

# CONFERENCE REPORT 2010

16 April—20 June 2010

# Introduction

Cornerhouse in collaboration with ArtRole is proud to present the first comprehensive UK exhibition of new and recent contemporary art from Iraq since the first Gulf War, examining practices that are emerging with fresh perspectives from a culture marked by conflict and turmoil.

Selecting works, which have never before been seen outside of the Middle East, across a wide range of media by 19 Iraqi-based artists for *Contemporary Art Iraq*, Cornerhouse and ArtRole, give a subjective snapshot of the current art scene in Iraq. From installation, performance, video, painting and photography, works presented overlap three main themes: Gallery 1 sets the tone for Of Time and Tradition, Gallery 2 hosts The Changing City, and Gallery 3 presents many different guises of Protest.

This booklet provides a guide to the exhibition and related events at Cornerhouse, featuring a text from exhibition co-curator Sarah Perks of Cornerhouse, which provides a broad context within which to understand the work of these artists. The guide also includes details of the special opening weekend events, where you can find out more about the themes of *Contemporary Art Iraq* by joining our one-day Symposium or Artist Presentation Event.

# Exhibition

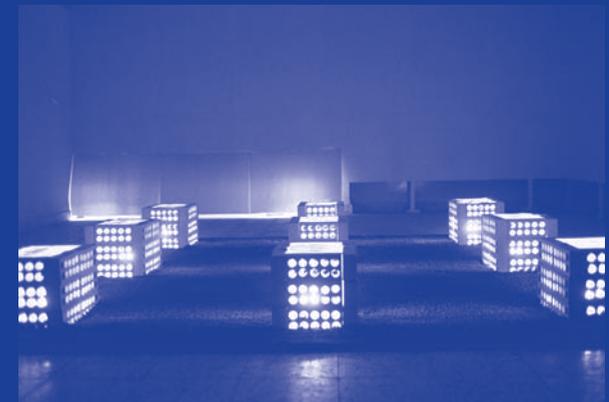
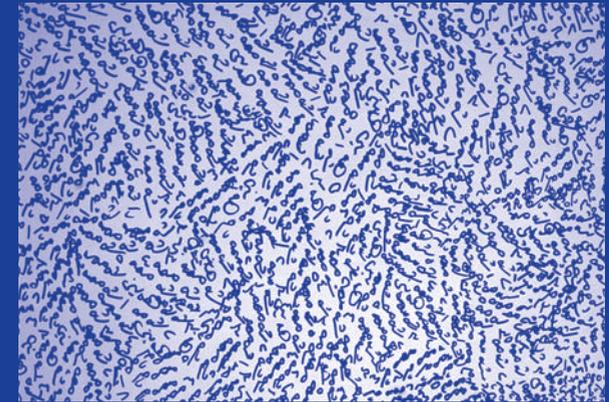
Iraq is both somewhere we feel close to and yet a place we also feel we know nothing about. Iraq is constantly in the news and yet it is never in the news – outside of the media reporting on conflict anyway. The Iraq Enquiry is a political post-rationalisation, the recent Iraqi election coverage is focused heavily on limited violent incidents, and Kathryn Bigelow's film, *The Hurt Locker* is a uniquely American perspective of war in a dusty, foreign land. As Jean Baudrillard famously argued, the media representation of the first Gulf War was so technologically camouflaged that we saw nothing whilst imagining we have seen it all. So, if we can continue to use a collective 'we' at all, let's look at Iraq from another perspective, let's begin with the work of 19 artists that live and practice there now.



Top: Jamal Penjweny,  
*Iraq is Flying*, 2006 – 2009

Middle: Aryan Abubakr Ali,  
*A Year Or More (Days Of  
The Week)*, 2009

Bottom: Azar Othman  
Mahmud, *Bricks*, 2005



# Gallery 1

## Of Time and Tradition



Bhrhm Taib H. Ameen,  
*Kurdish Man*, 2009

Iraq has an exceptionally rich history, once part of the empires and dynasties of Mesopotamia, often referred to as the Cradle of Civilisation, and famous for one of the wonders of the ancient world, The Hanging Gardens of Babylon. Under Arab Islamic rule in the middle ages, Baghdad's libraries and academies made it, by many accounts, the greatest city in the world.

Following the British invasion of Iraq in the wake of WWI, the blueprint for a new country was drawn, with national boundaries constructed around oil deposits rather than ethnic divisions. The legacy is an exceptionally multicultural nation of Arabs, Kurds, Turkomen, Assyrians and Persians – with faith mostly Muslim, split between Shiite and Sunni, with a minority of other religions. Where these highly diverse communities co-exist, the recent instability has ignited volatile situations. As modern Iraq undergoes rapid reconstruction and renewed exposure to globalisation, its culture and communities are in a state of flux and attempts to conceive a shared identity have so far been highly loaded and problematic.

In *A Year Or More (Days Of The Week)* (2009), Aryan Abubakr Ali begins with a nod at Mesopotamia's claim to have invented writing. His ceaseless mantra and repetitive mark-making are an attempt to contain the passage of time by inscribing it in language, to objectify it in a methodical process that negates any threat or trauma.

Mustafa Mumtaz Noori reflects on the appropriation of traditional music by conflict in *Joza* and *Rababa* (2009), both traditional string instruments the artist has transformed into weapons – a music of death. Music in Iraq has been a site of contest between religious groups since 2003. Particularly in the South, religious leaders have closed music halls and clubs. Students of Baghdad's Music and Ballet School have been attacked. Yet there are signs of change, the National Symphony Orchestra began performing again in 2008, and the first rap concert took place in Baghdad in 2009.

Sarwar Mohamad Amin's documentary *Yayli* (2007) follows the loss of livelihood for local men driving horse-drawn carts, in particular 59 year old Hussein Fatah who can no longer compete with the busy roads and provide for his family after using his carriage in much the same way for 3 decades.

Bhrhm Taib H. Ameen's highly theatrical photographs depict the same model, posing in a range of different ethnic costumes. By rehearsing multiple identities in such a staged manner, he is throwing into relief the heightened awareness of cultural and individual identities (and divides) as the nation struggles to attain social stability.

## Gallery 2

# The Changing City

Following successive occupation by the Ottoman and British Empires, Iraq gained independence in 1932. By the 1970s, the oil boom brought the country great economic prosperity, with marked social equality and stability. With contemporary Iraq's infrastructure, services and urban centres having received extensive damage, efforts are gaining pace to rebuild the nation. With international investment playing out alongside increased political autonomy, how are the efforts at nation-building to be articulated and understood? How are the ruptures and traumas of the cities' topographies to be treated and what role or status does the individual play in this national and international agenda?

Bitwen Ali Hamad's *Qalat* (2009), documents a performance that was partly made in response to Francis Alÿs', *The Leak* (1995). The artist passes through the visibly different neighbourhoods of the city of Sulaymaniyah, marking his passage with a leaking bucket of white paint. Unlike other areas in the country, Sulaymaniyah's stability means that this level of personal mobility is not contested. The piece stands as a testament to the importance of the individual, whose trace (no matter how minor or localised) acts as a register of our presence and our actions.

Azar Othman Mahmud's installation *Bricks* (2005), is a reflection on the Iraqi nation-building project, raising questions on its permanence and how it will connect in an increasingly globalised world. The artist believes that true building work is the constant action of creating contacts among people and cultures. In his words, 'every theme is equally significant, not giving weight and consideration to merely one.' However, the overall effect should be optimistic; buildings - like relationships - can be rebuilt.

*W.C.* (2007) initially appears to be a game, though it is actually about our choices which can be as mundane, or as important, as our preference in toilets. In using one example of difference, Yadgar Abubakir Nassradin's piece contrasts the way people live, in particular the demands their religion places on them and the expectations of modernising influences.

*Displacing* (2009) by Natheer Muslim, disrupts the usual stability and comfort of an ordinary object - the chair - leaving only a disturbing trace of where a married couple once sat together.

In Hemn Hamed Sharef's video work *Sleep* (2008), we have an unhindered view of a sleeping man lying fully outstretched on a sheet of plastic. His unconscious movements are amplified and play-out as a series of sporadic calamitous noises. Here the actions of the individual, even when oblivious and seemingly lacking any direct agency, have highly ambiguous consequences.

Rohzgar Mahmood Mustafa's short video, *Nylon* (2009), draws on the body's relationship to and impact upon the materials of its environment. Initially constraining and destructive, her simple gesture allows the disposable material to recompose itself and regenerate into a semblance of its previous form.

Salam Idwer Yaqoob Al-loos' painted triptych, *Baghdad... My City* (2010), exposes contemporary transformations in the city post 2003. The titles of his work chart his feelings from the suffocation of Saddam Hussein's regime, through the hope of change to recent disappointment. Whether one supported the invasion or not, no one can deny that the subsequent reconstruction attempt was inept and ineffective.

One of three female artists in this exhibition, Roshna Rasool, has created *Luck* (2010), two buckets from which you can create your own luck using redundant computer keys. White keys signify good news, while black ones bring a warning, a letter is the start of someone's name and the key to the numbers is as follows: 1 means love, 2 means you will meet someone, 3 indicates a problem, 4 is a kiss, 5 is happiness, 6 is marriage, 7 is patience, 8 is a surprise and 9 means your wish will come true. By all means try your hand, but Rasool reminds us relationships need to be about more than technology, or even luck.

# Gallery 3

## Protest

This section draws on the trend amongst many Iraqi artists to directly confront contemporary problems through their practices. Their tactics range from staged interventions in the public realm and documentation of the unrepresented, to projects that express a collective or individual will to defiantly take ownership of circumstances. Whether drawing on the recent past or the present moment, all of these pieces articulate a political or social agenda.

The materials in Mohammed Abdulhussein Yousif's sculpture, *The Thinker* (2010) have a commonly accepted significance. By being recast in the form of a human head, the matches adopt a more troubling set of connotations. They evoke the slow burn of civil unrest, the tortured surface of the individual and the social body. The association with religious ritual also references the fact that continued violence is largely the result of religious extremists.

In his series *Iraq is Flying* (2006-2009), Jamal Penjweny photographs a wide selection of people, all captured in a mid-air jump. His subjects are, for a moment, united in a gesture of euphoric abandonment and escape. In a sense, they are literally 'rising above' their situation. With this simple device he powerfully negates the experience of trauma and asserts a faith in the future that rests on collective human will.

Muhammad Sale Rostamzadeh and Wrya Budaghi exhibit a video of one of their recent performances in Iraq. The artists are both internally displaced and therefore denied the right to vote, so in *My Finger Didn't Get Ink* (2009), they stage a demonstration outside a voting station, with the title referring to the requirement to leave your finger print after casting a ballot. Rostamzadeh and Budaghi's work is both light-hearted and extremely provocative, depending entirely on those around engaging with and taking an interest in the work, creating spontaneous communities around a perceived injustice.

For *Traffic* (2009), Gailan Abdullah Ismail organised a large group of colleagues to stage a daring intervention at a busy intersection in Erbil city. The junction had become notorious for the high number of traffic accidents and fatalities – a symptom of ill-developed infrastructure. Risking the very apparent danger, they sit in a ring and form a human round-about to guide the course of the traffic.

Zana Rasul Mohammed's *Memories and War* (2009) is constructed from the artist's own books and the kind of bullet boxes that were used by Iraqi Kurds as book shelves under the Ba'ath regime. The artist pointedly refers to the fact that Saddam Hussein's Anfal genocide not only destroyed Kurdish people, but threatened Kurdish culture as well. However, he also demonstrates how appropriating the materials of war and applying a new use has enabled people to re-encode the significance of these objects, removing them from their former connotations.

*Born in Jail* (2009) is a powerful series of portraits of women with their children. With a background in photojournalism, Julie Adnan has focused on many aspects of Iraq's social and political climate. In this series she exposes the unrepresented and ignored phenomenon of women prisoners conceiving and raising children in jail. Their status occupies an in-between position, removed from conventional society, but still subject to it.

A significant number of artworks in the exhibition come from Iraqi Kurdistan, where relative autonomy and safety has seen a recent surge in artistic activity, as evident in its advertising slogan of 'the other Iraq'. Whilst there are art schools at Universities in Baghdad and Babylon, Iraqi Kurdistan has the highest number of art students, particularly in Sulaymaniyah, the region's artistic and cultural capital. Here there are more exhibition opportunities too, including the redeveloped Amna Suraka, Saddam Hussein's former security building The Red Jail, now housing a contemporary gallery space and cinema. While collating information from the exhibiting artists, one artist in particular gave a statement that encapsulates the attitude of the new generation:

*"Although I want no part of war, war leaves its mark on me and I have come to consider both what is happy and sad in our lives by its measure. Thus, in my mother's mind, I was born 'when the Iran-Iraq war started', and my grandfather would recall he got engaged 'during World War I'. It seems that war has become part of our lives. Our children do not know of peace and as a result grow up playing war. In Slemani [Sulaymaniyah], a child made a picture of a passenger plane which had bombs falling from it. Above the picture he had written 'I can travel'. It made me wonder... I asked him, 'Why is your passenger plane dropping bombs?' His answer was, 'Why? Is there a plane which does not throw bombs?'" Through my photos I try to erase the idea of war."*

Jamal Penjweny (*Iraq is Flying*)

Whilst the future of Iraq's state is still developing with some uncertainties, there is a renewed optimism from many of its Iraqi-based artists, and with it a great hope for its vibrant and developing art scene.

## Further reading

Baudrillard, Jean,  
*The Gulf War Did Not Take Place*, 1995,  
Bloomington: Indiana University Press

Ham, Anthony (Ed),  
*Lonely Planet Middle East*, 2009,  
Victoria, Australia: Lonely Planet  
Publications

Polk, William R.  
*Understanding Iraq*, 2006,  
London: I.B. Tauris & Co. Ltd.

Ross, Stewart,  
*The Middle East since 1945*, 2006,  
London: Hodder Education  
(Teach Yourself series)

Sloman, Paul (Ed), *Contemporary Art  
in the Middle East: Artworld*, 2009,  
London: Black Dog Publishing

Tripp, Charles,  
*A History of Iraq*, 2007, Cambridge:  
Cambridge University Press



Left: Bitwen Ali Hamad,  
*Qalat*, 2009

Right: Mohammad Sale  
Rostamzadeh & Wrya Budaghi,  
*My Finger Didn't Get Ink*, 2009



# Artists

Julie Adnan  
(Kirkuk)  
*Born in Jail*, Series  
of 8, 2009  
Lambda prints

Aryan Abubakr Ali  
(Sulaymaniyah)  
*A Year Or More*  
(*Days Of The Week*),  
2009  
Marker pen on canvas

Salam Idwer  
Ya'qoob Al-loos  
(Baghdad)  
*Baghdad... My City*,  
2010, Series of 3  
Painting, acrylic, soft  
pastel, paper on canvas

Bhrhm Taib  
H. Ameen  
(Sulaymaniyah)  
*Folk Man Series*,  
2009, Series of 4  
Lambda prints

Sarwar  
Mohamad Amin  
(Sulaymaniyah)  
*Yayli*, 2007  
Video documentary,  
00:18:56

Bitwen Ali Hamad  
(Sulaymaniyah)  
*Qalat*, 2009,  
Series of 10  
Lambda prints,  
photographic  
documentation  
of performance

Gailan Abdulha  
Ismail (Erbil)  
*Traffic*, 2009  
Video documentation  
of performance,  
00:06:26

Azar Othman  
Mahmud  
(Sulaymaniyah)  
*Bricks*, 2005  
Installation, bricks,  
light bulbs, sand, wires

Zana Rasul  
Mohammed  
(Sulaymaniyah)  
*Memories and War*,  
2009  
Installation, wooden  
bullet boxes and books

Natheer Muslim  
(Baghdad)  
*Displacing*, 2009  
Sculpture, wood, iron  
nails, acrylic paint,  
steel bowl

Rohzgar  
Mahmood Mustafa  
(Sulaymaniyah)  
*Nylon*, 2009  
Video, 00:01:20

Yadgar Abubakir  
Nassradin  
(Sulaymaniyah)  
*W.C.* 2007  
Video, 00:06:16

Mustafa Mumtaz  
Noori (Baghdad)  
*Joza*, 2009  
Sculpture, iron,  
wood, plastic  
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*Rababa*, 2009  
Sculpture, iron,  
wood, rope

Jamal Penjweny  
(Sulaymaniyah)  
*Iraq is Flying*, 2006 –  
2009, Series of 8  
Lambda prints

Roshna Rasool  
(Sulaymaniyah)  
*Luck*, 2010  
Installation, buckets,  
computer keys, mouse  
devices, mouse mats,  
wire

Mohammad Sale  
Rostamzadeh &  
Wrya Budaghi  
(Erbil)  
*My Finger Didn't  
Get Ink*, 2009  
Video documentation  
of performance,  
00:11:38

Hemn Hamed  
Sharef (Erbil)  
*Sleep*, 2008  
Video, 00:20:00

Mohammed  
Abdulhussein  
Yousif (Baghdad)  
*The Thinker*, 2010  
Sculpture, matches,  
strings, cork, papers,  
paint

# Art Events

Find out more about the themes of *Contemporary Art Iraq* by joining our one-day Symposium, Artist Live Presentations or other Events. Leading presentations and debates will be renowned British and Iraqi artists, international cultural commentators, plus special guided tours of the show from exhibition curators Sarah Perks of Cornerhouse and Adalet R. Garmiany of ArtRole, London.

**Talk/  
Tales of Iraq: Artist  
Live Presentations  
Fri 16 April  
14:00 – 18:00  
FREE, Booking required**

Cornerhouse's Sarah Perks, who has co-curated the *Contemporary Art Iraq* exhibition, chairs this lively event, featuring a series of presentations by some of the most prominent artists from the UK and Iraq; including British sculptor Richard Wilson, installation and performance artist Anne Bean, performance artist Mohamed and official Iraq war artist Xavier Pick.

This event includes drinks and the chance to meet, chat and network with the artists.

**Symposium/  
Future Now: Iraq and  
Contemporary Art  
Sat 17 April  
11:00 – 17:00  
£8 full/£6 concs**

*Contemporary Art Iraq* launches at Cornerhouse with this one-day symposium that explores the various thematic strands that emerge from the exhibition. Divided into three panels delivered by a host of leading international researchers, artists, curators and writers; whose discussions will extend upon concepts from nationalism and nationhood, current art education and the recent surge in art activity in Iraqi Kurdistan, to the impact of international initiatives and the future of contemporary art in the Middle East and Iraq.

**Speakers include:**  
Nat Muller (Rotterdam-based independent curator and critic), Dr Rebwar Fatah (Kurdish writer and journalist), Hadani Ditmars (Co-editor *New Internationalist*), Daniel Miller (Art critic and journalist who writes for *Frieze* and other journals), Anna Bowman (ArtRole), Aaron Cezar (Delfina Foundation) and chair Peter Jenkinson (Cultural broker and former National Director of the Arts Council's Creative Partnerships Programme)

**Tour/  
Contemporary Art Iraq  
Thu 29 April  
18:00  
FREE, Booking required**

Join co-curator of *Contemporary Art Iraq*, ArtRole's Adalet R. Garmiany alongside Cornerhouse's Tomas Harold for this introductory tour of the exhibition.

**Artist-in-Residence/  
Moments of Breathing  
with You  
Wed 12 – Sat 15 May  
Galleries 1, 2 & 3  
FREE, Drop-In between  
12:00 – 20:00**

Cornerhouse in collaboration with FutureEverything (12 – 15 May 2010), is pleased to host artist-in-residence Hafsah Naib, who will respond to our current exhibition *Contemporary Art Iraq*.

For this project, Naib will locate her practice within the context of our Galleries. Drop-in at anytime during this residency and contribute to the production of a unique online moving book.

[www.cornerhouse.org/hafsahnaib](http://www.cornerhouse.org/hafsahnaib)  
[www.futureeverything.org](http://www.futureeverything.org)

**Tour/  
Contemporary Art Iraq  
Sun 23 May  
14:00  
FREE, Booking required**

Join Cornerhouse's Sarah Perks, who has also co-curated the current show, for an introductory tour.

This tour will be BSL interpreted by Siobhan Rocks.



Check website for details of our film programme in June. For further details and to book for these events visit [www.cornerhouse.org](http://www.cornerhouse.org)

Julie Adnan, *Born in Jail*, 2009



Exhibition co-curated by Cornerhouse  
and ArtRole

About ArtRole

ArtRole is a UK-based art organisation developing international cultural exchanges with the Middle East, founded in 2004 by British artist of Kurdish-Iraqi origin, Adalet R. Garmiany. Previous activities include the first major Post-War Art & Culture Festival at The Red Jail, Saddam Hussein's former security building in Iraqi-Kurdistan (7 - 9 Nov 2009). The festival presented Richard Wilson's seminal installation *20:50* for the first time in the Middle East and mounted exhibitions by British and American artists alongside over 50 Iraqi artists.  
[www.artrole.org](http://www.artrole.org)

Thanks

Cornerhouse and ArtRole would like to thank the Foreign & Commonwealth Office, British Embassy, Iraq and Kurdish Regional Government including Ministries of Internal, Culture & Finance and also Khak, Press & Media Centre in Iraqi Kurdistan. The curators would also like to thank the many people who also made this exhibition possible with their actions, advice, technical skill and knowledge.

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Cornerhouse  
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Gallery Opening Times  
Mon: Closed  
Tue – Sat: 12:00 – 20:00  
Sun: 12:00 – 18:00

**CORNERHOUSE**  
[www.cornerhouse.org](http://www.cornerhouse.org)

**ArtRole**  
[www.artrole.org](http://www.artrole.org)

