

Rays of hope

The Ruya Foundation champions talented, little-known Iraqi artists, keeping the spirit and the culture of the country alive

By SOPHIE ELMHIRST

At the Venice Biennale earlier this year, the photographer Latif al Ani sat in the Iraq Pavilion as the festival of contemporary art unfolded around him. Artists usually wander around other pavilions and study the work of their contemporaries, but Al Ani – aged 83, and considered the founding father of photography in Iraq – was content to stay put and watch, delighted, as people flowed through the pavilion to look at his work. 'It gave him another kind of affirmation,' says Tamara Chalabi, chair of the Ruya Foundation for Contemporary Culture in Iraq and organiser of the Iraqi Pavilion. 'He's a world-class photographer. In this country he would have been given an OBE.'

Instead, it's miraculous that Al Ani's work exists at all.

Al Ani founded the photography department in Iraq's Ministry of Culture in 1960 and built up an archive of thousands of photographs. In 2003, the year of the allied invasion and the overthrow of Saddam Hussein, the entire collection was looted.

'I know how they took it, drawer by drawer,' he said in an interview with Chalabi for the Pavilion's catalogue. 'The last thing I heard was that the negatives were being sold in fleamarkets.' Al Ani somehow managed to preserve his own personal archive, 'a small comfort' in the face of such brutal cultural deletion. And this was the work on display in Venice: photographs from the 1960s and 1970s of daily life in Iraq, shepherds with their sheep,

smartly dressed women shopping, a girl playing the accordion, new housing developments and a peaceful scene of fishing boats in a harbour. The pictures, viewed today, offer a galling contrast to the more familiar photographs that emerge from contemporary Iraq – images of violence and abject suffering, of fighters for the so-called Islamic State storming cities, of ancient buildings being torn apart.

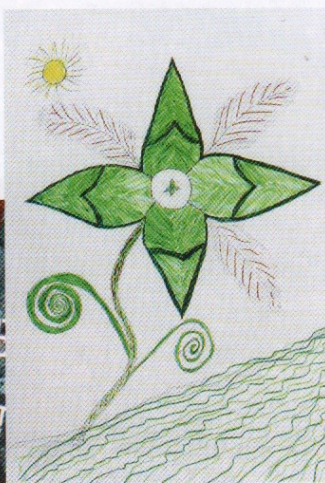
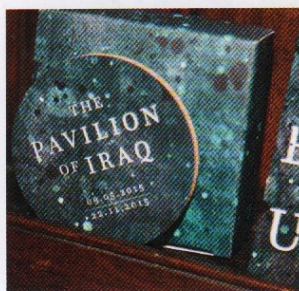
'I could not see the pictures of Mosul being destroyed,' said Chalabi recently, sitting with her Ruya colleague Reem Shather-Kubba in a café in Mayfair, London. 'I can't see it, just as I can't see someone being executed.' Her distress is evident and all-consuming and partly why she created the Ruya Foundation in 2012. Chalabi is a historian and writer, Shather-Kubba a former lawyer turned philanthropist and art collector. The pair live in Istanbul and Dubai respectively, meet

irregularly and work remotely. Both have Iraq in their blood: Chalabi is half-Iraqi, the daughter of Ahmed Chalabi, the controversial Iraqi politician who was once a close ally of the Americans and tipped as a possible future leader of the country. Shather-Kubba was born in Iraq but left as a child and still has family there. Both feel a powerful connection to the country, a pride in its history and a desire to both protect its cultural legacy and bring young Iraqi artists to the world's attention.

Hence the Pavilion in Venice, the ultimate international stage on which to promote a new generation. But as IS has battled its way across the country, Ruya's mission has expanded. The foundation now distributes art materials in refugee camps, and is working with Ai Weiwei on a project to collate the work that has emerged. This can be seen in a book, *Traces of Survival* (published by Yale University Press), and an exhibition is being planned.

They launched a drama-therapy project, working with children who had been affected and often traumatised by violence, and over the summer they ran a film programme in the camps. There is no limit to what they will do to keep Iraq's cultural spirit alive.

The work, practically speaking, isn't easy. Iraq's infrastructure has never recovered, so transporting art out of the country to



They persist so that yet another generation of Iraqi artists doesn't fall by the wayside

Left and above left: the Iraq Pavilion.

Above right: a drawing by Zaytoon Mirza Elias from Camp Shariya.

Opposite: a work by Salim Anwar from Camp Baharka



Venice took weeks of planning. Internet access is patchy at best, so even uploading photographs is awkward. It's almost impossible for many of the artists to leave the country, so the team often organises seminars and workshops in Iraq to bring the world to them. But even these pose insurmountable difficulties. One of their young artists lives in Kirkuk, two hours on the motorway from Baghdad, where one of these seminars was taking place. 'He was too afraid to come,' says Chalabi, but eventually they got him there by travelling miles out of the way via Erbil. 'Movement is very challenging.'

They persist in the face of all these hurdles so that yet another generation of artists doesn't fall by the wayside. Chalabi talks about a 'lost generation' of Iraqi artists – those in their late fifties and early sixties, who never connected with the outside world and still paint in the style of their forefathers. 'The old guard is wedded to abstract compositions that are very academic,' she says, 'that have to do with shape and colour and have a very decorative element to them.' They mimic the work of artists from the 1930s, who were educated in the West, at the Slade in London or the Beaux-Arts school in Paris, and as a result 'the interaction with the West is not now, it's not new'. It's not their fault, she's quick



to add – these are artists who couldn't travel, who had no concept of the wider contemporary-art scene and who lived under a brutal Ba'athist dictatorship that deeply inhibited their practice. Al Ani, for example, describes how in the early 1980s he was forced to stop taking pictures: 'I couldn't even step out in public with a camera; it was dangerous and impossible. I would have been arrested.' Chalabi doesn't want another generation forgotten, and sees a younger crowd who are more technologically literate drawn to working in video and photography. 'But they need a lot of nurturing,' she says.

They need help, too, in the face of a campaign of destruction by IS that poses not just a threat to life, but to an entire culture. 'It's self-annihilating,' says Chalabi. 'You are being confronted with the fear of death. The opposite of hope.' She describes small glimpses of optimism – a Facebook community, for example, who gather anti-Islamic State cartoons, many violent and furious but at least offering a creative outlet for resistance. For Chalabi, the challenge is wading through the 'thick cloud of negativity', as she puts it, trying to remain positive in a country that has been so afflicted for so long. Shather-Kubba, meanwhile, finds hope deep in Iraq's past, in the memory of a rich, ancient civilisation.

'I don't think you can wipe that history,' she says. 'You can't cancel its legacy. I hope for the sake of my children and generations to come that they will feel very proud to call Iraq home.' □

The Ruya Foundation (www.ruyafoundation.org).