

ISMAIL FATTAH ARTIST PAINTER

Carefree creativity that challenged and changed

Ismail Fattah was a unique phenomenon in the history of Iraqi art. Along with compatriots Jawad Salim and Khaled Rahhal, he sculpted and painted with an equal degree of passion and creativity, despite the huge differences between the two art forms. Prior to his death in 2004, Fattah told me that he painted to relieve the spiritual tension he felt when he was unable to execute his ideas in sculpture and, during that same conversation, went on to say that painting often caused him anguish and pain.

While Fattah had been known, since the 1960s, to possess a bias towards sculpture, even in his ink drawings and in many of his paintings, it is not surprising that during the last six years of his life he produced dozens of etchings in which he employed a painter's judgment and maintained a clear connection to the content and form of his oil paintings.

In Iraq, Fattah will be remembered most for the statues and monuments he designed and built that still adorn public squares in Baghdad. The most important of these is undoubtedly the 'Martyr's Monument', a moving tribute to those Iraqis, and others in the Arab world, who lost their lives to violent conflict. Although not built until the mid-1980s, the monument was designed by Fattah several years earlier as an entry in a competition that he went on to win. In fact, Fattah had worked with an architect to complete the blueprints for the construction of the sculpture prior to 1980, after which the project was shelved before being picked up by the government later.

I first met Ismail Fattah in 1959, when we were both students at the Institute of Fine Arts in Baghdad. I was in my first year at the Institute and he was close to completing his studies there. It was clear to me then that Fattah was an exceptional student who stood out from the rest and enjoyed the admiration and attention of his teachers. In many ways he appeared to be more of an assistant to those who taught him than a mere student. I also sensed – and admired – in him, even in those early days, an eagerness to go beyond the confines of what he was being taught and to explore new realms in his art.

Any attempt to assess Fattah's artistic achievements is, I believe, likely to be problematic because the artist himself had no interest in anything that did not involve

sculpture and painting and showed little patience for an intellectual community that had failed to see the importance of documenting artistic experiences. Moreover, the unprecedented difficulties faced by Fattah, and other Iraqis during the many years of conflict and international sanctions, necessarily make any serious evaluation of the artist's oeuvre incomplete.

I have been able, however, to put together some thoughts on the artist from a recorded interview that I conducted with him in his studio in Doha in 2002, as well as through the many conversations I had with him over the years, particularly in the mid-1990s when I used to meet with Fattah in the studio in Doha that the Arab Museum of Modern Art provided for him. It was there that he produced a collection of works that many believe best represents his achievements in both sculpture and painting.

Ismail Fattah was born in Basra in 1934 and moved with his family as a child to Nassiriyeh where he attended school. During one of our conversations, Fattah recounted how angry his school teachers used to be with him when his interest in creating with his hands drove him to sculpt shapes out of the classroom chalk – which was very scarce at the time because of the privation of the Second World War. He also recalled visiting the port in Basra with an uncle who worked there and being fascinated when he saw an allied aircraft carrier that was docked in the harbour. "When I returned home", said Fattah, "I made a model of the carrier with cardboard and my uncle was so surprised and pleased with it that he offered it to the governor of Basra of the time."

After completing his secondary school education in Nassiriyeh, Fattah decided, in 1952, to go to Baghdad to study at the newly-constructed Institute of Fine Arts where he gained two diplomas, one in painting in 1956 and the second in sculpture in 1958. During his years at the Institute, Fattah attracted the attention of Jawad Salim, a teacher and sculptor who was widely recognized as the father of the modern art movement in Iraq. Ironically Fattah was unaware of the importance of Salim and did not realize that many of those who taught him were considered the most important Iraqi artists of that time. He said he remembered once expressing to Salim an interest in 'socialist art', to which Salim replied: "If that is the kind of art that you admire, I will not be able to help you." Fattah did not understand Salim's remark and told me he had felt disappointed at his teacher's reaction.

During Fattah's second year at the Institute, the students were asked to create sculptures. Fattah chose to sculpt a peasant standing with his shovel at his side.

"I started to construct the metal framework for the sculpture and had also begun to

cover it in clay", he recalled."When Jawad Salim saw it he told me to immediately cast it in plaster. I was surprised at his request, especially since I was still in the early stages of working on the sculpture. After the framework was cast, Jawad painted it in a bronze color and it was put on exhibit in 1957."

I believe it was Fattah's relationship with Salim that paved the way for the young artist and convinced him to look beyond the obvious and to explore his ability to create a style that would be different from that of his contemporaries.

Although he distinguished himself as a student, Fattah did not attract the attention of wider artistic circles. He was obsessed with working with his teacher and at the same time was busy studying the work of renowned artists, such as Faeq Hassan and others. He was also attentive to the work of other students, who were doing advanced studies at the Institute including Shaker Hassan, who used popular heritage in a style influenced by cubism, Kazem Haidar who attracted attention with several daring pieces, such as his famous painting of Hussein's martyrdom, and Tareq Mazloum, who combined popular and primitive art with features from Assyrian sculpture.

Having completed his studies at the Institute, Fattah went to Rome where he gained a higher diploma in sculpture from the Academy of Fine Arts and a diploma in ceramics from the San Jacmo Academy. He also won first prize in sculpture for Arab artists in Italy in 1962 and another first prize for sculpture for foreign artists in Italy one year later.

While at the Rome Academy, Fattah found that his course work was not very helpful, especially since his main professor was very fond of classical art and tried to impose it on his students. As time passed, the young artist discovered what he was looking for while working outside the Academy on smaller sculptures that reflected the influence of artists whose work he had been introduced to since his arrival.

Although the work of Henry Moore had served to influence a whole generation of artists, Fattah was not impressed by it. Rather, he believed he had found what he was looking for in the work of another British sculptor, Kenneth Armitage, who employed a simplicity in shaping his sculptures and created forms that were more human-like in their interaction with their environment.

Upon his return to Baghdad in 1965 Fattah joined the Institute of Fine Arts as a teacher of ceramics. It was not long, however, before disagreements with other faculties in his department began because Fattah encouraged his students to disregard the utilitarian

and traditional aspects of ceramic design and to create works of art instead. He did not believe that his students should confine themselves to a particular technique, since he thought discipline only served to restrict the beauty of the imagination. It was this attitude that made Fattah extremely popular with the Institute's students, who treated him more like a friend and mentor than a teacher. In 1969, he also began teaching sculpture at the Institute and continued to do so until the mid-1990s.

Fattah contributed to the change that took place on the Baghdad art scene upon his return from Italy. He held a solo exhibition at the National Museum of Modern Art of sculptures and oil paintings that he had brought with him from Rome that proved to be very different from the work that other Iraqi artists were doing at the time. The exhibition was revolutionary in its style and many who saw the work were unable to understand it. Fattah's small sculptures revealed great patience and attention to detail and his paintings reflected a complete departure from the usual subjects that had, until then, occupied Iraqi artists. Rather than depict the usual images of peasants and of daily life, Fattah's sculptures conveyed a concern for the experience of humankind in its wider global context, as well as for the human body and its relationship with the surrounding void. We discussed the manner in which this seminal exhibition was received during our recorded interview. "The general climate on the Baghdad art scene was marked by confusion", Fattah explained. "There was also a kind of freedom that was devoid of political commitment and which distanced us from the positions taken by the founders of the modern art movement in Iraq."

On the more personal level, I was struck, throughout the years of our friendship, by the extent of Fattah's lightheartedness when it came to showing responsibility towards his family. As late as the year 2000, Fattah described himself in a newspaper interview as "a child who plays with clay and with colors". I remember visiting him late in the afternoon on several occasions only to discover that his children – two boys and two girls – had not yet had their lunch because he had been too busy working and his then German wife, who spoke no Arabic at that time, was unable to brave the streets of Baghdad to fetch the groceries, so we would have to go out and buy the children some take away food to eat. It seemed to me at the time that he was too preoccupied with his work and with his life outside the home to pay much attention to those people who needed him most.

After the death of his first wife in 1992, Fattah married again and upon his death left behind two young children.

Fattah's frivolity also affected his work in that he did not use all the time he had

available to him to execute his ideas, choosing instead to draw them on any bit of paper he could find and only work on them if he was in the mood to do so. He said he preferred seizing the moment during which he felt like working, regardless of what the external circumstances were and without sticking to a particular work schedule.

During the latter stages of his terminal illness, while he was working and receiving treatment in Abu Dhabi, Fattah expressed a wish to be buried wherever he happened to die. Although the prospect of his dying was a subject that both of us found difficult to discuss, I spoke to him from London and told him I thought he should return to Baghdad. He said that although going home was something he longed to do, he did not think he would be able to make the journey and in any case could not afford to pay for it. With the help of a friend who had close contacts with the government of Abu Dhabi, his family was able to charter a plane to fly him to Iraq on July 22, 2004. Fattah died a few hours after his arrival in Baghdad.

Dia Al-Azzawi (Book on Ismail Fattah which will be published in English and French by Touchart, London, and in Arabic by Dar Kutob, Beirut.)



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