

"A Tapestry Woven in My Soul": Sadik Kwaish Alfraji on childhood recollections that shaped him as an artist. - Ruya Foundation For Contemporary Culture In Iraq

January 13, 2016

"A Tapestry Woven in My Soul": Sadik Kwaish Alfraji on childhood recollections that shaped him as an artist.

*Sadik Kwaish Alfraji (b. Baghdad, 1960) lives and works in Amersfoort, the Netherlands. Trained as a painter and printmaker, he also makes animation videos and art books. Alfraji left Iraq in the 1990s, where he later settled in the Netherlands. As a young artist in Baghdad in the 1980s, Alfraji worked as an animator for a children's television programme. At the difficult time of the Iran-Iraq war, Alfraji produced a series of etchings of patients at Al-Shamma'iya Psychiatric Hospital, as well as an art book *Biography of a Head* (1985), the story of a head without a body, among other works. As he often states himself, his work has been influenced by the German Expressionists, as well as his love of philosophy and literature, mainly the existentialist currents and sophism.*

*Today, Alfraji's recent work is dominated by the presence of an oversized, melancholy silhouette. *Ali's Boat* (2014) is an animated elegy to his home, written for his twelve year old nephew Ali, who lives in Baghdad and longs to join his uncle in Europe. It was acquired by the British Museum and is currently on display at Ayyam Gallery in Beirut. In his letter to Ruya, below, Alfraji reflects on the first images and stories that shaped*

his role as an artist.

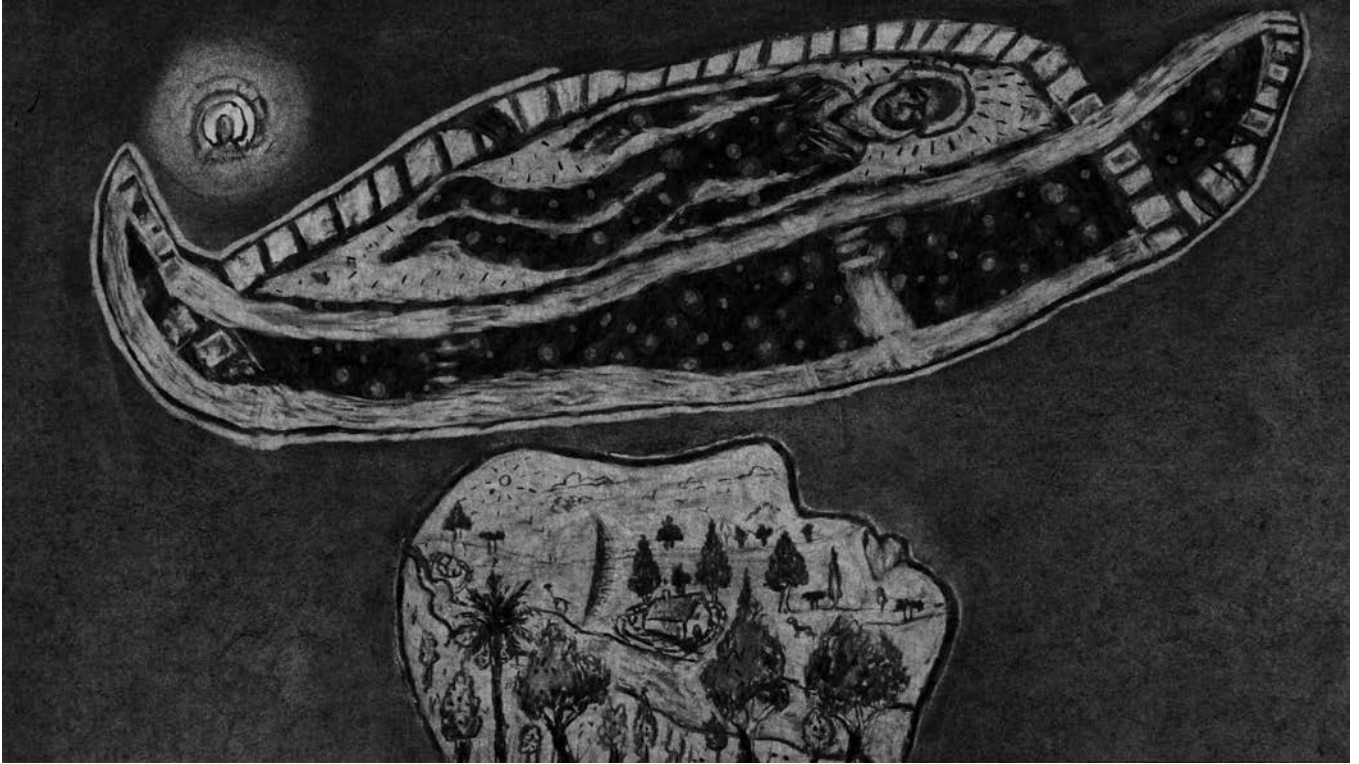


In Baghdad, Under the Freedom Monument, 2013. Courtesy of the artist.

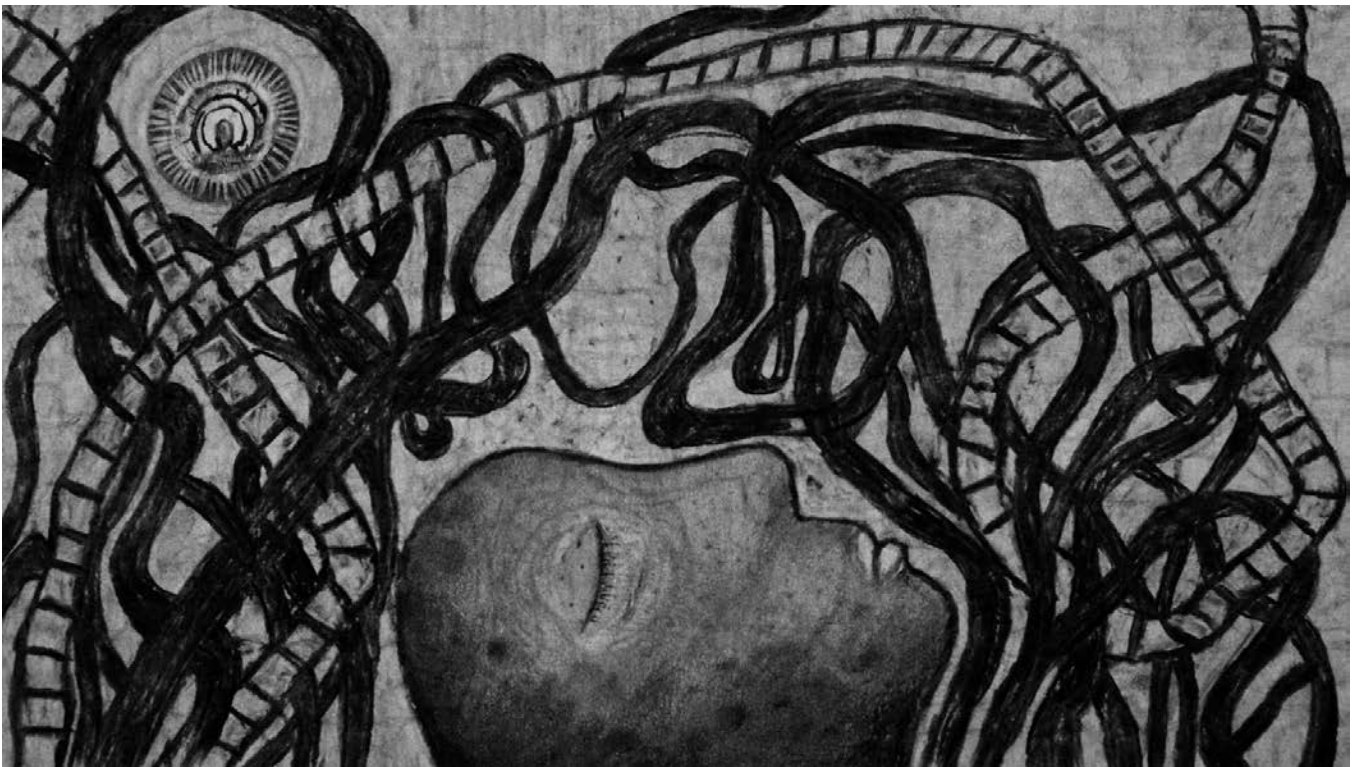
What was the first image you admired as a child?

There was nothing you could call a first image or object as such. My early imagination always created a sea of images that helped shape my identity; images on walls, behind glass, over furniture, on crockery. It was the images of home first with me: porcelain, fine china, wall carpets, big floor rugs, prayer mats, and the like; family pictures, pictures of religious and political figures, set alongside decorative images and scenes of nature – a mixture of Koranic verses, holy sayings, drawing of greenery, flowers, and animals.

I remember a picture of a wounded deer, and one of the beautiful 'Al-Mu'aydi's daughter' – the Iraqi 'Mona Lisa'. I recall the imagined likenesses of Imam Ali and Hussein and of the Battle of Kerbala, with all the angels, horses, and tents. It was a battle between men, women and children with beautiful, haloed faces full of sanctity, against faces filled with ugly evil.



Still from Ali's Boat, 2014. Courtesy of the artist.



Still from Ali's Boat, 2014. Courtesy of the artist.



Still from Ali's Boat, 2014. Courtesy of the artist.

There was a picture in our house of Da Vinci's 'Annunciation' hanging from the wardrobe, the size of a small poster. I don't know why. It created deep feelings within me back then, feelings that I didn't understand. I saw within it an angel's face, a face like my mother's.

No one had arranged these images into groups, but they formed a whole of diverse parts. It was a world of its own. Every detail served every other and they all came together to make "home".

The days of Ashura are also deep in my memory. It is a mixed memory of wonder, sadness and mystery. They were the first public events I ever took part in. To eyes of the young boy that I was, it seemed endlessly awe-inspiring. There was a great sadness in the images and colours that mingled with the sound of drums, hymns and all kinds of lamentation and enveloped the streets around our house. Everything was shrouded in a jet blackness, something which has deeply marked my work ever since. It is unmistakable in the black ink drawings I love to do: black human forms either bent and curled in on themselves, or soaring towards the heavens

and unknowable dangers.



Still from the House that my Father Built, 2011. Courtesy of the artist.



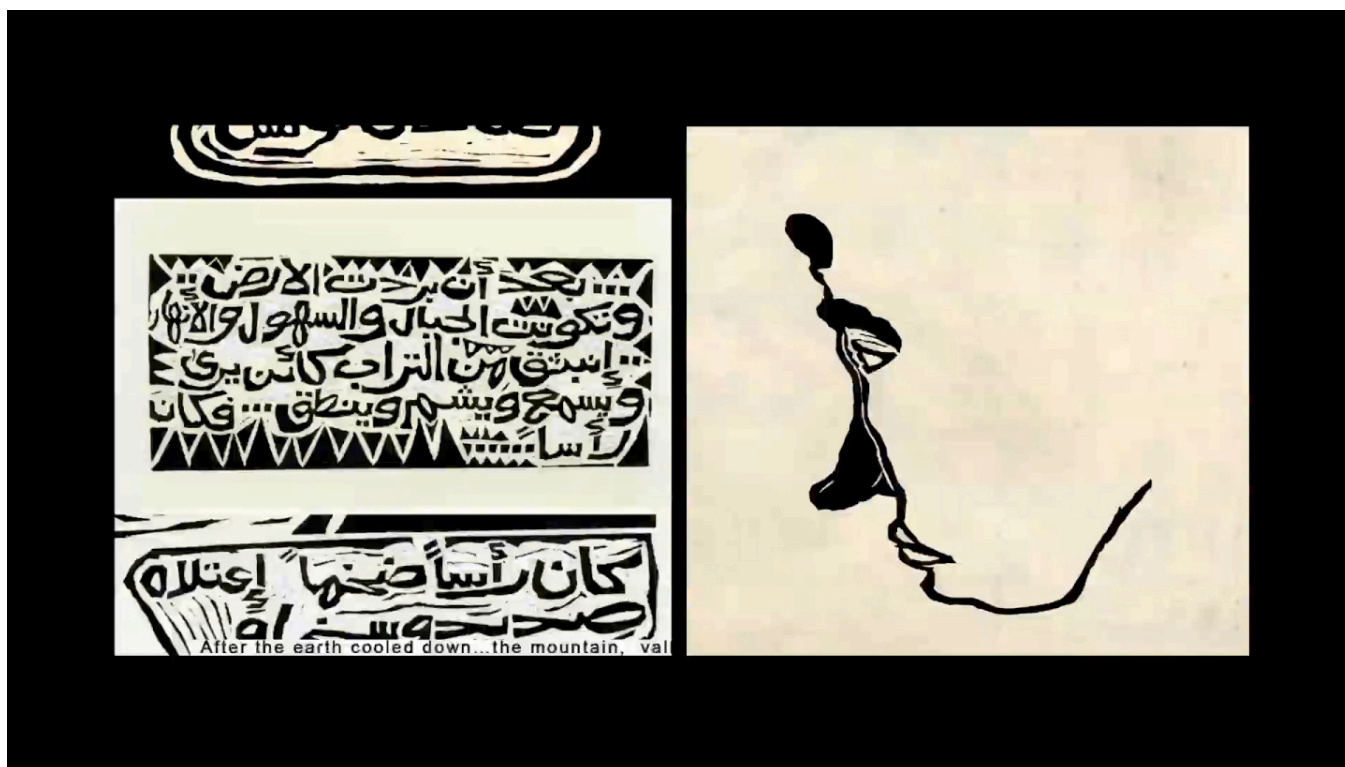
Still from the House that my Father Built, 2011. Courtesy of the artist.

There were also the magical images contained within the *Al-Qira'ah Al-Khalduniyah* ('The Khaludiniyah Anthology'), which was the first book we Iraqis would read in primary school. Its pages were full of images of people, animals, trees — very simple drawings. They illustrated a never-ending compendium of tales that left a deep mark on my imagination. Whenever I opened that book, I would find myself singing songs with a nightingale, feeding sheep with a shepherd, or catching fish with a fisherman. I still remember, in class, finding my name, Sadik, on one of the pages of that book. It made me feel part of its very pages, one of its illustrations, one of its creations. It felt like I was flying endlessly through space, floating forever within its lovely pages.

No, there was no first image. It is truer to call it a grand panorama of

stories, mixing with images, sounds and feelings. It was as if, wherever I looked, there was yet another image to engulf me completely.

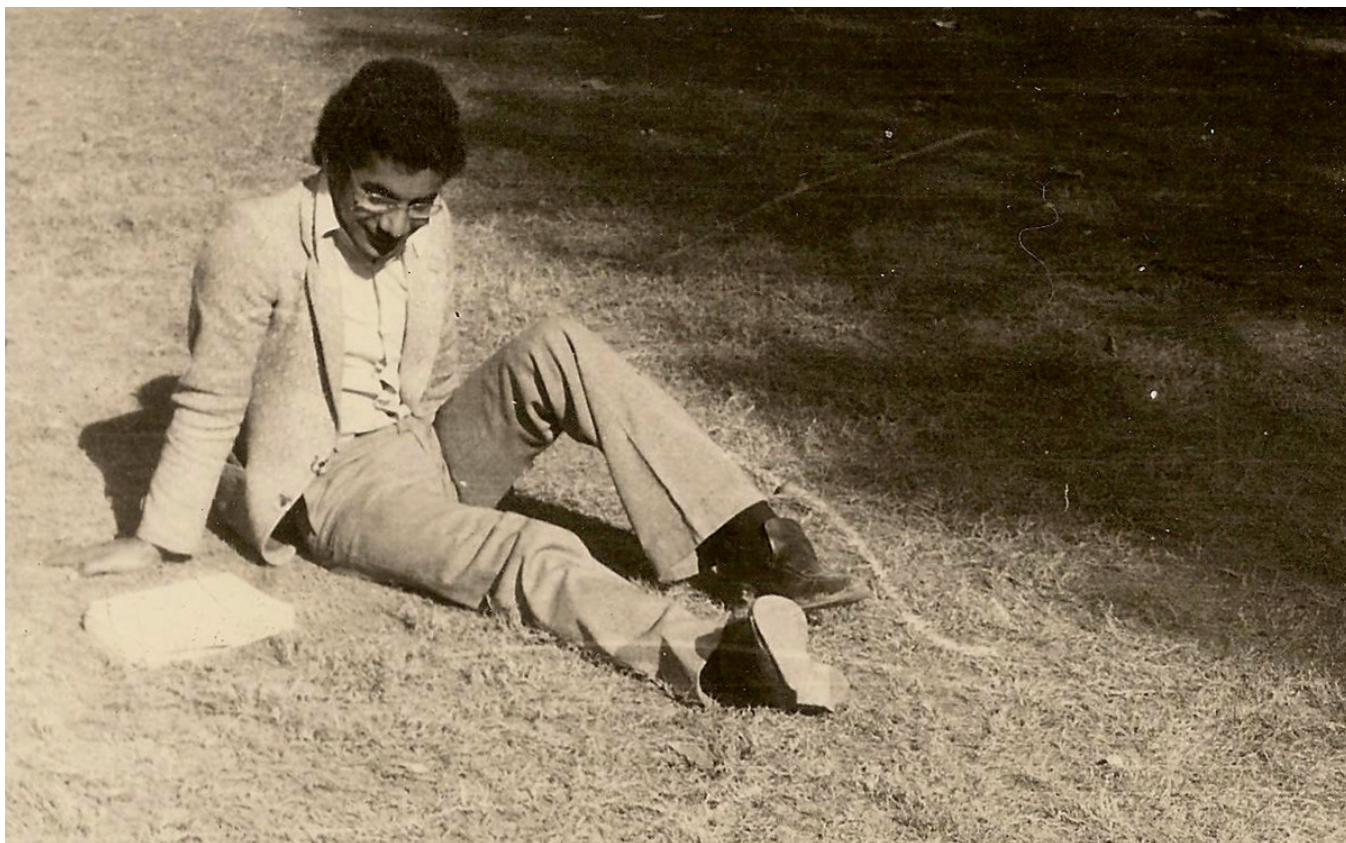
Now when I look back on the magical reality of my childhood, I find I cannot separate one image from another or one event from another. It is all one tapestry woven in my soul, the basis of my identity as a person and an artist.



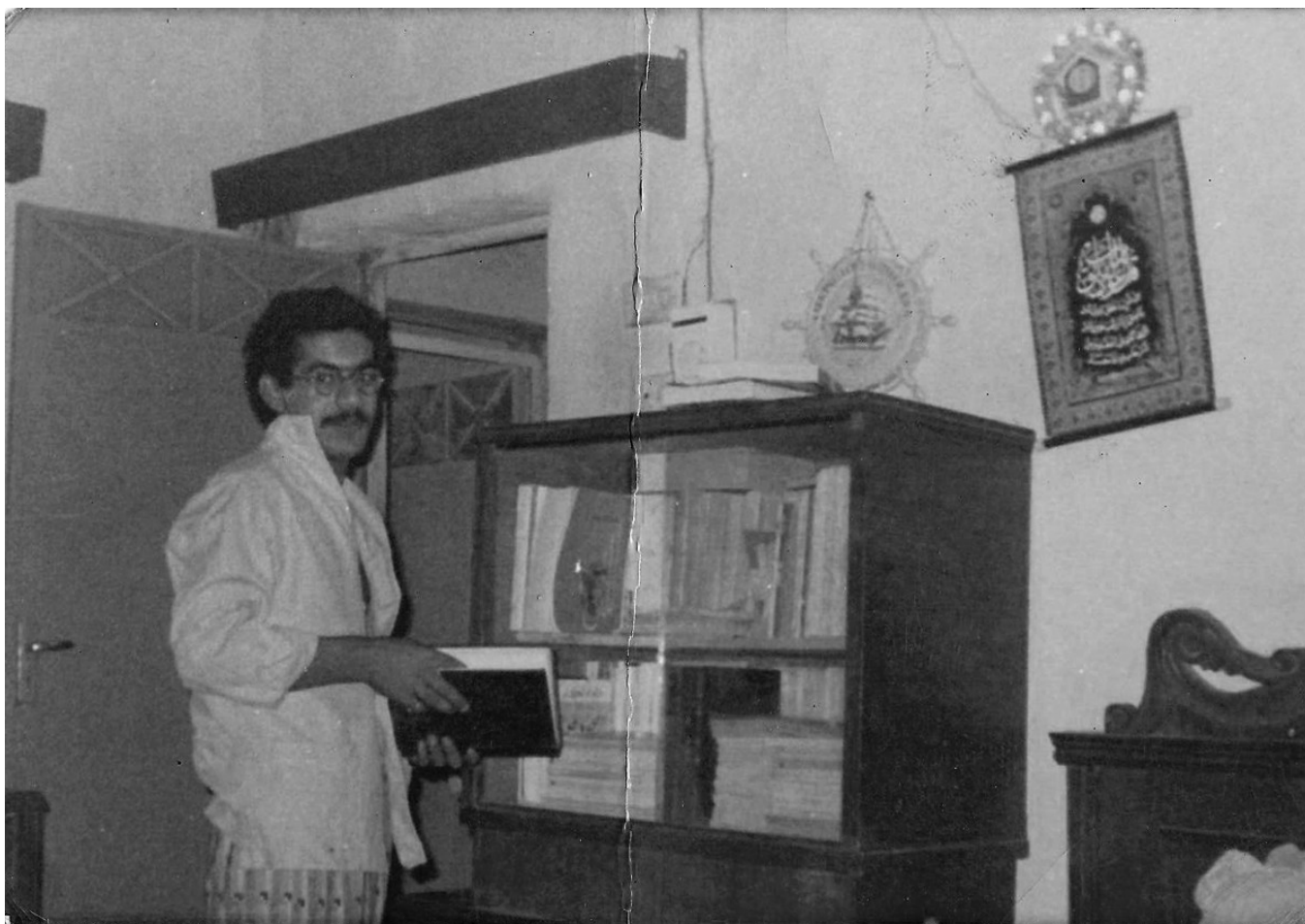
Still from Biography of a Head, Engraved 1985, reproduced 2014. Courtesy of the artist.

What is the role of an artist?

The artist does not have a specific role: one might be a seer, thinker or storyteller; maybe even a community or political activist. One may be all these things but, in the end, one's work is inevitably closer to a journal documenting one's life and time, detailing one's being.



Alfraji at the Institute of Fine Arts, Baghdad, 1980s. Courtesy of the artist.



Alfraji in his family home, 1980s, Baghdad. Courtesy of the artist.

What memory of Baghdad or Iraq would you recreate in an artwork?

Everything in my recollection of my birthplace is a gateway to daydreams, nostalgia and pain; everything is a gateway to a concept or idea that prompts creativity.

There are so many tales I could tell, blending fact, fiction and fantasy. Perhaps what I recall most at this very moment is the death of one of our dearest relatives while he was a guest in our house. It was a beautiful summer's evening and I was on the roof enjoying the sweetness of the air, in the first numbing prelude to sleep. I heard a commotion in the courtyard below and looked down to see my father hurriedly dragging our guest's mattress around in a jerky, semi-circular fashion. Our guest lay still on his back, barely moving except for miniscule quivers in his face and around his open mouth. I didn't understand what was happening back then: why was he being like that? I had been playing with him only two hours before. He had promised me so many gifts.

I can still vividly feel the terror I felt at my father's panic, our guest's cold, wide-eyed expression, my mother slapping his face.

His last breaths were irregular rattles, and my father twisted the mattress around so that his face and hefty body faced in the direction of prayer. His soul ascended and he departed this life before my very eyes, though his own remained open, looking to the skies and occluded like the sometimes cloudy white of Baghdad skies. That was my first encounter with death. It gripped my soul and painted my bewildered heart black. It is something that has stayed with me forever, in my thoughts and in my art.

Amersfoort Holland 2015



Alfraji in his studio, Amersfoort. Courtesy of the artist.