been destroyed. People have been killed and precious objects have been lost," he explains.

"I am not making political posters, not shouting a statement. My work is deliberately

● Contd. on Page 2

Art for the children of Iraq

● **Contd from Page 1**

abstract, I'm opening up people's imagination."

Al Bahraini is showing strong, unusual, iron sculptures. The iron is melded into large structures of interlocked discs or squares with unexpected gaps. They are either hung on heavy chains from the ceiling or mounted on the wall and can weigh up to 100 kilos.

"As an artist my mission is different from that of a lawyer or a doctor," he points out.

"My message is indirect. I'm working on a challenging material like iron which needs a lot of effort and strength. There is a contrast between the material and the effect, between the solid iron and its emotional impact."

His sculptures symbolise fragmentation, he describes. "There are parts and

yet there is a whole. It is like a wall that has cracks running through it and is about to crumble. My sculpture is open to interpretation, I don't want to tell a story."

A substantial percentage of the proceed's from the exhibition will go to Iraqi children through Medecins Sans Frontieres. Each of the five participating artists – Samer Usama, Ghassan Gha'eb, Karim Rasen Mansour, Yahya and Al Bahraini – plus two other celebrated Arab artists – Dia Azzawi and Ismail Fattah – have also contributed a work for the silent auction.

"We are only contributing one brick to the whole reconstruction process," Yahya and Al Bahraini say.

"The people of Iraq have made the real sacrifices. To donate a piece of work is nothing. We are not simply offering something material. We are being one with our nation, supporting

our people," the artists emphasise. The exhibition has been sponsored by the Kubba Foundation, a private family foundation established by one of Iraq's oldest families.

"When you watch television and see Iraq, the first thing you notice is how the children are suffering," says Myla Atassi of Green Art Gallery.

"We wanted to do something to help them, because we believe one hand is not enough. The Kubba Foundation has very kindly sponsored this exhibition. Parts of the proceeds from the exhibition, including from the gallery's commission, will go to the children through the MSF. Altogether, along with the silent auction, we hope to raise Dh200,000."

The 54-piece exhibition runs until June 22 at the gallery in Jumeirah. Works are priced between Dh750 and Dh28,000.



Nazar Yahya...
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Picture:
Devadasan