

# Harper's BAZAAR ART

VENICE BIENNALE

## INVISIBLE BEAUTY

Tamara Chalabi writes about this year's Iraq Pavilion and the long road that was taken to make Invisible Beauty possible.

Sitting in the small studio of Haider Jabbar in Samsun on the Turkish Black Sea coast on a cold morning last February and craving a warm bed instead, I was struck by the long journey we had all made in the short time since we started preparing for this year's Iraq Pavilion at the Venice Biennale, *Invisible Beauty*. I came to visit Haider with Philippe Van Cauteren, our Pavilion curator, after a few months of daily updates by Haider on Viber of every piece of work he was producing. Haider was very pleased to see us both, recounting to us the difficulties he had in getting his first show off the ground in Baghdad a year earlier because the few gallerists there found his work ugly. "I wonder what they will say now that I'm participating in Venice," he said with a hesitant smile that still carried their



critical voices in his head. Tormented by his mother's recent illness and death, Haider had taken to drawing her hospital room and sketching her on the back of prescription notes he took from a nurse. The rawness and immediacy of pain in his paintings is what had set him apart and led us to support him as a Foundation once we found out he had left Baghdad and was an official refugee, temporarily in Turkey until the UN relieved him of his limbo with a more permanent destination. His paintings, often on small pieces of paper, 25 x 25 cm, are all of beheaded men, victims of Iraq's violence. They are entitled by numbers, case no. 23, case no. 567, case no. 1639 and so on. He wants to make 2000 to honor them all.

Salam Atta Sabri on the other hand, had a different reaction. He didn't properly hear the sentence, that he was selected. Sitting in front of a dining table, with all his A4 drawings laid out on the table one next to the other, we had been talking about his constant feeling of guilt towards his two young daughters at having come back to Iraq with his family in 2005 when he could have stayed out. With his sonorous voice, he spoke gently of the weight of his choice, of living in his beloved Baghdad. His works entitled *Letters from Baghdad* are at once compulsive and therapeutic, their repetitiveness being the link between both. I interrupted him by asking him if he had understood Philippe's invitation to be part of the Pavilion. He stared at me, and then told me "our pain is so heavy, it's sometimes hard to hear good news." Then he smiled at both of us.

Latif Al Ani, a charming slender man in his early 80s gives the impression of having been a good dancer as he moves. He is also a good poser, intimate with the machinations of a camera that was his constant companion since he was an adolescent. He is openly curious, but initially reserved, over our first lunch in Baghdad as we discuss his work and career. We had already seen his archive at the Arab Image Foundation in Beirut, where he stores it for safekeeping. He was excited to know what images were going to be selected for the exhibition, and what printing paper would be used. He has an irrepressible joyful nature, despite the hard hits he has received, which he slowly unburdened to us, losing his only two sons consecutively in the last few years due to violence and an electrical accident and the deep disappointment he had in the situation in Iraq. The latter was easier to talk about of course, as he juxtaposed it constantly with the photos he had taken earlier in the 1950s and 1960s of Iraq's honeymoon with modernity. Over the many days I spent interviewing him for a long piece, he became more relaxed as he commented on his photos. Pointing at young women wearing crisp white sports shorts at a school playground, he said, "look how tidy and elegant they were." In another image, of the main commercial street of Baghdad, Al-Rashid Street, with its modernist buildings, he pointed to the cleanliness of the street, "you don't see one piece of paper on the street - it's spotless. Today you can't even walk without getting your shoes filthy." His images have a timeless quality to them, rendering them contemporary while at





the same time being a priceless archive of a bygone era. Exhausted with the very long list of questions I had for him, Latif put the photocopied images on the table, and got up to smoke his slender cigarette on the porch outside.

Akam Shex Hadi may come from what was recently a more peaceful region, Sulaymania in Kurdish Iraq, where his connections to a larger Iraqi identification are rickety as is the case with the entire Kurdish region after their uprising in 1991 and the international no-fly zone that freed them from Saddam's rule, but the traumas of the land are just as profound. The cycle of violence hasn't stopped, there are just lulls. The son of a former Peshmerga soldier, Akam's history is rooted in the Kurdish story. More recently, the ISIS onslaught has brought a more pressing existential dimension to the story, with the destruction of towns and shrines, and with entire communities being uprooted, persecuted and murdered. Akam, trying to make sense of the nightmare, has worked with four of the communities affected by ISIS to decry the suffocating panic they have generated. Each figure poses with ISIS's black flag rolled in the form of a long rope that coils around the legs, like a snake before it strangles. Artfully shot, they are portraits of a people in the cruellest battle for survival.

Rabab Ghazoul, the only woman artist in *Invisible Beauty* is far from the physical distress of Iraq's violence, but still preoccupied with it. Born in Mosul, she left for the calm of Cardiff, Wales and despite wanting to visit, has not gone back. As a visual artist, she has explored this complex identity in much of her work, which is often linked to interactive and performance pieces involving people. Confronted with a different set of challenges to those residing in Iraq, Rabab like many Iraqis in the diaspora, had to confront the evolving connection or disconnection with her homeland, "the gradual dilution of that 'Iraqi' part" of her, as she puts it and she has also explored this in several of her works as a form of testimony. Ghazoul's work for the Pavilion is also a reflection on testimony but an official one. Through the Chilcot Inquiry (also known as the Iraqi Inquiry) she investigates people's relationship with political and social structures spoken through ordinary British citizens.

I found the idea of *Invisible Beauty* very exciting when we started preparing for this project, but soon after we started a shocking reality exploded with the ISIS onslaught in early June when Mosul fell. With the horrific human suffering that ensued and cultural destruction, it was difficult to ignore this in such an exhibition. Yet I was preoccupied for months with what we could do to address it so that it doesn't overtake the entire conversation? Fortunately, we came up with a solution that has proven to be quite an adventure and that took me from the refugee camps in northern Iraq, where we distributed art material, to Beijing, where Ai Weiwei generously selected a number of the drawings made in the camps for a book, *Traces of Survival*. The book is a testimony of people in their own words and drawings. These drawings will also form part of a separate exhibition in the Pavilion. However they are also very much linked to the main themes of *Invisible Beauty*: art as a form of record-keeping, therapy and beauty. Art as survival.

As a Foundation, Ruya has survived yet another year with the difficult situation in Iraq, and at times it is unfortunate to think of just surviving, but in the wake of so much destruction, it becomes an all encompassing mission. The dialogue that started with the last Pavilion, of marking a place on the Biennale map for Iraqi artists inside Iraq, has now developed into a conversation that lives inside those in the diaspora and those that still live it daily inside Iraq. It is in itself another form of healing, of opening doors, enlarging spaces and breaking boundaries, however invisible they seem. ■

FOR MORE INFORMATION, VISIT [WWW.RUYAFFOUNDATION.ORG](http://WWW.RUYAFFOUNDATION.ORG)

(Facing page)  
 (Above) Latif Al Ani. *Tourism Promotion Film*, circa 1962  
 Black and white digital print on Hahnemühle Baryta Fine Art paper. 25 x 25 cm. Courtesy of the artist and the Arab Image Foundation (AIF).  
 (Left) Haider Jabbar. Case 1303. 2014. Drawing. 15 x 10 cm. Courtesy of the artist.  
 (This page) Akam Shex Hadi. Untitled. 2014-15. Black and white digital print on Innova-Baryth Smoothgloss paper. 30 x 45 cm. Courtesy of the artist.