

CONFLICT AND BEAUTY

[Dorian Batycka](#)



Serwan Baran, *Untitled*, 2020. Acrylic on canvas, 200 x 325 cm. Photography by Paul Hennebelle, courtesy of Saleh Barakat Gallery.

Iraq's seemingly endless conflict pervades Serwan Baran's work

Iraqi-Kurdish Artist Serwan Baran untangles the complexities of identity and the fatherland in his latest exhibition, on view at Saleh Barakat in Beirut. The exhibition by the 52-year-old artist, whose works were most recently presented as part of Iraq's pavilion at the 2019 Venice Biennale, carries through on a familiar theme for Baran: displacement and the isolation of war.



A Harsh Beauty, exhibition view. Photography by Paul Hennebelle, courtesy of Saleh Barakat Gallery.

The artist's show, *A Harsh Beauty*, explores preoccupations of masculinity in the Arab World. The recent body of work explores how the concept of fatherland impacts social and political life in Iraqi Kurdistan. It presents several large-scale paintings, sculptures and works on paper scoured from Baran's memory whilst enlisted in the Iraqi army. The paintings thereby function like cognitive therapy on war – a way, perhaps, in which Baran comes to terms with his experiences and traumas.



Serwan Baran, *Untitled*, 2020. Acrylic on canvas, 150 x 200 cm. Photography by Paul Hennebelle, courtesy of Saleh Barakat Gallery

Baran's latest exhibition in Beirut comes amidst rising geopolitical uncertainty in the region, but through his works, Baran gives poignant counter-narratives that help see through political propaganda. Extending these threads through the artist's latest exhibition, Baran's works draw attention to how the idea of fatherland creates theatres of war and conflict. For Baran, monumental acrylic paintings are used to convey the sense of his lived experience. In doing so, they become like documents and ephemera of a wider history. With visual panache, the doom contained in Baran's works feels utterly and viscerally palpable.



Serwan Baran, *Untitled*, 2019. Acrylic on canvas, 100 x 120 cm. Photography by Paul Hennebelle, courtesy of Saleh Barakat Gallery

All paintings *Untitled* continue the series *Fatherland* from Baran's Venice Biennale exhibition. In one painting, we see four handcuffed men with backs to the view, blindfolded, their heads pointing down. What the painting bears witness to is not so much the brutality of war, but rather its isolation. In the work, the men appear sullen.



Serwan Baran, *Untitled*, 2019. Acrylic on canvas, 180 x 200 cm. Photography by Paul Hennebelle, courtesy of Saleh Barakat Gallery

In another, a horizontally aligned body of men with their hands bound behind their heads walk in a line. Accompanying these men appears to be blood-like splatters beneath their feet, perhaps intended to create a sense of anxiety in the viewer. Another large-scale canvas shows several dozen men, huddled and blindfolded. The idea of being blindfolded becomes a recurring theme in each of Baran's paintings. One work is given a Francis Bacon-type treatment, with faces blurred and indiscernible, the group becoming a dilapidated mass of prisoners with only the numbers of their blue uniforms visible.



Serwan Baran, *Untitled*, 2018. Acrylic on canvas, 180 x 200 cm. Photography by Paul Hennebelle, courtesy of Saleh Barakat Gallery

The monumentality of the works seen together gives the exhibit added weight. In terms of the installation, the large paintings reveal a sum much greater than its individual parts. Seen together, the works installed at close proximity resonate with the complex identity of masculinity in wartorn Iraq. Only here, looming in their midst, their sense of destruction becomes a depressing idea to contemplate.

A Harsh Beauty is on view at Saleh Barakat Gallery in Beirut until April 18, 2020.



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Dorian Batycka is a Canadian curator, art critic and DJ based in Muscat, Oman. He is currently curator at Bait Muzna for Art Film. Previously, he was assistant curator for the first ever Maldives National Pavilion at the 55th Venice Biennale and has contributed to numerous publications, including Art and Education, Frieze Blog, and Nero. He can be found on Twitter.