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The City of Baghdad in Art: Innovations as Reinterpretations of Destruction

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Abstract:
In and amongst the return to ruin ravaging the city of Baghdad, its contemporary artists lamented these violent turns unto space, taking it from utopian bliss to everyday dystopia. Their works represent a conveyance of the spatiality of pain but also a reckoning with character-altering devastation. There is further love of place even as it suffers the perils of war, the challenge being to reconcile death within life through the complexities of representation. Within these artistic offerings is the pioneering of the aestheticization of ruin. It is that life necessarily emerges from the bowels of devastation as the five selected native artists capture the majesty and ache of the capital as it ignited their imaginations. This is, in many ways, a series of interpretative frameworks that treat the afflicted city so that it may survive. It is settled into their imaginative sensibilities that can reclaim what was stripped in the absurdity of the real. From the permeation of ruination as material into the art-making process to reified pain, these Iraqi creatives have incorporated woundedness into their pieces. They speak back to the city what it was feeling and reeling from and uncover a spatiality of loss and innovation.

Keywords: *Baghdad, space and place, art, war, ruination, wounded identity*

1. The Visceral Encounter with Ruination as the Essence of Being

Iraqi artists were met with a challenge, indeed a crisis, of representation after the fall of the capital as it entered into the twenty-first century, and yet there was potential for an opportunity. On the face of it and in execution, the carnage would fix them in a place of mourning. It also meant that the treatment of destruction, their disorientation and pain reaching over into the absurd demanded a new mode of expression. A few short years after the abysmal 2003 assault, they were breaking away but still somewhat mired in the cult of personality of its former dictator, “a part of the bizarre and unique aesthetic culture that has gripped Iraq for almost a quarter-century." However, the disgustingly "odd patronage" was beginning to lose steam "...and many Iraqi artists are hoping their country’s great traditions of art-making will take another turn – this time for the better" (Chang, 2006), though it ultimately took a turn for the worse. It is a sad fact, while looking back in retrospect that these creative minds were looking to visualize life; however, from spaces of figuration to abstraction, they were left with a wrenching sense of hurt. The question essentially was how art could respond to it. As Baghdad fell into unending chaos, "they saw themselves as responsible for clarifying the notion of Iraqi identity" (Shabout, 2012), not simply influenced and built upon the foundation of the ruin of political gaffes but leaning so far in that a new practice was born. They pioneered the aestheticization of ruin in the midst of trying to come to terms with it.

Colors, shapes, textures, a myriad of objects, what formed their works and how they approached them would indefinitely change simply given that the safety and familiarity of the old would no longer suffice. In other words, the one-dimensionality and visual elements of a traditional creation were too distant if they were to successfully forge a connection with the observer. If said person gazing upon a piece is to sense the pain and not merely look upon it, the artist who furiously creates must privilege ruin by aestheticizing it, and an artistic rendering will result. It is an ambitious objective, but the post-Iraq War artist was pushed into this deconstructive approach despite himself. To be able to capture Baghdadi's agony, a moving target, and increasingly having him elevate the tricks of his trade, he would have to cross that decorum of sorts, that threshold. As he makes and remakes, an observation Sheila Regan (2010) registered when she profiled the 2010 The Art of Conflict exhibition, he is seeking reconciliation through art. Creating art is primarily to facilitate an act of healing, and for Ghalib Al-Mansouri, whom she spoke to, once the personal artist and designer for Saddam Hussein, his suffering had to come across brashly from "textured blobs of blues and browns" to choosing "bolder colors, creating areas of thick white paint, and strong red strokes" (Regan, para. 7). In this near-postapocalyptic landscape, the artist began to allocate meaning to the confused madness of creation. The tragic dystopia can only come to life if the distorted medium, ruination and the ruin it draws from become the message. These individuals have led this recalibration with the first thought always being what went into their process.

So this postmodern and postcolonial period of artwork has offered a double-edged manifestation where pieces are novel in their innovation while also devastating on a human level when the casual observer recognizes how far and deep pain as inspiration has taken the creator. Put simply, no tried and tested strategy for creating art would be enough to put

forward the amount of hurt, so they had to look for new modes of expression. The subject matter, with its centering on ruin, had long outgrown past strategies. This is the hallmark of these oeuvres and essential to their understanding. Having been touched by this pain, the level of authenticity is immediately an instinctual and intensely physical one. Stepping into the environment of any of these pieces is not merely transformative but transportive. It is like walking into war itself, the artwork engaging the senses and not simply lapping at the heels of sight alone. Many have risen to the occasion over the past eighteen years, allowing themselves the artistic courage to push the envelope. They not only respond to war as they come to experience it but quite literally bring it to the viewer, "The horror is seen from all perspectives" (El-Kayal, 2019). The terrorizing goings-on of death and destruction do not need to be spoken for, and from this point of departure, a number of artists have sought to give it the first and last word. They are no more than vessels, hardly needing to artistically embellish the horrors of ruin. Through its aestheticization after the communication of this pain, ruin is able to find new life, and the artist can craft it into being. It amazingly emerges into the world of function. In content, as far as morality is concerned, there is the potentiality that ruination holds, and in form, especially for sculptors and those who work with objects, there is practical use. One particular artist working out of London today certainly comes across as the most seminal, having definitively innovated wreckage as an art form. Others have taken after her ethos and the misery at the heart of it, surely recognizing that prospect, though she is the first to clearly describe it. To this visionary, even beginning to depict ruin means that the items used must be ruined themselves, presenting this frailness as input into the process, giving value to the finished product. To represent Baghdadi destruction, her goal and that of every Iraqi artist, it would mean attempting to make of ruin an item folded into the language of visual imagery so that it no longer stands outside of it.

Iraqi mixed-media artist Hanaa Malallah approached the start of her artistic creation with the knowledge that the old would not suffice in portraying the environment of instability she had taken in around Baghdad. The viewer cannot be transported by mere sight, and the magnitude of the pain she is looking to reproduce is far too great, so a different configuration is warranted. Nada Shabout (2006) clarifies that in the aftermath and within the framework of war, contemporary works spatially reformulate the city "in an effort to construct images for a new Iraq through ideological, cultural reconstruction" and that circumstances were certainly geared towards ample production of an aesthetic persuasion. Image-making in the postmodern age presented limitless "possibilities of interpretation" (p. 41), and the archetypal Iraqi artist had more inspiration from a nation in tatters than he knew what to do with or identify. However, Malallah always went one step ahead. There had to be a shattering of the dialectic of the copy foregrounding the original. The feeling of the immediate and the real had to be associated with the finished piece. As for ruin, it symbolizes the beginning and never the end of her creativity as it forms the basis of being transported to the materiality of the wounded space. It is thus not a matter of limiting the experience to the abstract and does not mean "that I am reproducing the idea of war." Ruination calls for multidimensionality and, quite literally, stepping into as close an encounter as possible, the grotesqueness that it leaves behind.

Therefore, she rises to the challenge of artistic depiction of the Baghdadi space and the imperative for another method by replacing mere reproduction with the actual. In the place of abstraction, “I am utilizing its intrinsically destructive process to engender the visceral experience of the reality of war irrespective of its geographic/political particular” (Malallah, para. 2).

Figure 1

In figure 1, it is plain for the observer to see the refreshing lack of aesthetic mediation in an example of what she terms object art. The reading table, embellished with burnt trestle and light filament, was quite literally lifted from a scene of destruction happening in the city. It communicates a spatiality that is fissured and at odds with conceived and planned space, there being only room for chaos, with something to say, yet "…there is very little to be said" and far less "to be lived" though this space goes on living. It follows that "lived experience is crushed" (Lefebvre, 1991) with only nostalgia and regret punctuating it. However, Malallah purposefully aims for some semblance of life from within the underbelly of ruin. Physically tasting war in this way reorients public opinion around death. It assumes the opposite role, the starting point to an alternative plane of existence. When art picks up the mantle of representation, this kind of immediacy jolts expectations and assigns method to madness, as it were. What she is doing is producing new space from below. This is an attempt at claiming the right to the city from the heart of an urbanism of destruction, transforming it; otherwise, it would be lost to a force that cannot be controlled.

Instead of presenting it to the onlooker as a vessel of spatial lifelessness, she changes it with conviction so that its central message is the potentiality within ruin to participate in the creation of something new. As pieces of damage that are turned into treasure, Saleem Al-Bahloly (2009) speaks of how Malallah reengages them “to give form” not only to the city that lies in a leveled state “but also to the collateral disfigurement of its aesthetic tradition, her works are themselves, in her words, ruins, piles of forms” (p. 103).

Figure 2

Faceless victims, part of a collection commemorating the over four hundred lives lost and dreadfully incinerated during the Amiriyah shelter bombing on February 13, 1991, as a portion of American aerial warfare, were afforded a second chance at individuation by Malallah. These martyrs were literally and disturbingly merged into that desolation of Baghdadi spatiality, the assault "both devastating and sustained" (Ismael, 2020), burning them into the ground. Her project, arising again out of the ashes of ruination made up of burnt canvas, as seen in figure 2, does not solely give the dead surrealist identities from beyond the grave but questions the very physicality of facial representation. Once more, the playfulness between the concept and the immaculate technique employed begins from the pits of ruin. It is the source of their profound and continued being in the hereafter. There is still a subjective presence felt when the completed work is looked upon by the observant other. Indeed, in this particularized poetics sensed when stepping into that space of mourning, as Gaston Bachelard would attest, "everything comes alive when contradictions accumulate" (p. 39) such that ruin bestows significance upon the faces that are no more rather than distorting them. The observer knows, despite the incongruity, that they come alive. The artist fights for the city in her constructions, in projects "of a different society, a different mode of production" where space is overseen by "different conceptual determinations" (Lefebvre, 1991, as cited in Unwin, 2000). Malallah seeks to achieve this by wholly embodying the contradictions that have come about and remained part and parcel of urbanity.

Briefly looking back before the Iraq War, Malallah and others like her lived and breathed a contradictory existence as the artist had to create more on account of sensing greater suffering with far less. The post-1991 economic embargo meant that material was hard to come by, making it so that the Iraqi painter, sculptor and photographer would rarely experiment preoccupied with a shrinking market. The public could not even shore up enough international support to reverse what were deemed criminal sanctions, let alone the reticent artist scrambling to secure his tools. A dictatorial hold on state power, no doubt wanting to further a certain ideological bent, made matters worse. There was no improvement. This stagnation was so limiting that they "…began to explore the small-scale notebook or album as a primary medium of artistic expression" (Bahrani, 2009). On the other hand, art-making has decidedly been revolutionized as Iraq stepped into a catastrophic millennium both freeing these creative minds to position themselves in new forms of articulation, ones that they would fashion, as their imaginations run wild yet stimulating them to do justice to a deeply severed city. They were, due to this material shortage, dabbling in the idea of economical art-making, where a piece of work can only go so far as provisions would allow it. Ruin was a centerpiece of daily life, but only the destruction of war would hoist it into an inevitable repurposing. Physical markers of conflict arresting everyday normalcy like piles of debris and rubble virtually handed them their next artistic step, not just because it made logical sense but because it was a necessity if Baghdad had a fighting chance at surviving. It had to grow into something useable lest it fester on its streets, and this epiphany, coupled with newfound freedom, meant that a different culture would take flight.

This repurposing of ruin is paramount to the creative process if one were to try evoking the ruptures of Baghdadi spatiality and internalizing the destructed form. However, the challenge is made even more demanding for the contrast that ought to be struck.

Figure 3

The resonances of life that are born anew are held up against the documentation of pain. Genuine suffering and reworking it in some fashion, darkness and light are part of this critical dualistic phenomenology that every viewer will glean. The Iraqi creator is in the midst of this dichotomy, forever fleeting back and forth between the two states of being. Dia Al-Azzawi, a painter and sculptor who calls Baghdad home, made this his moniker as he witnessed the beginnings of "military brutality against civilians" again tormented by the bombing of the shelter. In figure 3, he removes irony, clearly prioritizing the rawness of hurt as he pays tribute to those killed in nine charcoal sketches. However, there is, though muted and purposefully not animated, an impression of essentializing ruin. Titled *The Land of Darkness*, he taps into a double meaning where the "auspicious and ancient" description given to Mesopotamia "to describe the fertility of the black-silted land" is reused in the same breath "to also describe the sorrow and destruction and the scale of the tragedy" (Al-Azzawi, n.d.). Any foundation for space in the aftermath of ruination is built upon its remembrance. To him, it can never be forgotten, and so it is the essence. This is nothing short of a postmodern crisis of representation; still, there is no turning back. Perhaps it is what Fredric Jameson would deem a characteristic cultural logic "…reshaping the form and functioning of the city" (Low, 2003) when it cannot turn a blind eye to the paradox overtaking it. So, it focuses on the recollection of pain as a defining feature of urbanity, and it is a sentiment that is continually absorbed into and shaping the urban spirit that is receptive to it as a chance at survival.

In condemning the 2003 invasion and destruction of Baghdad, Al-Azzawi again commits to a solemn commemoration of tragedy in a large monochromatic work made up of an assortment of shapes and objects.

Figure 4

Just as its dynamic nature, pictured in figure 4, documents the deep-seated pain of the Iraqi people, the abstractions at work stretch meaning into the invocation of a new everyday thrust upon them. They must grow accustomed to this pervasive poetics. It reeks of unshakable woundedness that becomes the identity of the city as a non-place. In it, the artist imagines "*the fire and blood blindly pouring over the living and the dead. Outlines of heads, legs, feet, hands – structured silhouettes and broadly outlined faces – overlap, piled on top of each other" (Al-Azzawi, 2017) as if they come together as an urban form, a physical being as a nauseating tribute to ongoing suffering. He leans into this ontological nightmare, aptly visualized in black and white, not just so that ruination emerges as the only truth but space as total and complete pain exists indefinitely between the threshold of being and nothingness. There is an entire reframing of the dialectics of inside and outside in destroyed spatiality. Whereas some sort of "border-line surface" endured before, "this surface is painful on both sides" in this precarious now, and the new order is ascribing connotation to the void, "void being the raw material of possibility of being" (Bachelard, 1994). The swords and limps peppering his creation can no longer differentiate, restricting themselves as if agony is meant to have sense and merely to continue with the organized chaos. For the soulless faces in his work, it is precisely the centeredness of pain and encountering it as it sits on the border flanked by two formerly separate realities so that it is always passed, which results in their distress.*

As a trans-spatial artist, Al-Azzawi has defiantly refused contemporary Baghdadi geography and history, choosing instead to amplify "the relationship between art and revolution…" that can perhaps bring forth a new humanity. The

*victimized Iraqi citizen gains pride of place in his work, reclaiming social space where it is taken from him in everyday life. He takes liberty in allowing art to not necessarily divorce itself from the plague of destruction, as he forges a utopian reality in his lines and colors, but makes of it a mechanism for "rejecting injustice." In this way, "*rejection and rebellion become two existences inseparable from the continuous act of creativity" (Shabout, 2014), so his beloved Baghdad is continually imaginary. It is precisely why he has vowed never to visit it since leaving in 1976 when the Baathists were seizing power and closing in on the entire country. He says, "I know a different Iraq", and so decides that "I do not want to visit this place because I am certain that I will lose it once more. Therefore, I do not want to win myself and lose Iraq" (Karam, 2016) hence he gives no consequence to time. Ruin also has no temporality. It is free-floating and chock full of opportunity thereby succumbing to his vision to create a better future within the world of his canvas. It enters into his construct that privileges human existence and is necessarily transformed as he conveys and acts upon his discontent. It is a complex structure, what Friedrich Nietzsche (1909) considers an activity "that exalts and denies simultaneously…no artist tolerates reality" (Camus, 1956), so it continues the constant push and pull. The artist feels a sense of duty that he outwardly rejects in his art, yet what is interesting is how hope is never on the outskirts of his creation. It necessarily springs from that very darkness. There is no real nuance in Al-Azzawi as his resignation, in mind and spirit, is clear, so the observer has to labor and mine that celebration of being within the real world on his behalf. He can only picture it in his imagination. There is no place for it to him otherwise.

Figure 5

So, his love affair with the city is such that he calls attention to its torment. The narrative that he follows is never linear, but it persistently answers to a desire for life. Both elements inform his artistic approach. The homophobic lurks in the background; however, he decides to emphasize his love of place, which is his own invention, formed from his hope for the immateriality of this wounded space. Its scars last in physical form, yet his plan is to favor the abstract and treat it as real. Over time, "what begins as undifferentiated space becomes place as we get to know it better and endow it with value" (Tuan, 1977) until actual reality is nothing but a memory. There is essentially no limit to the transformative power of the intangible acting as a refuge from the ills of daily life, and those suffering can remain there if they so wish, untethered to a smothering state of affairs.

Another Iraqi artist who questions the past in her visual language is Hayv Kahraman, who operates out of her Los Angeles-based studio to bring the onlooker a sense of non-fixity that genders her memories of the city of her birth during the Iran-Iraq War. She eventually moved to Sweden at the tender age of eleven in 1992, though not before Baghdad as a concept of disarticulation and the concrete reality of ruin as a fresh mode of expression would penetrate the subject matter of her work. It would also come to mean what it was to be an Iraqi immigrant. In figure 5, it is depicted that the artistic effect as ruination "breaks down the stability of the canvas," yet all so that the finished product, titled *Shield 2*, can confidently take on its normative character that will welcome its proclivity for destruction, “to help the viewer see with new eyes” (Khoury, 2019).

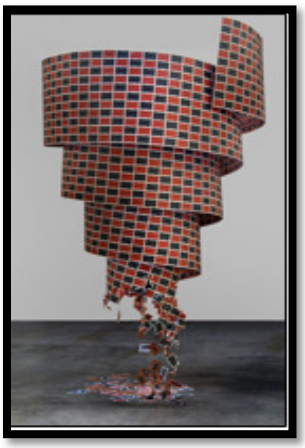

Figure 6

To destroy and perforate the tranquil figure is to imagine that spatial violence is not an outlier contrasting with it. It is accepted as part of her essence. Anecdotally inspired, Kahraman would lift this aesthetic contradiction from her own wartime experience, remembering once "when my dad was driving in downtown Baghdad" and they happened upon a terrifying sight, a once-tall building a shadow of its former self. The artist looked in fascination and "pointed up toward the demolished building…that was the first time I had seen the destruction of that magnitude" (Kahraman, 2015), and she waited for the noises to stop. Stepping outside again, she hoped to "collect the most bullet shells" and they were "somewhat golden in color and quite beautiful" (Daughtry, 2017) the artist remembers thinking. These agonizing recollections were nuanced, always duplicitous, and started her down a road that saw to it that she would express the performativity of violence in her pieces. The defiant woman is meant to challenge and disrupt norms, acting as a medium for the postmodern Baghdadi demeanor that is uninterrupted by wounds. Those same grazes oozing great pain were given a new purpose, and there is even something to be said of their placement, never disrupting her.

Kahraman begins the journey into her creative process, which has had her surrounded by an army of women, each a fragment of her consciousness, wanting to reconcile "the complexities of representing identity" when it is plagued by trauma and loss. She chooses to see that there is a certain something to speak of despite illusory nothingness. Again, from a lopsided foundation arises an object that can scarcely symbolize the Baghdad she knew and mourned but brings to life what it must eventually become lest it be lost forever. Like many an Iraqi artist, her stab at the Iraqi self is a personal affirmation to fly in the face of those who doubt it. She must, with confidence, present it, devastating ruins and all, as normal, much like in figure 6, where the Malwiya Mosque in Samarra is turned on its head, disintegrating at the base. A nod to national and diasporic space alike, as the peculiarity and turmoil of displacement were experienced broadly, she employs her "signature polarization of form and content" such that spatiality and everyday life, characterized by non-being, that is reversed can "still make sense" (Shabout, 2018). Henri Lefebvre would celebrate this understanding of the significance of producing social relations in a concretized space, that which has her placing contradictions in the structural center of the struggle towards "territorial liberation and reconstruction" forming a beautiful tension that is at the very least alive. Edward Soja argues that Lefebvrean thinking would never negate the import of "…the spatial problematic…for its significance reflects the progress development of the forces of production over time" (p. 215) particularly if the objective is to regain control of social space. The artist leans into the beauty of inversion and makes of it a recognizable urban form. It is an all too familiar account that reclaims the mentally perturbed city by setting up shop and creating a home of some sort to return to in the inescapable in-betweenness. Soon enough, it begins to feel familiar and like a refuge from daily ailments. All the while, there is an acknowledgement to be sure that this by no means should feel normal however it is unfortunately all that presents itself.

Essential to her aesthetic regulation of space, the artist does not shy away from fixing her gaze upon a middle-of-the-road subjectivity where perception is transitory.

Figure 7

The course is made jagged, and the linear is continuous and divergent. As Walter Mignolo (2013) asserts, “her work liberates aesthesis, sensing, perceptions, from the prison house of Western aesthetics" by venerating "migrant consciousness" (Mignolo, para. 4); thus, the border becomes the home. However, in this exercise in voyeuristic self-analysis like in figure 7, given that Kahraman perpetually looks to understand her own confused place be it as an Iraqi, Kurdish-American, refugee or exile, she empowers herself when "the house is my domain" (Kahraman, n.d.). Only she is able to look back on herself, feel her own eyes burning through her closely from behind and try to piece together her fragmented self. It is a spatial reality whereby the binary of migrant and indigenous loses relevance, and it offers her a different kind of whole. She proves that there does not need to be a relentless nod to othering, a process beaten to death in the East-West neocolonial present, just a conscious effort to run as far away from it as possible. It does undeniably appear as the aggressor in this regard, hence what the fortified walls of her home are shielding against, but the obvious message is a pushing back to gain some semblance of agency. The separation is deeply entrenched in the popular imagination. Within it, Iraq and its occupation have been a flagship failure of its recent history, though she seeks to break this unbeatable cycle and simply be despite it. Maybe then space could come alive both artistically and realistically.

Confusion is a hallmark of her oeuvres, and anyone gazing upon her creations will understand that she is trying her utmost to locate herself and negotiate the self, the perennial question continuing to haunt and ensnare however it is justified. She is meant to show, and the observer is meant to walk away with, a work in progress that begins with jolted apprehension at having to reimagine ruin in a creative context and discursive space though materialized of its own volition. The artist captures this transitory vulnerability more often than not, choosing to remain fixated in the Manichaean middle. More than anything, "the material genealogy" of the archetypal body forming the epicenter of her artistic focus is vital to consider. The central point behind their mutilation, bending joints out of shape and outside of functional use, twists and distortions is that "…the shreds are re-woven. The disfigured body is remembered, and it is incumbent upon us to try to retrace or imagine its painful journey" (Antoon, 2018). Bachelard acknowledges the phenomenology of the poetic imagination as just that, the being of man expressed in a language that "bears within itself the dialectics of open and closed." It would be divergent from reality to define it "as the being of an ambiguity" when it "wants to be both visible and hidden…man is a half-open being" (p. 222), and he cannot be anything but in a poetics of destruction. By legitimating through giving a name and purpose to this concept, he extricates it from ambiguity and creates the real possibility of a space that takes its cues from the body as disfigured. It can now embrace an aesthetic meaning and be free to construct a separate spatiality. Eventually, language must catch up to what the artist is looking to represent, which is truthfully no choice of hers. Ruination and its accumulation of contradiction must be the ontological foundation to create. The picture of the whole is never quite achieved, for the splits are plain for all to see, but the key is that it is a different kind of completeness. It is not merely an authentic representation but a viewing experience that is aesthetically adjusted since the object is just as poetic as it is political.

2. The City as an Endless State of Change Is a Mark of Modern Reification

Rafa Al-Nasiri, an Iraqi painter and educator, firmly grounded his illustration of wounded Baghdad in his book Art in the Narrative of Consistent Evolution. This change did nothing but heal a fractured reality. Urban life had to make do with its figurative cracks to normalize them until change became the constant. The space did not know anything, if not its complete incompleteness, though it would, in time, learn to settle for an exclusive definition, "not as an artefact inert and complete unto itself but as something in a constant state of motion and flux" (Liu & Zeitlin, 2003). Only later in life did Al-Nasiri put down roots outside of his native country, sometime in the 1990s, having experienced personally and brutally the horrors of the war-ravaged capital. What emerges from his ruminations is the sense that everyday life is forever in search of something ongoing, so it grows weary of committing itself to a sole image. Sonja Mejcher-Atassi (2017) argues that his book art “partakes in such travels and contacts in search of an Arab modernism in which Iraq was to take centre stage, challenging monolithic notions of modernism that align this term with Western art only" (p. 38) and Iraq more than complicates the holistic perspective of modernity. From its vantage point, the modern age breaks all lofty promises for structure and provides dislocation and disarray in perpetuity. To Al-Nasiri, it is time-consuming to harp on the intricacies of the levels that have made the Baghdadi space a liminal conundrum, but it is all the better to burn them. Just as James Clifford (1997) conceived of them, the city fits snugly into the grouping he called "crucial sites for an unfinished modernity" (p. 2), though the most critical aspect to make note of is that there is no final destination at the end of this journey. Being caught at the halfway point is the journey. As such, it is reified as close as possible to being a physical construct. The thingness of ruination is concretized, and it is this very transformation that salvages space since it runs parallel to and complements the need to recalibrate itself every time disruptive change happens upon it.

Book art is a unique phenomenon that "appeared in France at the turn of the 20th century" and is called the livre d'artiste. Its most significant feature is operating under a synthetic formula that combines various art forms. In any one of these creations, "there exists an intricate correlation between the text and the illustration" ("Moscow Museum of Modern Art," n.d.), coming together against a thematic backdrop. The premise is at once personal and shared broadly with the reading public as the artist mediates the conception of an intimate point of contact between text and illustration, essentially why the piece was created and readying it for wider consumption.

Figure 8

It is, first and foremost, a work of art employing "all means of production", and this particularly resonates in this day and age when those have evolved into so many. They include "photography, painting, drawing, collage, metalwork, stitching, beading – both hand and machine-driven" (Drucker, 2007) and where import ultimately resides is in the intersection of word and image. For Al-Nasiri, and his contemporaries for that matter, the book is as art "as a gained momentum" and pride of place in their arsenal "as a result of political urgency." It was, in addition, technically speaking, a perfect fit for the exilic Iraqi artist for "the book's relatively small size and its portability and ease of storage meet the work and life conditions of many Iraqi artists…" According to Mejcher-Atassi (2014), their dark homages to a dismal present can be produced in an instant. The discerning audience any one of them hoped to attract, to listen to the modern tragedy of a nation, does not need to walk the halls of an exhibition. A book artistically executing this pain can appear in the palm of their hands.

Anxiety is categorically held firm and made into a thing in the art book of the artist entitled *Homage to Al-Mutanabbi Street*, seen in figure 8, which, at the height of infighting ignited by the invasion, suffered a car bomb in March of 2007 that left it in shambles and many businesses were devastated. In the literary and cultural heart of Baghdad, the street encountered a brush with death that "killed thirty people, injured more than one hundred others, and destroyed centuries of cultural heritage works" (Staum-Kuniej, 2015). The artist renders with precision the pain the area felt that it would concur should it be able to speak for the finished pieces bear the vicarious mark of brutalization. A metonymy, looking upon it, feeds right back into the lived experience of that bombing. However, now what is outwardly a momentary lapse in citywide security is crystallized, frozen in time, and his artistic memory, as every day and what is abstractly ghastly and disturbing, is aestheticized and thus normalized. So, form is given to this abstraction that ought to just pass, but its recurrence makes it impossible. There is no choice but to perform this paradox. Al-Nasiri does this by depicting "the face of an unnamed woman" bound and gagged as well as making the artistic decision to shoot at the image "leaving multiple bullet holes" ("Iraqi Artists in Exile," n.d.) that cease to remain a physical element. The atmosphere he has created passes them through a process of reification, bestowing the entire object, informed utterly by ruin, with migration into the fixedness of the real. This is the all too tragic face of modern Baghdadi space. The bullet holes are not just a thing of the present but are given a history of long inhabitation, a strong presence that can scarcely be invalidated. As Yi-Fu Tuan would conceive of it, the damaged street, even today, is a harmonious marriage of the topophilic and topophobic corresponding to "a number of researchers" who have liberally "discussed the dark side of topophilia and sense of place…" (Easthope, 2004). Indeed, it has become a topophilia of violence as concrete as any urban construct persisting through a contradiction and able to be seen just as much as it is able to be felt.

Another art book focuses on perceptible sorrow in November 2007, which, in retrospect, was one of the deadliest months of the war to plague the city and is the manifestation of quite a paradox around the notion of change. It is what may be called change that stands inflexibly still on account of its negativity. Though with sentimentality and sadness, Al-Nasiri turns into a pattern and reifies negative change given that this piece, over multiple pages which figure 9 illustrates, depicts red handprints emblazoned onto each one “with the red of the hands darkening to the color of dried blood" (Secor, 2009) and with the last page the image is complete. The Iraqi woman, with her eyes closed, defenseless and in grief, already knows of this pain as a free entity before the artist came along intellectualizing and giving it its thingness through his art. Lefebvre (1991) would most likely call this spatial fetishism, wounded space stretched to a reification unreal in composition but where only raw reality happens.

Figure 9

Essentially, there is a realness of pain extenuated because it is enacted on the non-thingness of space. The two work together, and such is the Baghdad upon which the impression of pain is constructed in the collage. The entity of misery, which is sustained as a fact of life, is predicated on the non-entity of space. So, though something that contradicts

what it means to exist at every level, it appears to still impose itself and then begins the laborious task of making sense of it. However, the Baghdadi space, utterly tattered and broken as it is, does not concern itself with "productive labour" and the "social relationships of exploitation and domination" (p. 80) as part of a capitalist system. It is preoccupied with its anarchic state, and so, even if it wished to, it cannot "…lie in order to conceal" (p. 81) what it, in fact, is since the ruin that has befallen it has made it so that there is never a moment where concealment prevails. It can be telling while criticizing and lamenting the death and destruction caused. However, residents have recently come around to realizing this truth, which is greatly understandable as they wallowed in the thick of utter pain, that the continuation of this brutal defacement exposes the treachery of the current political class disgracefully a case study in the penetration of vested interests into managing the state.

The exact opposite, in a physical sense, is what plays out, given that the rampant destruction literally drags the city through an expository experience, defacing architecture and leveling buildings so that nothing is hidden. Fresh wounds are, by their very nature, a show of the bitter truth, and they are one in which Baghdad is mired, an actuality of skeletal remains.

Figure 10

Everything is unmasked in this way, and space ceases to have a life, barely able to scrape one together before it is inflicted once more, so it has nothing but to transform into a dilapidated thing. It was often the case that shelter for him would be sought in poetry "to express my psychological state and the extreme pain and agony of witnessing the torture of the people of my country, wishing and hoping for liberation and salvation from the deterioration and disappearance of their country" (Mejcher-Atassi, 2017) and this appears in figure 10 displaying the art book called *Blessed Tigris*. What is reified here, which has indeed morphed into the bread and butter of many a Middle Eastern expert concentrating on Iraq, is simultaneous mystification and exoticization of the hurting city and countering it, switching back and forth as it is caught between two poles of spatial identity. The thing that is brought into material existence is its suffocating dichotomy where the land of blackness, once meaning a "land of plenty" and referring to "its vast forests", must now share and constantly entertain another. In modern times, it has been replaced with "the blackness of military tanks and boots" (p. 82) and the demolition they have caused. However, the honorable Baghdadi resident will not allow for the latter connotation to overtake his city and so the paradox finds life in the everyday. This sensed cataclysmic middle ground has turned into the thing of all things. It is quite terribly revealing when the supposedly fleeting becomes fixed, yet urbanity leaves no choice for the artist but to actualize this procedure and see it through so that some sense of life is grasped.

Al-Nasiri is a master of reified presentation that possesses a certain quality and intensity around pain as an object and the violent in-betweenness of present-day Baghdad. Somewhere in the midst of war and peace, the city somehow persists, and it is only in this liminal place, a phenomenological fusion of both, that there is what can be considered living. Life has abandoned it, and so has traditional death. Hence, it teeters always encountering the extraordinary. Art, to him, against the backdrop of this shaky condition is a means of survival attributable to "the Iraqi character that longs to develop and progress, possessing a competitive trait and a willingness to confront challenges" (Al-Nasiri, 2007). Consciously, he, and truly every Iraqi creator, has reconciled the fact of the thingness of pain, which is interestingly part of a narrative and under the banner of development, though it comes across as antithetical. Perhaps it is due to the Baghdadi state of consciousness reaching a point of reckoning, needing to normalize and bring anguish into the conceptual coherence of its borders. It can, thus, be channeled into the inside. Only then can there be a possibility of reclamation of social space. When it is brought into the fold as a functionally manageable thing in the creative sphere, the mystique of terror is lost, and progress, however, enveloped in sadness, is registered. Carried over from an enforced Western frame of reference, standardizing pain is one crucial way to combat "neocon mystification" that was especially potent in the post-September 11 climate. It was used to allow "an imperial geopolitics…without disclosure and justification" (Falk, 2005), except now it has morphed into an iteration whereby violence and its destructive aftermath have been made synonymous with the Baghdadi space. The artist must claim it so that spatiality can rid itself of that association, and so the environment of the work is a palimpsest, an atmosphere of ideological place-making. Creative ruin of this kind opens the floodgates towards dynamic interaction that empowers giving people back what was stolen. An artistic space in which this deeply resonates is

photography, still and digitized, seeing as its perceptual power can cheat death. It can better still permit the photographer to take liberties.

Through the photographic image, a powerful statement can be made that can necessarily intimate experience to be able to reach that part of it which is refreshingly unexplainable.

Figure 11

Maybe the intrigue resides there, this subject that cannot quite be grasped. With the emotional baggage of Baghdadi and wider Iraqi modern history weighing upon him, visual artist Nedim Kufi enters into this realm looking to disrupt conventionality regarding how the photograph is meant to function. Unlike Roland Barthes (2010), who, in his reflections on photography, inquires into the intimation of death, he has a hand in producing that ultimate effect instead of a situation where mortality is “perhaps in this image which produces death while trying to preserve life" (p. 92). Though the French philosopher speaks of it, the cruelties of the postmodern age, not to mention its technological capabilities, offer an entirely new understanding of the dive into literal death. In figure 11, an example of his strategy is displayed in which an image of himself as a child in Iraq is put alongside another where his persona is removed. He states that the second picture is an expression of disconnect, "which I have modified with Photoshop as an unrestrained expression of my feelings of emptiness and banishment," and in this action, it presents a reality of not just anticipating death in life but dynamically bringing it about. He makes an attainable thing of bereavement, though not in its full capacity, as "I stand confused in the middle" (Kufi, 2008). So he moves forward, clearly suspended between both states of being. Bachelard praised the poetic imagination for its creative power of transformation. Kufi, sure enough, goes through such a wild metamorphosis through his pointedly powerful before and after piece of art.

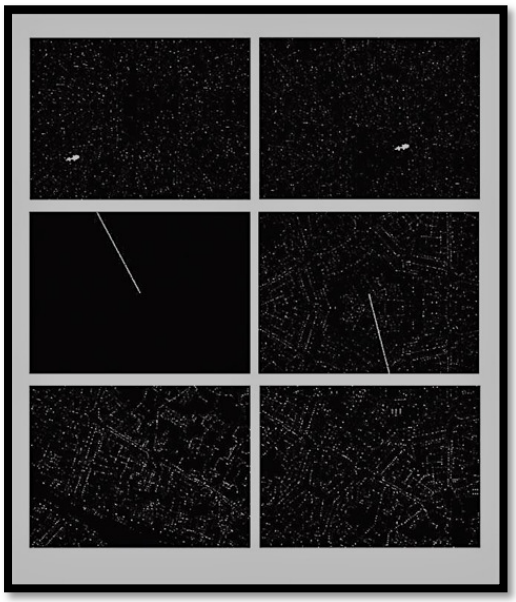

Figure 12

Taken by "the ecstasy of the newness of the image" (Bachelard, 1994) that is in place, Kufi exists in a poetics that creatively inches him closer to death when the very essence of his being is removed. However, it is that same innovation that creates “a real and deep awareness which can…reach remote islands of happiness and relief within the mind." He declares, "My purpose is to find a pure space of value in times long gone that surpasses the value of the present." So death, specifically in this case, the omission of his likeness, has value, and what he, in due course, reifies is an exultant move away

from nostalgia. He can figuratively point to it as where his exile has situated him. However, killing himself off from the prima facie image, it can be concluded, did not result in the permanence of his absence, just the likelihood of greater objectivity. He now fits squarely into that liminal place adjacent to the real and enters into an imaginary Iraq and its aching capital through "a loophole that has not been noticed by others" (Kufi, 2008). In it, he remains as if it is the only space open to his fantasy. He is able to bring spatiality alive from this position. This is equally grasped in his video work, Electrify Baghdad, observed in figure 12, in which a Google Earth satellite view was digitally manipulated. It depicts the shock and awe tactic at the start of the Iraq War that caused it to experience blackouts. Towards the end of the video, as darkness engulfs it, "the artist relights the city transforming it into a brilliant tapestry of many points of light" ("Art of Resistance Iraq," 2014), with possibly the most intriguing part being that he is in that coveted loophole as he shines brilliant lights onto his home given that electricity, typically a real-world convenience, becomes part of the unreal. The digital reconstruction, though imagined, was a literal thing standing in for the lack of an ability to illuminate the Baghdadi space, so the worlds must collide as reality alone will not suffice. Only by envisaging the real in the space of pure imagination in this way can the city spring to life as it were while it remains lifeless in actual reality despite efforts at reviving it.

Figure 13

The artist makes a point of orientating himself towards the explicatory power of “chaos and the curiosity it evokes” in figure 13, where it is quite clear that he revels in the madness of it all, his homeland being a powder keg of senselessness yet "while finding harmony between opposing elements." In the work that is oil on canvas, nothing is in place, but then again, everything is and within this beautified contradiction lays the creation of meaning. What gives it aesthetic weight is its dexterity, the ability to "find intersections and invisible messages" (Kufi, 2020), so it is imperative that he engages the viewer to have him remain in that coveted middle. Baghdad and, indeed, Iraq today always finds itself in a state of reimagination. As such, it can never fully be one thing or the other; instead, it makes the realness of intermediacy evolve into urban character permanent. The context that is formed is such that the "language of things and products” (Lefebvre, 1994) is spoken to convey a syncopated rhythm out of a seemingly noise-filled void, to move space into a place of symbolic production. The military plane is representatively flying overhead, with incongruous words and phrases and faces that are ominous while others are more expressive, and many further elements speak in the tongue of "post-modern experimentation" (Shabout, 2012). In the aftermath of the 2003 invasion, the immediate "loss of identity became particularly significant" (p. 42) and the Iraqi artist had to contend with and arrive at the invention of a tradition of fragmentation. It was there to stay going beyond the political quagmire. He would venture into the belly of the beast, trying to make sense of it, giving futurity to a historiographical abyss. It is almost as if ruins stand outside time as he fills them in with his imagination. They can then be reinserted into everyday life after having been repurposed. Hardly to be faulted, he may very well decide to remain in this hodgepodge tuned into the fact that it remains a fantasy yet a welcome one, no doubt.

Kufi believes in placing himself within the possibility of new readings, for though outwardly dead, the aestheticization of ruin makes it a living organism able to be reformulated into a permanent thing. It is the centralization of the fleeting and peripheral. Truly, this is the only way that his city could have survived after the war brought space an existential threat. This is why he "seeks the gaps within rationality, similarity and contradiction" ("Timeline," n.d.), and so must reify the middle that consistently activates post-war survivalism. It happens that there is not merely a re-engagement but coexistence. Baghdadi space is in this sense layered but more so than that, it becomes the newly created point of departure where Iraqis must rush to as different intrusive elements impose themselves upon spatiality. French philosopher Denis Diderot (1995) would call this utter liberation as ruin "delivers us up to our inclinations…" and on the site of this destruction, "I'm freer, more alone, more myself, closer to myself" (p. 199). The artist, thus, in his fascination

and embrace of ruination as power, finds and sustains a relationship between order and chaos. This is maintained by the phenomenon of spatial accumulation of the same "and the newness which springs from repetition" (Lefebvre, 1991) so that a typology comes to life. It is so commanding that "an imaginary space" wills itself into existence within which he is capable of entertaining "the plethora of illusions and obsessions which have occupied my mind" (Kufi, 2008). Though he has lost both physically and the joyful remembrance of, his homeland as an exile, the only hope of regaining it is by involving himself with the liminal and peering into it from an objective positionality. He must see what likely odds and ends can be fused together to come out with a novel representational form of the home he once knew. Omission, then, of the idea that fragments should be left as is in their contradictory state prevails, and it would critically carry on without him in any case because the energy of Baghdad has organically become one of defying logic.

The creative output of Iraqi artists is predicated upon a direct correlation between art and survival, completely overturning the commonly held notion around ruin. To feel and taste the abyss, to venture into the far reaches of its desolation, is paradoxically yet sensibly an act of not merely living but coming alive. Every resident of the city who has gone through this purgatory of existence knows full well the value of what it is to appreciate life. In Iraq, more broadly, it simply means that one must possess a particular sanctity. This is the case given that protracted instability and bloodshed have started the space down a road to find the normal of old that is no longer there. When it is regained, even if for a brief moment, it would not be too far-fetched to claim that people in this wounded capital are conscious of the worth of life to a far greater degree than most of the globe. They wake up each day looking to survive. Within artistic circles, the key intention was to recognize this diurnal pain but then work to aestheticize it. The hurting city dweller will be made to feel that this unimaginable hurt can count as a surely precarious, nonetheless plausible beginning. In the words of Malallah, who, starting in the 1980s, fronted what would become a culture of artistic creation, "ruination is the essence of all being" (MacMillan, 2014), so life coming out of this bout can be ascribed to normality. The act of ruin is the objective start of all things, so it can never encompass the bitter end. In the Iraqi tradition, the layman witnesses its graphic nature, violence-stricken streets and bloodied corpses before being introduced to it as an elementary part of everyday life. The key to her work and that of Al-Azzawi, Kahraman, Al-Nasiri and Kufi is to address the universality of ruin as an ultimate source while also speaking to the gloom and doom of the Baghdadi present. It is quite a paradox, a fine line they all walk. Within this innovative space, the firm belief they all hold is that somewhere between entity and nonentity, that in-betweenness is where destruction with meaning resides. One might often lose oneself in the sheer abstraction of artwork, but this is almost never a commonality for individuals like them. Their sensibilities etched into their brilliant pieces transport to the visceral and real experience of war.

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