

# An Iraqi Artist Explores the Spiritual Echoes of Migration

Iraqi artist Sadik Kwaish Alfraji's work explores an all-too-frequent experience in today's world—the experience of having multiple homes where one is both comfortable and yet spiritually uneasy.

This experience is not just the result of the refugee crisis, he argues, but of the rising number of people who have been forced to leave their hometowns out of fear of ethnic persecution or in search of better economic opportunities. And the experience can thread through multiple generations, he says, as it has in his own family.

Alfraji, a multi-media artist who often works in drawing, painting and animated video, is himself a migrant, having moved to Holland from Baghdad in 1996. He studied both art and philosophy in his native Iraq before his move to Holland. He left behind a library of four thousand books, “most of which were philosophy books on the self,” he says, with self-deprecating humor.

Drawing on his family history of displacement, Alfraji makes work that is meant to broadly resonate with viewers. “The point of my work is not political, it's about presenting questions about what happens to the self when it has been forced out of its home to live elsewhere. I believe that is something that one can never remedy, and you carry that burden wherever you might travel to or settle thereafter. It is a matter that remains permanently in one's heart.”

## A Heart in Two Homes

Alfraji's work still refers to the way in which his heart is in both Holland and Iraq. His [animated video, Ali's Boat](#), for instance, was inspired by an encounter with his nephew, Ali, in 2009 when Alfraji was visiting Baghdad

after his father's death and was about to fly back to Amsterdam. On a plain sheet of paper his nephew drew a boat and wrote the words "I wish this boat could take me with you," and put the picture in an envelope.

Alfraji's work has found a wide audience. He is preparing multiple exhibitions in the coming year, including one at L'Appartement 22 in Rabat, a contemporary art space in Marrakesh. He currently has a large installation composed of nine animated videos at the Queensland Art Gallery in Brisbane, Australia. His work was been on display at Art Dubai, shown at the Iraqi Pavilion at the Venice Biennale and has been acquired by the British Museum.

He has just ended an exhibition, *The River That Was in the South*, at Ayyam Gallery in Dubai. The exhibition contained many of the aesthetic elements and motifs that occur throughout his oeuvre: a limited range of colors; a simple—yet not primitive—rendering of human figures; symbolism and myth-like narratives. "Many of my paintings I produce using black ink or black paint, and perhaps this is an emotional reference to my childhood when during preparations for 'Ashura [a day of mourning for Shias that commemorates the death of Hussein, the prophet's grandson, in Karbala in 680 AD] my mother would buy black powder from the market to dye our clothes as it was the cheapest way to give us children black clothes for a time of the year imbued with heavy emotions."

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*The River That Was in the South* had one video and a series of black-and-white paintings in a somber yet poetic style executed entirely with black ink on white canvases on a staggeringly large scale. The size and starkness of the images are haunting, like a provocative film that remains in viewers' minds long after the movie is over. The exhibition could be considered an elegy for Alfraji's father and grandfather, whom he frequently brings up in conversation.

But the exhibition was also a personal exercise “to grapple with the permanent sense of displacement which will never be resolved. Despite many years away from Iraq, one carries this sense of being permanently out of place, never at home abroad and never at home in Iraq.”



From the exhibition *The River That Was in the South* (Photos: Ayyam Gallery and the artist).

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