

NOT ABOUT BOMBS

A collection of contemporary works by female Iraqi artists

Curatorial Perspective
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In starting the process of putting together *Not About Bombs*, I wrote in a grant proposal: “I realized what I have been seeing in the artwork is predominantly male-oriented since war is typically seen through a man’s eyes. What are the women of Iraq feeling and thinking, especially in the context of the Arab Spring and the role Arab women are taking towards promoting post-war change? We should view women less as simply victims of war and more as participants in solutions. Such artwork should reveal the complexities of who they are and what their reality is as they face an uncertain future as Iraqi women.”

And that was really all I knew.... I hoped to come across the most engaging and relevant Iraqi female artists I could find, assuming their work would reveal a current reality. The process was challenging. The pool of Iraqi female artists creating contemporary work was slim. A few options were eliminated based on unavailability or a hiatus from art. It was heartbreaking to pass on an amazing contemporary artist whose work was simply too expensive to ship from Dubai. Settling on the final 5 artists led to the realization that all the art in the show would be photo-based. I fought with this for a while, attached to the idea that a variety of mediums needed to be represented. A good friend pointed out to me that instead of fighting this outcome, I needed to embrace it and explore what this common thread signified. Instead I realized that the photo-heavy focus of this exhibit is compelling, particularly in response to the meditated photos that we as Americans are selectively exposed to when it comes to Iraq. Regardless, I do not consider this a photography exhibit. Instead, these artists have chosen photography as their medium to express something that is too real and too present to be shown any other way.

I decided also that I would not force a theme on this exhibit; instead I would wait and see what the art revealed collectively. What surfaced was an intrinsic dialog between the artworks... on residual memory and escape, the experience of loss and re-adoption of the past along with a yearning to look forward and find positivity.

The framework for interpretation of this dialog lies in the visual commonalities between the personal perspectives of each artist. It is also important to recognize a contemporary understanding of what it is to be an “Iraqi artist” in a technologically and

socially advanced world, especially with how connected this world allows us to remain. The work presents a consistent perspective that cannot be ignored even with art related to individual experiences of being Iraqi today. War, belonging, and the concept of home remain virtually present although it seems far away... because for these artists it is also as close as it can be.

This group of Iraqi artists exists more within a cross-cultural sphere than anywhere else. The five women collectively represent a place between their country of origin and their country of destination. Sama Alshaibi lives in Arizona and Dena Al-Adeeb lives in Los Angeles. For *Baghdadi Mem/Wars* the women collaborated in New York. Tamara Abdul Hadi splits time between Montreal and Lebanon, while her sister, Sundus Abdul Hadi works and lives in Montreal. Both their work in this exhibit is based on photography captured by Tamara while she re-visited Iraq for the first time in 17 years. In contrast to the rest of the women, Julie Adnan remains based and rooted in Kirkuk, Iraq. Yet avoiding the framework of nationalism and instead understanding their work as representatives of individual narratives leads to greater understanding of contemporary Iraqi identity.

This show claims one thing boldly, that it is not about bombs... what then is it about? To me, the selection of works embrace cultural and visual references to Iraq and a 9-year war, but I hope I present it in a way that is contemporary enough to be immediate and fresh. And for the artists, it is perhaps about remembering the past but looking towards the future...as well as acknowledging the obstacles such a simple concept inevitably implies. Ultimately this is a voice that is rarely heard, and admittedly a challenge to bring together. Yet the intensely beautiful and cohesive outcome... speaks to the power of a platform for representation.

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