

Sadik Alfraji: The River That Was in the South

[Anna Seaman](#) Posted [25 April, 2019](#)



The ongoing practice of Sadik Kwaish Alfraji explores issues of melancholy and nostalgia through weaving together personal stories and that of his family, infused with a general sense of solidarity with anyone who has experienced displacement. This exhibition, *The River That Was in the South* is a multi-faceted show that begins with a poem of the same name that

describes part of Alfraji's personal history. It tells the real story of Alfraji's ancestors who lived from the land on the Tigris-Euphrates marshlands. They were forced to leave during the 1980s and 1990s when Saddam Hussein drained the marshes and their journey of migration began.



Sadik Kwaish Alfraji, *Weeping of the South*, 2019, charcoal and ink on canvas, 270 x 565 cm. Courtesy of Ayyam Gallery

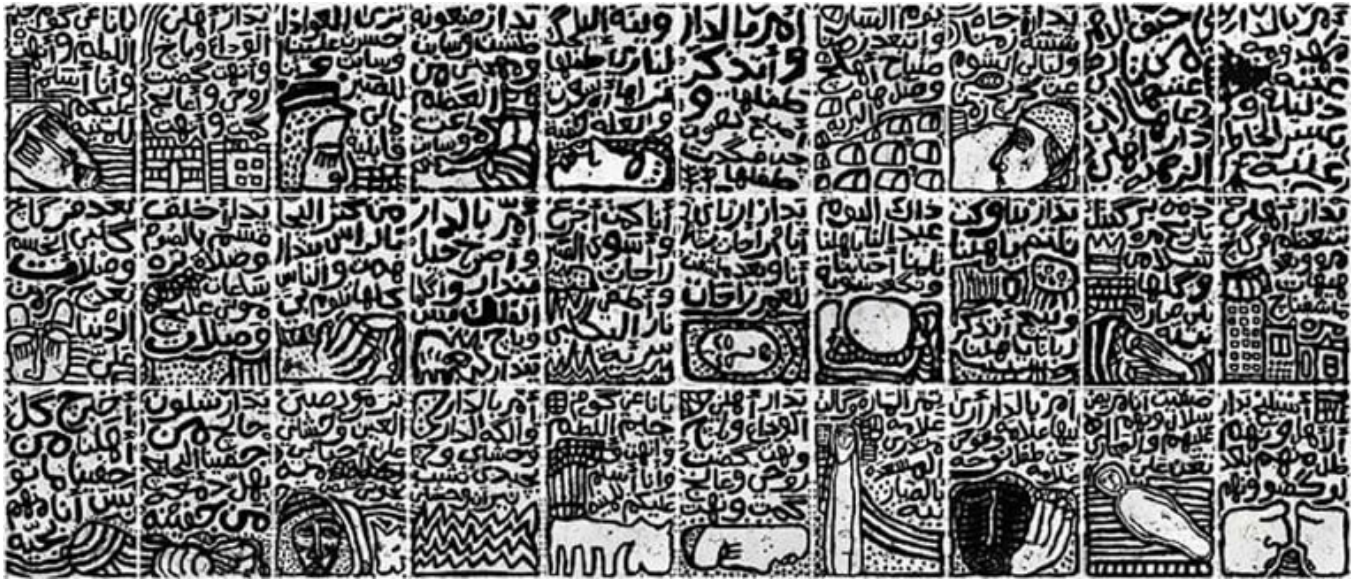
Alfraji himself was born in Baghdad, where his family ended up but he continued to move on and now resides in the Netherlands. The poem describes the paths of migration as "glistening like gold" and "painting a bright horizon" but later those paths become "burdened with misery and loss". Such themes of despair recur in several works, perhaps most notably in *Weeping of the South* (2019) – a giant 5.5 metre canvas depicting a sea of faces, gathered together upon a background of wave-like forms with long, black tears streaming from their eyes. The intensity of the expressions conveys so much tragedy and also brilliantly captures the narrative and emotion of the entire show.



Sadik Kwaish Alfraji, River's Book 1, 2018, archival print on cotton paper, each 28.3 x 41 cm, series of 101 works.

Courtesy of Ayyam Gallery

The title work is a five-minute animation film that plays out the story of Alfraji's ancestors. It shows the plight of the people of the marshlands through a set of iron jaws, representing dictatorship, gobbling up the land whilst other pieces consist of multiple drawing, containing snippets of poetic writing, together transcribing the emotional plight of this community. However, there is a high note at the show's close. On a Distant Edge (2019) is a continuous loop of film taken from the bow of a small wooden boat that is traversing the modern-day marshes, which are now listed as a UNESCO Heritage Site. They are beginning to be populated again now and by including this piece, the viewer is left feeling hopeful rather than completely submerged with sorrow.



Sadik Kwaish Alfraji, Sing like the Southerners Do, 2019, oil and ink on paper, 300 x 700 cm, series of 30 drawings.
Courtesy of Ayyam Gallery

Sadik Kwaish Alfraji. The River That Was in the South. Ayyam Gallery,
Alserkal Avenue, Dubai. March 12 – April 25, 2019.