

# Iraqi artist Sadik Kwaish Alfraji's "Once Upon A Time: Hadiqat Al Umma" at Maraya Art Centre, Sharjah

Iraqi artist Sadik Kwaish Alfraji explores nostalgia and expectation in a new immersive installation.

"Once Upon a Time: Hadiqat Al Umma" is on display at the Maraya Art Centre in Sharjah until 6 May 2017. *Art Radar* takes a look at the exhibition and the recent work of Iraqi artist Sadik Kwaish Alfraji.



Sadik Alfraji, 'Once Upon A Time: Hadiqat Al Umma', 2017, multimedia video installation. In "Once Upon A Time: Hadiqat Al Umma", 2017, Maraya Art Centre, Sharjah. Image courtesy the artist and Maraya Art Centre.

In his latest work, Iraqi artist [Sadik Kwaish Alfraji](#) departs from childhood memories of Hadiqat Al Umma, Baghdad's national park. Hadiqat Al Umma had been the pulsing heart of Baghdad's social life since the 1930s, yet due to economic neglect and most recently war, the park went into rapid decline and has been all but abandoned as a social space in Baghdad. The works, stemming from the artist's vivid memory and recollections of the park's plants and fountains and park-goers, evoke the personal nostalgia and sentimentality of his childhood. The works also offer a philosophical meditation on the connection between nostalgia and expectation, past and future, that characterises the existential concerns of the artist's practice.



Sadik Alfraji, 'Once Upon A Time: Hadiqat Al Umma', 2017, multimedia video installation. In "Once Upon A Time: Hadiqat Al Umma", 2017, Maraya Art Centre, Sharjah. Image courtesy the artist and Maraya Art Centre.

From his permanent base in the Netherlands, the artist has delved into the Hadiqat Al Umma's history as a space of encounter for the people of

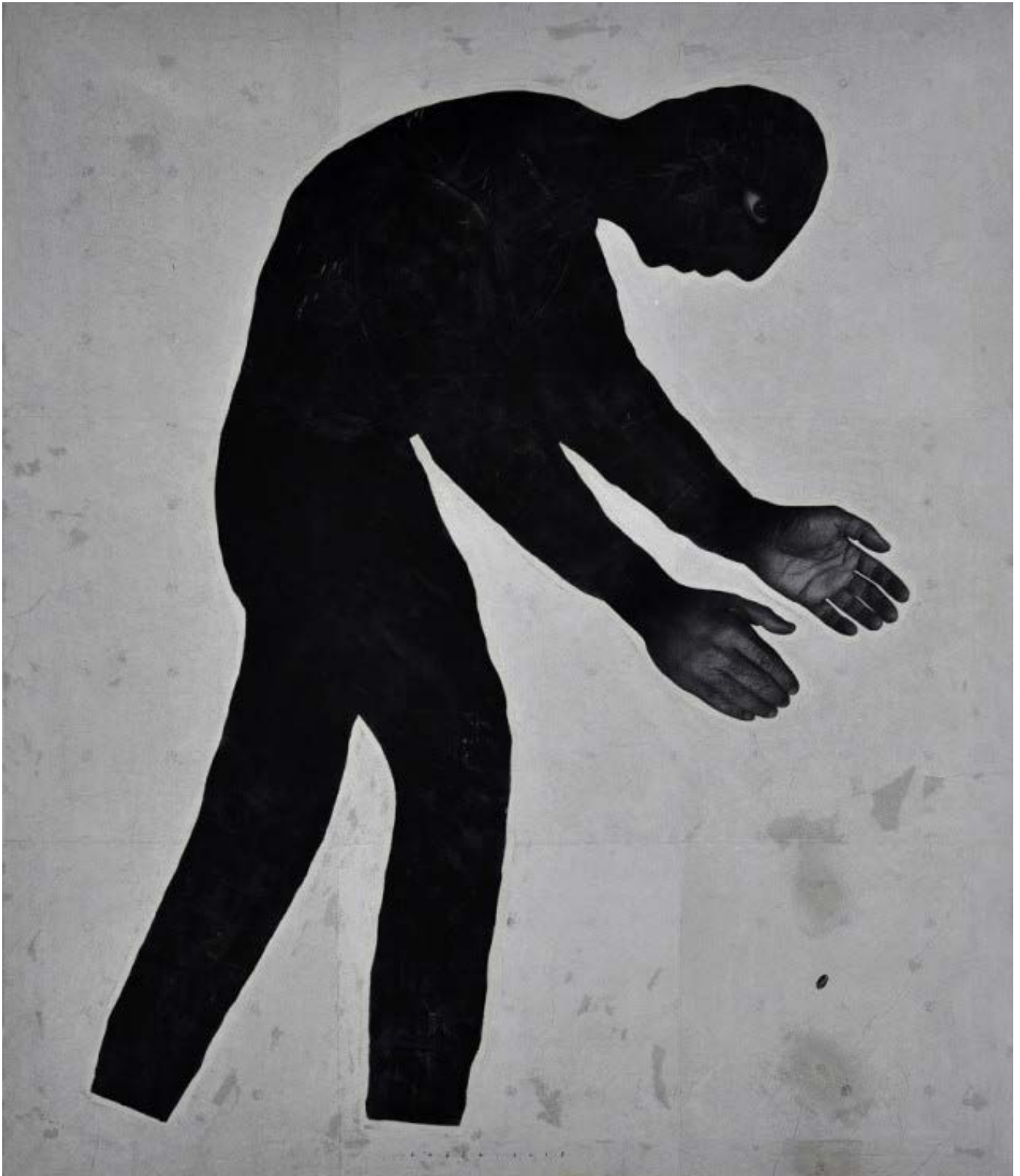
Baghdad. Through the creation of an immersive multimedia video installation departing from his memories of the park, the artists seeks to resuscitate the life force of Baghdad's once well nurtured public spaces, which Alfraji has described as "the gateway to realms of love, dreams and imagination that molded my childhood". With this as his motive, Alfraji has made over 14,000 black and white drawings that depict park-goers and display the characters and crowds through nine projectors across a large semi-circular screen. With a direct reference to the fairytale opening line in the exhibition's title, "[Once upon a time: Hadiqat Al Umma](#)" at the Maraya Art Centre in Sharjah sets out to explore the relations between the past and fiction, nostalgia and idealisation.



Sadik Alfraji, 'Untitled', 2013, indian ink, charcoal on rice, Chinese and printed paper on canvas, 180 x 180 cm. Image courtesy the artist and Ayyam Gallery.

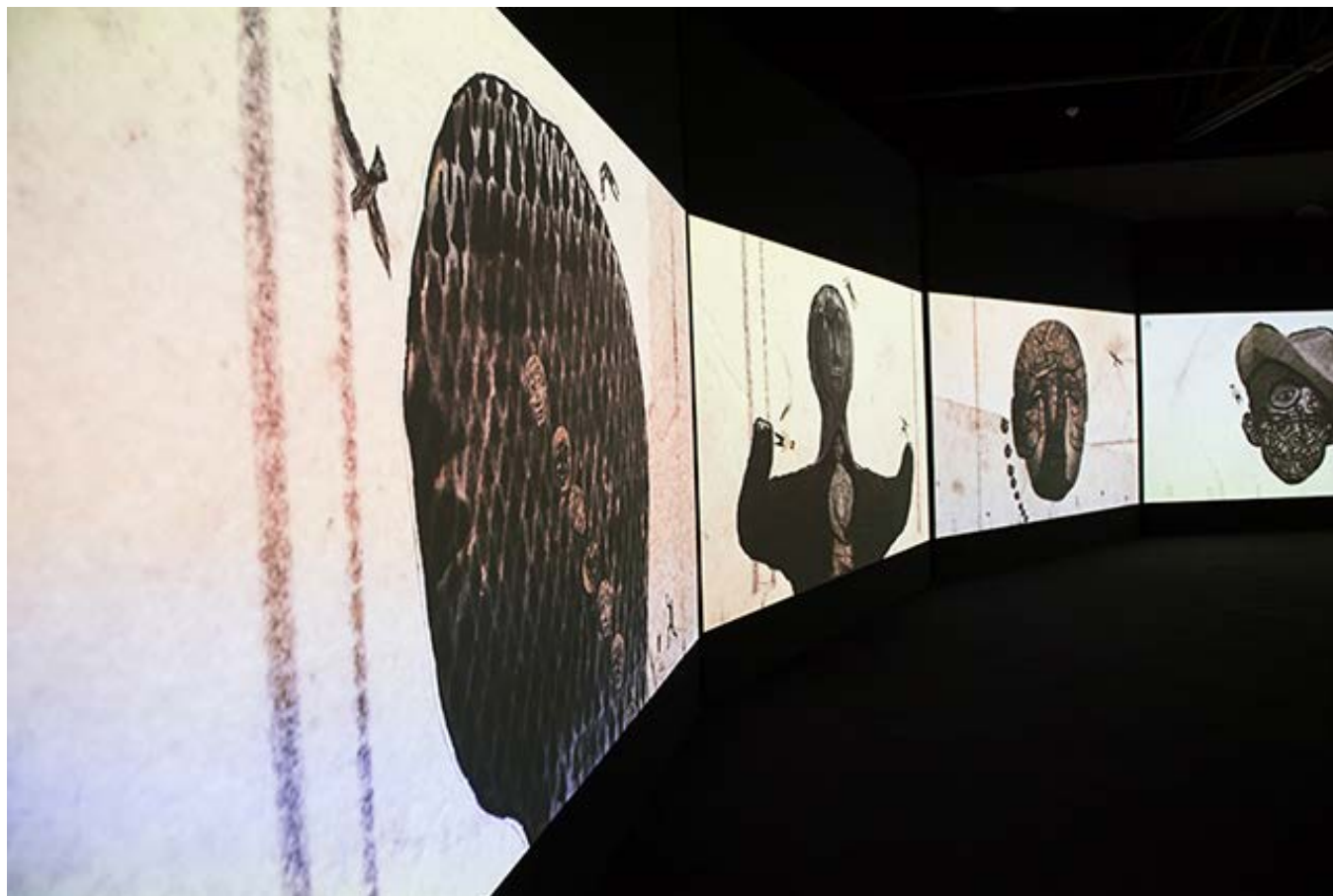
Sadik Kwaish Alfraji's work has often been presented as existential in nature, concerned with exploring what the artist has summarised as "the problem of existence". His drawings and paintings, which often are the material base for his video animations, installations or graphic art publications, are systematically populated by the same shadowy protagonist, a solitary figure with a large black willowing body often depicted in the middle of simple actions: picking a flower, walking along

the street or looking up to the sky. For Alfraji, this figure is a vessel for the exploration of the universal precarious intricacies of modern life.



Sadik Alfraji, 'Untitled', 2013, indian ink, charcoal on rice, Chinese and printed paper on canvas, 180 x 180 cm. Image courtesy the artist and Ayyam Gallery.





Sadik Alfraji, 'Once Upon A Time: Hadiqat Al Umma', 2017, multimedia video installation. In "Once Upon A Time: Hadiqat Al Umma", 2017, Maraya Art Centre, Sharjah. Image courtesy the artist and Maraya Art Centre.

By rendering his solitary figure as a charcoal-coloured silhouette and minimising the formal properties of his compositions, Alfraji captures the expressed movements and subtle inflections of the body in psychologically laden environments. The artist often records his own narrative in black and white depictions of this recurring character, particularly the loss, fragmentation and lapses in time that underline exile. In the current exhibition the figure appears again as a black, sculpted enigmatic presence in the foreground of the multiple projections of his video animations. It is said to be representative of Alfraji himself but also of the viewer – both subjects who, as the press statement says, "always stare back".



Sadik Alfraji, Still from 'Once Upon A Time: Hadiqat Al Umma', 2017, multimedia video installation. In "Once Upon A Time: Hadiqat Al Umma", 2017, Maraya Art Centre, Sharjah. Image courtesy the artist and Maraya Art Centre.

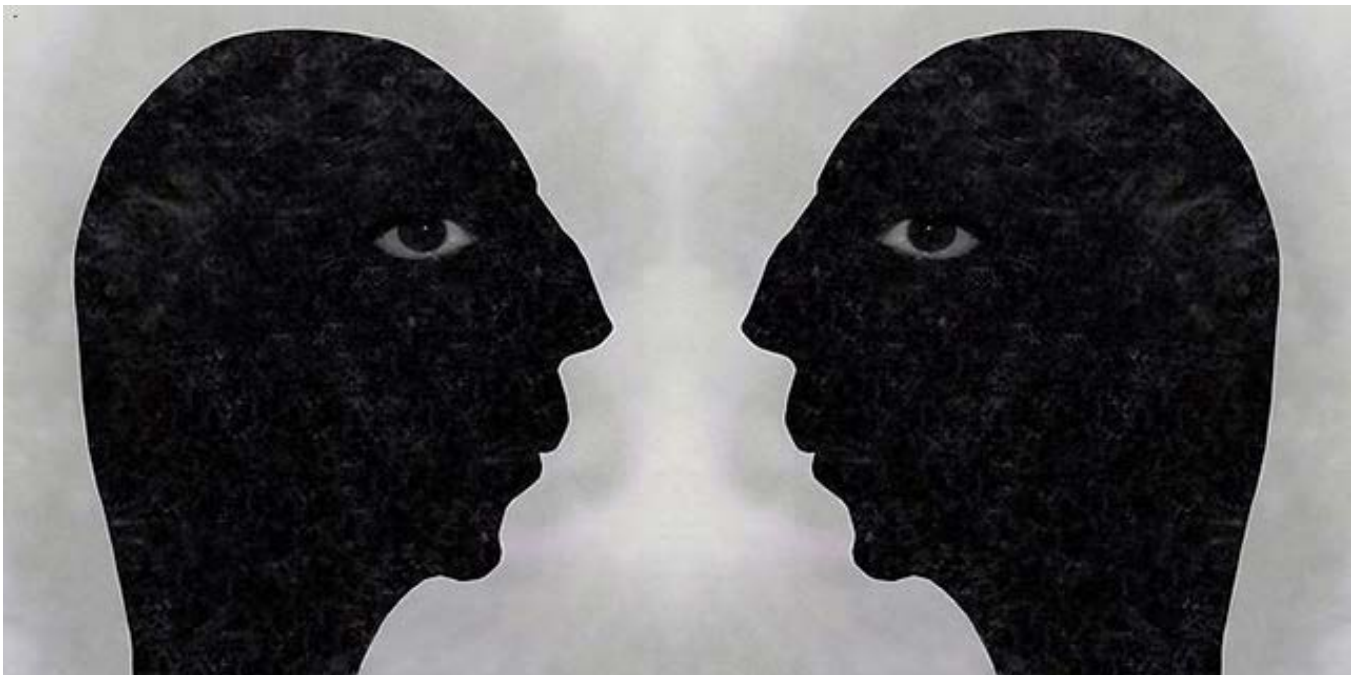


Sadik Alfraji, 'Once Upon A Time: Hadiqat Al Umma', 2017, multimedia video installation. In "Once Upon A Time: Hadiqat Al Umma", 2017, Maraya Art Centre, Sharjah. Image courtesy the artist and

Maraya Art Centre.

Sadik Alfraji's exploration of nostalgia in the current exhibition is characteristic of his wider practice of exploring death, displacement and expectation. The artist has previously stated that the most common universal human experience is waiting. Asked to give examples of this in a [2013 interview](#) with *Designboom*, the artist stated:

*One great example is our daily life. We start the day with a certain expectation of the day to come in mind, and we end the day with a repeated routine – we lie in bed, close our eyes and think about what will come tomorrow before drifting off to sleep.... we are in a constant state of waiting and expectation, it's a part of being human. I think this continuous process of expectation allows us the space to generate and develop new ideas, beliefs and hypotheses.*



Sadik Alfraji, 'Waiting for Godot series', 2011, lambda print, 125 x 250 cm. Image courtesy the artist and Ayyam Gallery.

The artist's interest in the condition of waiting is well demonstrated in the 2013 work *godot to come yesterday* (2013) – a video animation based on the Samuel Beckett play *Waiting for Godot* (1953), in which two characters, Vladimir and Estragon, wait for the arrival of someone named



Godot who never actually arrives. Debuting in the [2014 exhibition of the same title](#) held at [Ayyam Gallery](#), the artist renders the original play's rumination on expectation, doubt and boredom in his characteristic black and white figurative style. In the same interview with *Designboom* the artist explains the work:

*'godot to come yesterday' is an extenuation of my previous works titled after samuel beckett's absurdist play, a series of prints showing human figures in various states of waiting. These lonely and even bored figures are now no longer frozen and are now able to move around the screen, but are still trapped within the video frame and the endless process of waiting. This idea of futile waiting is something that I think is incredibly relevant to all of our lives – we are always waiting for something but it never quite arrives. it's the nature of our existence and this idea has long been a central concern of my work.*



Sadik Alfraji, still from 'Once Upon A Time: Hadiqat Al Umma', 2017, multimedia video installation. In "Once Upon A Time: Hadiqat Al Umma", 2017, Maraya Art Centre, Sharjah. Image courtesy the artist and Maraya Art Centre.



Portrait Sadik Alfraji. Image courtesy Maraya Art Centre, Sharjah.

The artist's current exhibition is distinguished from previous work by the anchoring of the project by a particular geographic site, that of Baghdad's Hadiqat Al Umma. Yet the continuity of the imagery used to deal with the location characteristic of the artist's wider drawing practice – the repeated use of solitary figures rendered in black and grey engulfed in blank white backgrounds – permits a productive reading of the artist's views on his subject matter of place, the past and nostalgia: for Sadik Kwaish Alfraji nostalgia is akin to waiting. The figures that populate the artist's park project are in an existential purgatory – neither past nor present, neither premonitions nor ghosts. This tense is the time zone in which the artist operates. Just like Beckett's *Godot*, Sadik Kwaish Alfraji's *Hadiqat Al Umma* is to come yesterday.

Rebecca Close

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Sadik Kwaish Alfraji's work is also part of "[Moving stories: three journeys](#)", a multimedia exhibition at the British Museum in London running from 30 March to 30 April 2017.

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