

Sadik Kwaish Alfraji

at the Venice Biennale

by Ambika Rajgopal

Sadik Kwaish Alfraji (b 1960, Baghdad, Iraq) received a Bachelor of Fine Art in Painting and Plastic Art from the Academy of Fine Arts, Baghdad in 1987 and, in 2000, went on to gain a High Diploma in Graphic Design from CHK Constantijn Huygens in The Netherlands. He now lives and works in Amersfoort. This year he was asked by The Ruya Foundation, the commissioning organisation of the Iraq Pavilion at the Venice Biennale, to create works for the 2017 event.

The new series, *I am The Hunter/I am The Prey*, explores the dual nature of experiences such as love, which Alfraji views as a form of hunting. Using references that span the history of civilisation that include everything from language to ancient warfare, Alfraji details this aspect of the human condition in drawings, a video animation, and ready-made objects.

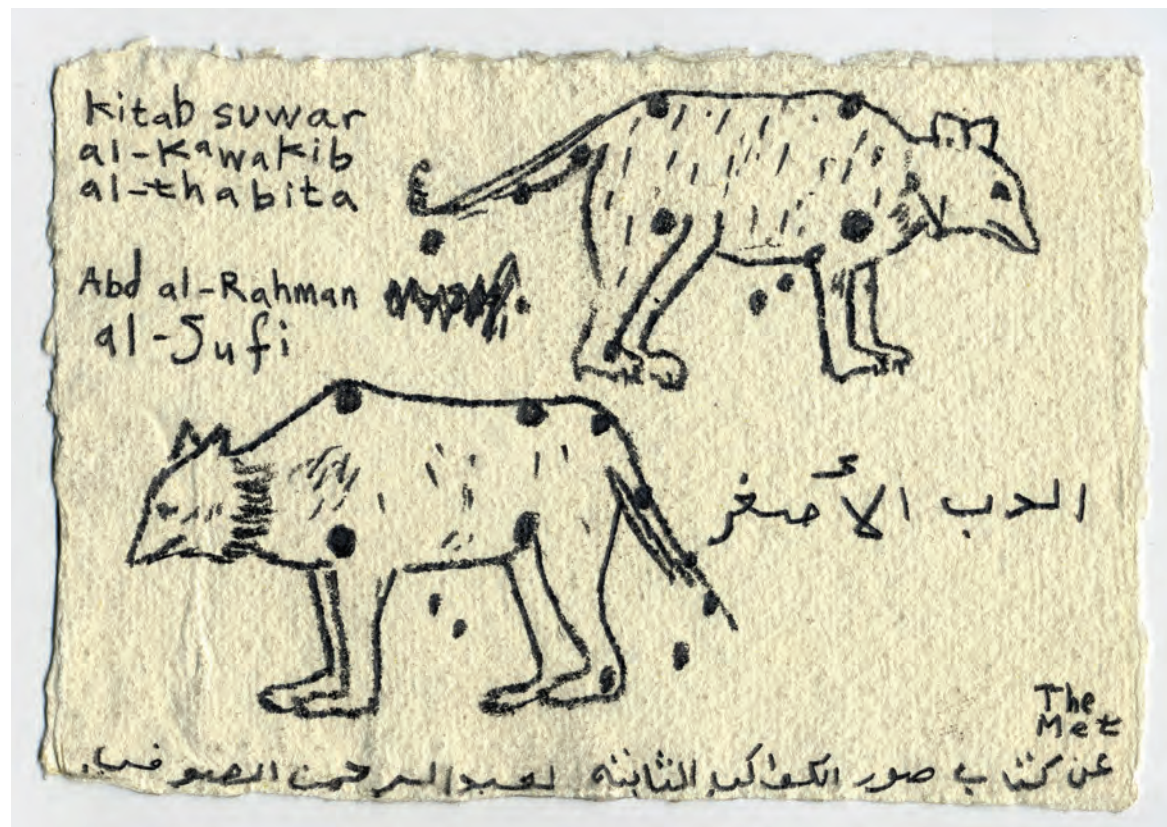
He discusses this latest work with Asian Art Newspaper in the interview below.

ASIAN ART NEWSPAPER: Why did you choose the theme of hunting to occupy such a centre stage in your latest series, *I am the Hunter/I am the Prey*?

SADIK KWAISH ALFRAJI: This year's theme for the Iraq pavilion exhibition is 'the archaic'. Within this concept, I was speculating about my body of work. The theme of hunting was always on my mind and I was thinking about it in a dialectic way. I considered that the hunter is the prey at the same time that the prey is also simultaneously the hunter. It is not about who kills who, rather it is about the relationship between the meaning of the prey and the hunter. It is about the dialectic relation between these two meanings, as it is impossible to hunt for nothing – you need to be hunted by something to follow it. Actually, you cannot be a hunter without being prey. The relation of love is a very clear example – it is not only in our daily life, but in our own history as well.

AAN: You draw from myriad references to address the dialectic relation between the hunt. How do these references visually fit within the Iraq Pavilion's theme of 'archaic'?

SKA: My work in the Iraq pavilion is a kind of indexing of the hunting process that is why I used so many sources in this work. I was searching for images and texts that can be perfectly used within this concept. The idea of the hunt and the theme of archaic are tied together in history. When I was mulling over the theme of the hunt, I found that history itself is following the dialectic of the hunter and the prey. This could fit



About Hunt, About Human (2017), drawing in mixed media installation, graphite pencil, ink and watercolour on handmade paper, 14.5 x 10 cm. Courtesy the artist and Ruya Foundation © Sadik Kwaish Alfraji

within the idea of the archaic – within the meaning that the idea of the hunter is always prevalent. It is not the traditional idea of the hunt between the pursuer and the pursued, which is how it started, but it still continues to have a relevance within our lives. It is the relation between our surroundings and who we are. Now, the idea of archaic in this exhibition – when taken as part of the history of Iraq – works perfectly, as the idea of hunting is part of the culture and so well represented when

you think about the texts and the images from the past.

AAN: In your artworks, hunting goes beyond the literal interpretation of the term to encompass themes like love, seduction, and pursuit, among others. Do you perceive the hunter and the prey as only a dichotomous relationship, or can there be hidden layers within this seeming duality?

SKA: In our lives, it is very difficult to assume that things are always

specified. It is not just a dual relationship. Call it whatever you want, there are always layers, conditions, positions, mechanisms, and situations, swirling between and around. There is no clear definition that says this is the relation between the hunter and the prey. You can look at them from the Hegelian philosophical standpoint (the rational alone is real) and how he perceived the relationship between master and slave. These kinds of relationships are made of multiple and complex layers which make a relation such as the hunter and the prey open to be seen or approached from many different angles.

AAN: Does the act of hunting become a metaphor for the imbalanced political bias, where the political force becomes the hunter and the proletariat becomes the prey?

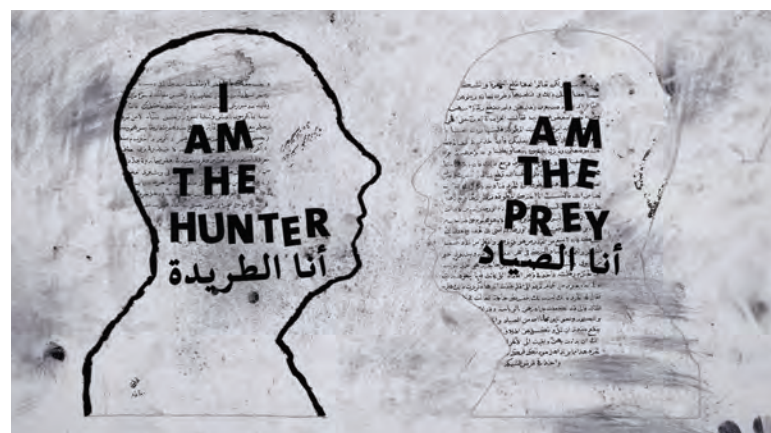
SKA: When I was working on this series, politics were not on my mind. Any point in our history can be examined within the idea of hunting, including politics. I was not specifically thinking about politics, but they are a part of it. My thoughts were on the ideas of mythology and history. Initially, war stems from politics, but eventually it overrides politics and becomes about co-resistance and human beings. That is why I did not pay too much attention to it.

Also, politics did not give me clear examples of the act of hunting. Politics need to become a kind of act to enable examples, like war and contemporary occupy movements. These political acts have examples that relate to hunting and these examples are prevalent in my work, but not within the umbrella term of politics.

My work comes through many other sources like mythology and books such as *kitab tabarwil sini al-alam*, *Abu Ma'shar al-Balkhi* ... or



I am The Hunter, I am The Prey (2017), still frame from animation in mixed media installation, work in progress at artist studio. Courtesy the artist and Ruya Foundation © Sadik Kwaish Alfraji



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I AM THE HUNTER,
I AM THE PREY
IN THE
IRAQI PAVILION
AT THIS YEAR'S
VENICE BIENNALE

kitab suwar al-kawakib al-thabita (Book of the Images of the Fixed Stars), *Abd al-Rahman al-Sufi* ... and many others. These books talk about stars, but the images and illustrations exemplify the process of hunting, but within it the ideas of politics are prevalent. This concept is more about the philosophy about our existence than the philosophy of politics.

AAN: Language and visuals appear side by side in your artworks, making them read more like stories. How much influence does the heritage of Iraq play in your artworks? What part do text and visuals have in conveying a story?

SKA: Talking about the heritage of Iraq is very painful for me. And, of course, it does play a crucial role in this work. You cannot see it directly within the work, but the criminal act of destruction of Iraqi heritage makes me think and work with these issues. I do not make a statement about the destruction of the heritage specifically in the work, but this subject is deeply personal for me. When I saw the destruction of the Mosul Museum, I cried a lot. I cried very, very hard. This is when I started working with and thinking about the idea of the prey.

The destruction of the heritage has affected and influenced me, yes. It made me work very closely with the idea of mythology and the many facets of Iraqi heritage. I believe that it is possible for the spirit or the idea of heritage to come alive again in another work, but how I do not quite know. It is very painful because I am an Iraqi as it is my heritage. I know these places, and have visited them. I have touched these objects and all of this forms part of my identity. In another sphere, it hurt me more as a human being and as a thinker. So it is this that also makes me think about our existence, about the meaning behind all this destruction.



It is not easy to destroy a sculpture that is 2,000 to 3,000 years old. When you go to a museum and look at a 3,000 year old Greek sculpture, for instance, you imagine the person who created that work of art. Even though the sculptor is no longer with us, the sculpture still exists. The spirit of the person remains inside the sculpture. When you destroy the sculpture, you simultaneously are destroying the spirit of the person who made it. You are destroying a civilization built around this artist and also the gap of time between this sculptor and you. You lose the value of time, beauty, and most importantly, humanity.

AAN: Part archival, part documentary, your series looks at a very primal, wild instinct. How do you steer this towards addressing the intricacies of the human condition?

SKA: The human condition is very complex and there is no one clear image that represents it. There is no black or white. In our life, there are multiple mechanisms that work through and around us. These mechanisms enable us to create our thoughts, actions, and choices. However, we can find our way around understanding this condition through the use of ideas, images, and concepts to examine these complex relationships between all these conditions.

If you look at the animated work in the I am the Hunter... I am the Prey series, maybe you will feel this because it is very fast and multi-layered, in an attempt to divulge the human condition. We can also look at these complicated layers by using concepts. Disciplines such as art and philosophy try to seek answers for such questions that are the heart of our human existence.

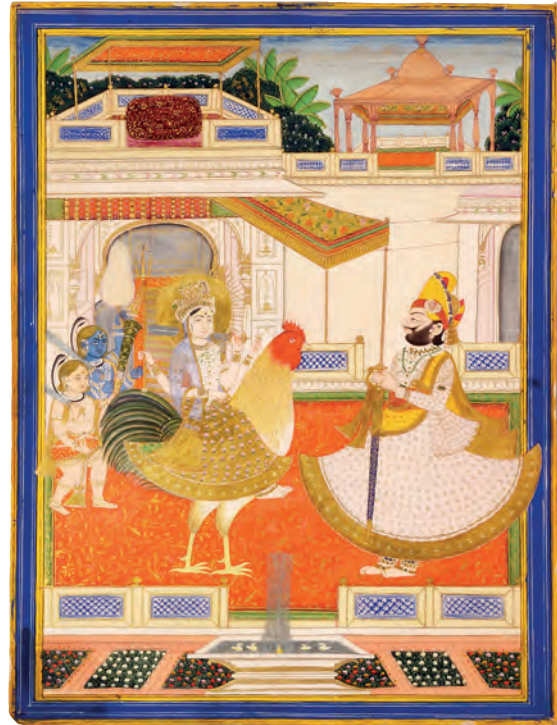
About Hunt, About Human (2017) diary notes in mixed media installation, graphite pencil on notebook paper, 20.5 x 14 cm. Courtesy the artist and Ruya Foundation © Sadik Kwaish Alfraji

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