



The Eighties' Generation: Gunpowder on the Palette

by Ali Wajeeh

If the generation of pioneers were the generation which shaped an identity, and the sixties' generation were a generation of rebellion and international self-expression; if the seventies' generation were a relatively quiet generation, then the eighties' generation were the live coal which history has thrust into the pockets of Iraqi fine art. In order to understand their concentration and extreme diversity, it is important to first understand the political-historical context behind it, specifically in Iraq.

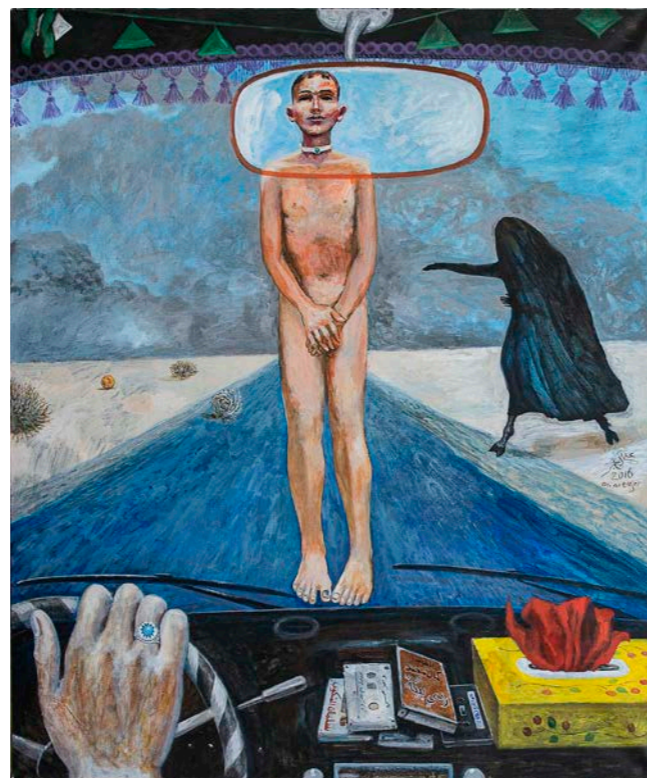
The youth of the seventies grew up in a rare period of economic prosperity and political quietude in which the Baathists were preoccupied with power and what resembled a temporary truce with their red rivals, the Iraqi Communist Party. Iraq even breathed a relative sigh of relief in what was called the 'National Front' between the two parties. The country didn't know how to continue with such calmness, so the front collapsed and Saddam Hussein began to tighten his grip on everything.

These young men found themselves face to face with a colossal war, with no end in sight. They wore their olive-green martial uniforms and left their classrooms to become soldiers. The fortunate ones among them were those who the military noticed their talent to draw, or how to scribe in good handwriting, to be in the records, away from being cannon fodder at the vanguard of its battles.

The production of fine art in particular, and whatever is related to it, requires something that poetry does not need; perhaps this is what made the productions of the eighties' artists little in terms of the number of works produced, compared to for example, those of the sixties. Military vacations were scarce, materials even more so. The eighties' artists would pool their energies into one or few central works, and participate in group exhibitions with them.

However, another piece of context regarding the eighties' generation would become clear from time to time, namely: sketching during military service. Thus, the artists produced many works on paper, depicting their fellow soldiers sleeping, injured, martyred, or anything else. Most of these works were done by dry or technical pens. Exemplars in this field included Sattar Kawoosh, Serwan Baran, and Ali Al Tajer. The latter two are

still affected by these wars, manifesting every now and then clear elements from that grim terrain and bitter age...



Ali Al Tajer (1962)
The Haunt, 2016
 Acrylic on Canvas, 120 x 100 cm
 Signed Mid Right



Serwan Baran (1968)
Prisoner Number, 2010s
 Oil on Canvas, 190 x 130 cm
 Signed Lower Mid

Political pressure was not the only factor, which takes us to the abundance and diversity of artistic experiences. These young men grew up whilst the pioneers were still alive, effective, and active. Artists like Faik Hassan, Kadhim Haidar, Shakir Hassan Al-Said, Saad Al-Tai, Mohammed Muhraddin, Mohammad Ali Shakir, Rafa Nasiri, and others were still active. This presented another challenge.

I tend toward an interpretation with regard to poetry: the presence of the heavy shadow of a great, influential poet like Muhammad Mahdi al-Jawahiri pushed the pioneering modernist poets to escape from the “prison” of vertical poetry, into a space of free poetry. Likewise for artists, escaping from Faik’s shadow produced a whole other visual language. A number of Faik’s disciples were under this shadow in a harmful way, wearing away an essential part of their experiences.

Another reason, likewise analogous the poets of the eighties: a good number of these young men were left-leaning. Many poets distanced themselves from writing for battles, wars, and Saddam, instead producing modernist literature which was highly ciphered in symbolism, refusing to comment on anything clearly. Many of the fine artists ventured to similar methods, far from Saddam and war, and far from Faik’s shadow too. Fakher Mohammed with his familiar realms, reproducing forms which stemmed from historical and natural elements in his own way. Asem Abdul Amir went on to explore two areas, rarely abstraction on one hand, and a child-like simplicity on the other. The late Mohamed Sabri preoccupied himself with himself, producing a few works on the lonely human, besieged and deeply scarred. As for Hassan Aboud, he resorted to total abstraction.



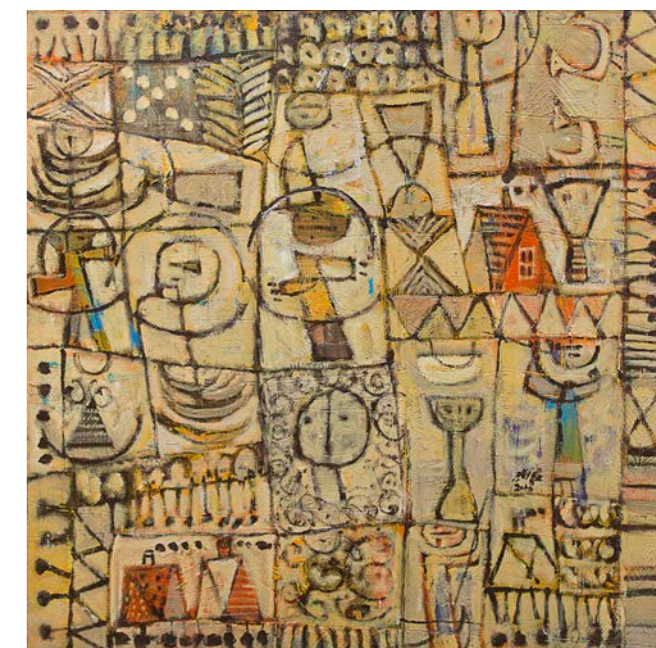
Mohamed Sabri (1955 - 2002)
Untitled, 1999
 Oil on Canvas, 80 x 60 cm
 Signed Lower Right



Hassan Aboud (1956)
Assassination, 2019
 Oil on Canvas, 120 x 115 cm
 Signed Lower Right



Fakher Mohammed (1954)
Baghdadi Window 1, 2000
 Acrylic on Canvas, 80 x 80 cm
 Signed Lower Left



Asem Abdul Amir (1954)
Childhood City, 2013
 Acrylic on Canvas, 90 x 90 cm
 Signed Lower Mid

Beyond just sensible vision was a wider context, namely digging into the intellectual side of these works. That area wasn't only an area of escape, rather it was an exercising of freedom under the intellectual influences of, say, Shakir Hassan Al-Said. Those very ideas were practiced by Hanaa Malallah, Kareem Risan, Himat Mohammad Ali, and many more. These works operated from a broad interpretative dimension, starting more so from an intellectual dimension rather than a diagnostic-figurative one.

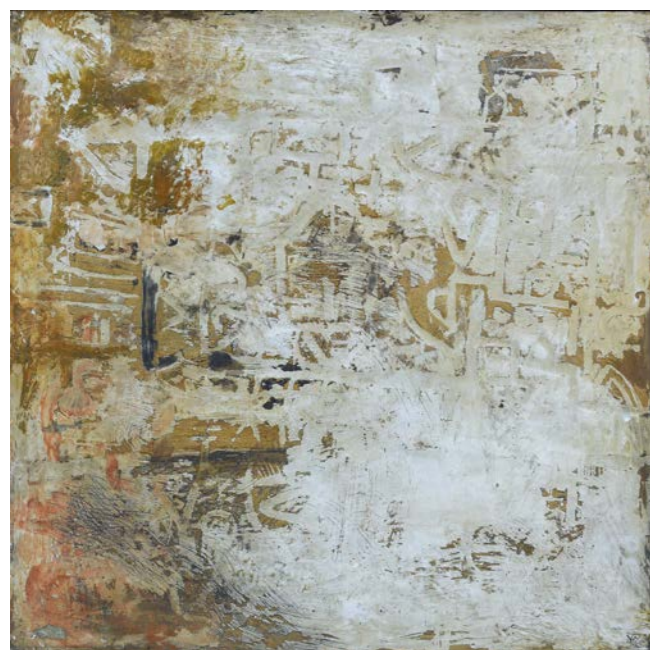
The eighties' artists benefited directly from their professor-artists from the previous generation. I am reminded of what the late Asem Farman said: "Everybody taught me except Jewad Selim". To this day we see Rafa Nasiri's effect on graphic art, Mohammad Ali Shakir on color, Faik Hassan and Shakir on art history and philosophy, and others. Indeed, the support of these teachers continued on through their art criticism. Thus, the likes of Shakir Hassan Al-Said and Rafa Nasiri wrote in that realm, as an example, about the most important artists of the eighties. Based on this, artists and critics followed suit such as Adel Kamel, Shawkat Al-Rubaie, Suhail Sami Nader.



Hanaa Malallah (1958)
Name of the Green, Wall Decoration in the Museum, 1989
 Oil on Board, 100 x 100 cm
 Signed Lower Left



Himat Mohammad Ali (1960)
Untitled, 1993
 Acrylic on Canvas, 80 x 65 cm
 Signed Lower Right



Kareem Risan (1960)
Remains of Ancient Writings, 1990
 Mixed Media on Board, 120 x 120 cm
 Signed Lower Right

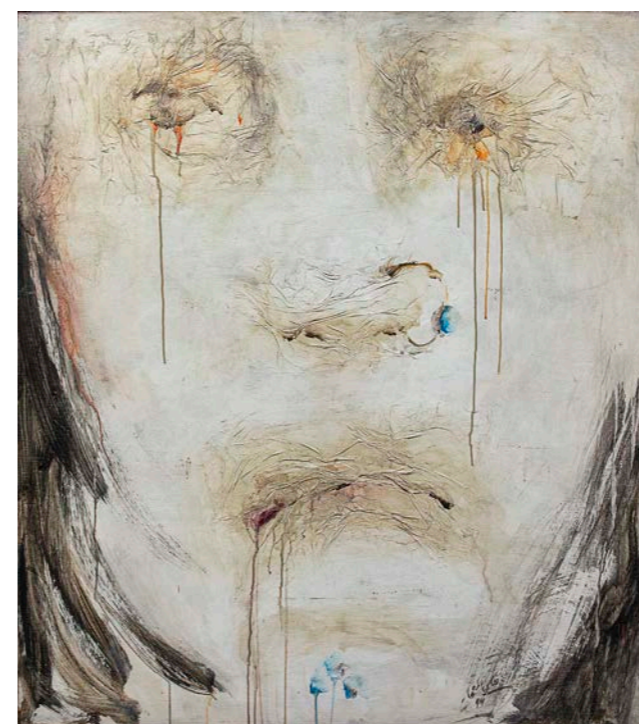
The Baath Party's force upon the visual arts was not as strong as in poetry. The iron fist was softer in the realm of fine art and sculpture. You could have depicted the sorrowful stare upon a grieving widow, or an exhausted and fatigued soldier. The management of the Iraqi art seen at the time was largely made up of returnees who studied abroad. They had a relaxed demeanor which turned a blind eye to any political allusions, such as Layla Al-Attar, Amer Al-Obaidi, Saad At-Tai, and others.

Just as the generation most cultured in poetry fled Iraq in the nineties, likewise those of fine art. Amman was the main refigure, and to a lesser extent Syria, then Europe. Cultural exchange and harmony remained present in this scene. The diaspora would continue to spread across God's green Earth, in search for a sliver of freedom. This renewed their experiences, most successful and influential, such as Sadik Kwaish, Serwan Baran, Ali Jabbar, Hanaa Malallah, and many others.

Even in the search for a cultural pattern, the war did not leave any of these artists. Even the most abstract artists were affected greatly, such as Himat Mohammad Ali, who personally told me: "I work in this area due to the excessive darkness I have witnessed". Even works embellished in idealized delight and felicity were, in reality, an escape from those wars, as presented by Sattar Kawoosh's experiences in the eighties, and his later "turquoise" period in the Netherlands.

Additionally, those who departed early from Iraq, in relation to those who did not, differed in rate of development. The experiences of the artists who fled Iraqi progressed at a faster pace, making use of more diverse media and foreign knowledge. This, unfortunately, was not found by the artists who remained fettered in the vast prison cell.

The Iraqi experiences of the eighties will remain the most tense and diverse due to the circumstances of their time and place. It may have exhausted its intellectuals, but it clearly affected and reformed successive generations to this day. It was an era of essential and axial experimentation, presence, and influence, which carried the scent of gunpowder and oil paints, fleeing from khaki martial hues to boundless colors!



Ali Al-Mimar (1965)
Face from My Country, 1999
 Acrylic on Board, 123 x 110 cm
 Signed Lower Right

Ali Wajeih (1989)

A poet, artist, and journalist, he is recognized as one of the leading figures of the post-2003 generation of poets.

Born in Baghdad, he obtained a bachelor's degree in political science from the University of Baghdad and has been working in media since 2006.

He published numerous poetry collections and poems. He began his drawing journey by following the example of the artist Shakir Hassan Al-Said, starting with sketches and later experimenting with various materials such as gouache, acrylic, and colored inks; for more information about his art, please visit the artist's page at the Ibrahimi Collection's website.

Front Cover:
Riyad Nemah (1968)
Between Two Times, 2021
Acrylic on Canvas, 200 x 200 cm
Signed Lower Mid



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