

Navigating the Aftermath

Curatorial Perspective

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Last summer “The Iraqi and American Reconciliation Project” presented an exhibit in Minneapolis entitled *The Art of Conflict*, which featured a collection of artwork from Iraqi and American artists who had been given an opportunity to express freely how they felt about the war in Iraq. These artists shared their feelings about the conflict in representations reflecting how conflict had affected lives, repressed emotions, and garnered uncomfortable perceptions. Artists of diverse backgrounds ranged from war veterans to civilians, war activists to student artists, and an Iraqi schoolteacher to one of Saddam Hussein’s former personal artists. Regardless of their artistic background, the sum of the parts equaled a gallery filled with raw emotion and a genuine recognition and concern for the impact this war has had on Americans and Iraqis. An inquisitive audience experienced an unfiltered and unbiased collection of war images expressed through a range of mediums. Displayed side-to-side, these works of art appeared to be reaching out and speaking to one another, as if to say, “so here we are...now what’s next?”

In response, *Navigating the Aftermath* looks once again to artists for inspiration amidst the chaos. With over 4,400 American casualties, at least 100,000 Iraqi casualties, over 32,000 Americans wounded, and at least 2 million Iraqis forced to flee their country, the Iraq War has etched itself into American and Iraqi history. In Minnesota alone, 90,000 refugees and 402,000 veterans make up a significant portion of the population that has been affected directly by war. Left in the wake is a torn and battered Iraq, while in the U.S., soldiers are routinely recycled back into conflict situations embarking on tours of duty in Afghanistan or yet another one in Iraq. The war is far from over, and the wounds are still fresh and festering. *Navigating the Aftermath* takes up where *The Art of Conflict* left off, except that for this event, the intent is to delve even deeper into the psychological impact of this war. Specific questions are posed to those who lived it to varying degrees.

From the American perspective, the artists are veterans, friends and family of soldiers, or those closely tied to the war through activism. As the artists’ battle with ignored and misunderstood experiences, with sharing them to try make sense of them, their voices speak of lives changed and lives taken in a faraway place called Iraq. The Iraqi perspective this time around is also re-imagined. Joining the American artists are not only artists living in Iraq, but Iraq-Americans who have left the place they once called home. The artists represent the voice of a contemporary and modern Iraq, hopeful and invested in the future of the country. They confront their losses

and the path ahead searching for meaning and a new understanding of the identity of an Iraqi and the identity of his or her country, whether viewed from afar or from the within.

In all, fourteen carefully chosen artists present a collective landscape of emotional battle scars accompanied by an intense desire to seek healing in a better place. What needs to be remembered? What can we let go of? And how do we move forward? Who are we? And how do we exist? Once again, both Iraqi and American artistic perspectives seamlessly elicit a kind of interactive soliloquy, where the first step towards addressing these questions is to engender an empathetic awareness by listening carefully to what the voices are saying.

While the Iraq War continues to see casualties, albeit with less fanfare, the aim of *Navigating the Aftermath* is to look forward and to inspire serious reflection and impassioned discussion about what the war has done and is doing to the United States and to Iraq. Although most Americans have seen only a small part of the devastation and tragedy of this war through the prism of media and its images, *Navigating the Aftermath* will avail the public an opportunity to take a long hard look at the collective and long-term effects of the war and reflect on how both countries must begin the healing process in an effort to move forward beyond the status quo to a more peaceful and secure future.

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