



MIDDLE EASTERN PAVILIONS AT THE 56TH

VENICE BIENNALE



IRAQ

ARTISTS: Akam Shex Hadi, Latif Al-Ani, Rabab Ghazoul, Salam Atta Sabri and Haider Jabbar

COMMISSIONER: Ruya Foundation for Contemporary Culture in Iraq (RUYA)

DEPUTY COMMISSIONER: Nuovalcona – Associazione Culturale per le Arti

CURATOR: Philippe Van Cauteren

THEME: *Invisible Beauty*

LOCATION: Ca'Dandolo, San Polo

WEBSITE: www.ruyafoundation.org/en/venice-biennale

RUYA, a not-for-profit non-governmental organisation founded in 2012, selected Philippe Van Cauteren, Artistic Director of SMAK Museum for Contemporary Art in Ghent, as the curator of the Iraq Pavilion. This is not his first Biennale rodeo – he co-curated the Belgian Pavilion in 2013 – but this year he is charged with addressing the complexities of presenting an Iraqi identity that challenges public perceptions. Tamara Chalabi, Chair/Co-founder of RUYA, believes that “at a very critical juncture in Iraq’s existence, the presence of a National Pavilion will act as a crucial ambassador.”

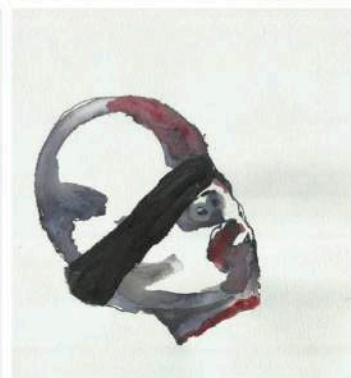
Invisible Beauty features photographers (Hadi, Al-Ani), performance artists (Ghazoul), ceramicist/sculptors (Sabri) and painters (Jabbar), drawn from across Iraq and the Diaspora. Van Cauteren and Chalabi have picked a sample of what Iraq has to offer and planted it in Venice, announcing to the world that the country has a Contemporary art scene that merits attention and offers an alternative perspective on a culture-rich but image-poor country. Art platforms such as the Biennale inevitably involve a reaffirmation or reinterpretation of cultural boundaries, a process never more relevant than in Iraq, a country whose cultural infrastructure is struggling.

The aesthetic commentary of the diverse Pavilion is composed of varied media, generations (Al-Ani, for example, worked predominantly in the 1950–70s, a heyday in the Iraqi art scene) and perspectives (Ai Weiwei makes a special appearance in the Biennale-ready special publication, *Traces For Survival: Drawings By Refugees In Iraq Selected By Ai Weiwei*). With all this insight, and the inclusion of an artist known for ceaselessly challenging the status quo, what is the theme? *Invisible Beauty* talks about the relationship of art to survival, about record keeping, therapy and beauty. Above all, it asks, “What happens to cultural production in an environment riddled with war, genocide, human rights violations and ISIS?” The answer comes in a melange of rediscovered and specially created pieces that collectively constitute the next logical step given the Iraqi Pavilions of the last two years.

Prior to 2011 there had been no Iraqi Pavilion at the Biennale since the 1970s. Returning with a bang, 2011’s presentation saw artists from across the Diaspora drawn together and curated by Mary Angela Schroth under the theme *Acquaferita (Wounded Water)*. It was a moment that addressed the outcomes of



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This spread (clockwise from top left): Akram Shex Hadi. Untitled. 2014–15. Black-and-white digital print on Innova-Baryth smooth gloss paper. 30 x 45 cm; Latif Al-Ani. *Mitjaz Mosque*. 1960. Black-and-white digital print on Hahnemannsche Baryta Fine Art paper. 25 x 25 cm; Haniyar Jabbar. *Case 1303*. 2014. Drawing. 15 x 10 cm; Salam Alti Sobri. *Letters From Baghdad*. 2010–12. Pencil on paper. 29.7 x 21 cm; Philippe Van Cauteren. Photograph by Anna Drijbooms.

All images courtesy the artists and the National Pavilion of Iraq.

the country's turbulent political life over the previous few decades, a question that was sustained by the 2013 Pavilion, curated by Jonathan Watkins. In an effort to move the discussion away from the geopolitics, Watkins explored the day-to-day world of artists living in Iraq, showing that there was more to existence than what was presented in the news. This year's offering will feature something of both approaches.

It remains to be seen what this actually means in terms of works to see and experience, but a collection of predominantly monochromatic works in simple, candid

and occasionally naïve styles is promised. It is important not to let visual impressions dictate our responses. There is a visceral stillness at hand, prompting moments of heavier reflection. One displayed caption reads, "This work is by an 18-year-old school girl and depicts the girl's best friend who she saw dead and bloodied after being raped on Mount Sinjar. At the time this drawing was made, her friend was still unburied."

The Pavilion transcends traditional categorisation, a dimension reinforced by Van Cauteren. "I do not like to think in slogans," he adds, "but three words: Universal. Engaged. Critical." [\[1\]](#)

