

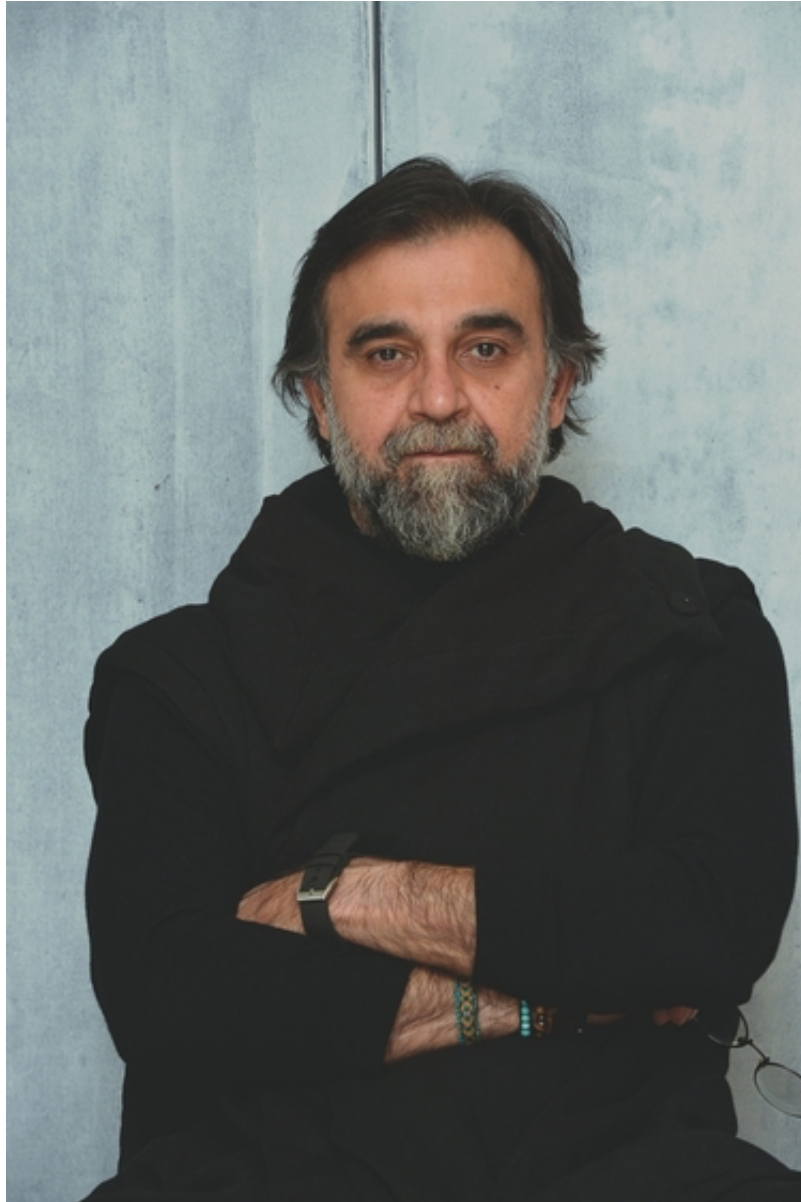
Iraqi-Kurdish artist's work documents the legacy of conflict in his homeland

Serwan Baran's latest work is being exhibited at Venice Biennale



I have the great responsibility of representing a whole country with only two artworks," said [Iraqi](#)-Kurdish artist Serwan Baran about his exhibition *Fatherland*, currently running at the [Venice Biennale](#). "But I trust that I am able to represent everyone who lives in [Iraq](#), and I know I can touch every individual, from the youngest to the oldest, and describe the interior of each house that has suffered a loss."

Born in Baghdad in 1968, much of Baran's life has been stained by war and conflict. Having served as a soldier in the Iran-[Iraq](#) War and a war artist in the First Gulf War, his work has long expressed the horrors of conflict and the lasting impact it has on the soldiers that fight them. For *Fatherland*, commissioned by the Ruya Foundation, Baran created two artworks: *The Last Meal*, a large-scale acrylic painting, and a clay sculpture entitled *The Last General*.



Iraqi-Kurdish artist Serwan Baran.

The Last Meal depicts soldiers who are killed while having a meal. The painting's aerial perspective allows the viewer to absorb the entire scene

at once, as if they're flying above it. Curled in foetal position, the soldiers look like silkworms, Baran said, labouring away to produce silk for their masters. For him, the painting is a reflection of the sectarian violence that has swept across much of the Middle East since the US-led invasion of Iraq in 2003.

"When Ruya Foundation chose me to represent Iraq, I began looking for a subject that would top everything," he said. "I was very interested in doing work on the war, but through something that carries ideological and religious aspects with it, in addition to the traditional wars that we've experienced."



The Last Meal at Venice Biennale. Image courtesy of the artist and Ruya Foundation. Photographed by Danto Productions.

Placed on the ground in front of *The Last Meal* is *The Last General*, a clay sculpture that features a general's corpse in a boat. Inspired by the

ancient Sumerian civilisation that buried their deceased by sending them out to sea on a reed boat, the piece tells the story of a high-ranking army general who drowns while trying to escape. The body appears partially decomposed, while his army decorations remain visible.

Fatherland is an extension of Baran's past work, although it tackles the subject of war in Iraq and the Middle East differently. At the beginning of his career, Baran, who studied under the Syrian-German painter Marwan, used to paint victories on the frontline and the heroes that fought them. His portraits of Saddam Hussein and army generals emphasised their strength – exposing their insecurity would have ended Baran's career and perhaps more. "It was propaganda," he said. "I painted in a realistic way that did not match our reality as soldiers."



The Last General at Venice Biennale. Image courtesy of the artist and Ruya Foundation. Photographed by Danto Productions.

After 2003, the tone in his artwork changed. He began expressing his own military experience through grotesque, figural abstractions. Considered a member of the new generation of Iraqi painters, preceded by Iraq's revered artists such as Jawad Saleem, Faiq Hassan and Ismail Fatah Al Turk, Baran's artwork now sheds light on defeat and the psychological consequences of fighting in battle.

"The Middle East has not had peace for a long time," he said. "I decided to work with themes of war and setbacks, prisoners and the dead, red rooms of torture and death sentences. I know very well that these subjects are difficult to market and that they are not for decorative art collections, living rooms or palaces, because they carry too much drama, but I couldn't let this dictate my approach."



Acrylic sketch for *The Last Meal*. Image courtesy of the artist and Ruya Foundation.

A common figure in Baran's artwork, in addition to the disfigured soldier, is the canine – together, they are the linchpins of his creations, or the “vocabulary of his work”. Used to intimidate detainees in Iraq's infamous Abu Ghraib prison after 2003, dogs became a symbol of cruelty and the power of the US forces for the artist.

In Baran's paintings, the animal is often illustrated mid-aggression, with its ribs highlighted and its teeth showing. There are a few instances though, where the dog appears softer, even lifeless. Though a direct reference to 2003, the canine, like most of the images in Baran's work, reflects multiple meanings.



The canine is a common symbol in Baran's work. Image courtesy of the artist and Saleh Barakat Gallery.

"At times I propose the hero as the victim, and at other times, I introduce the victim as the hero," he said. "I researched the mythology of the dog, and found that it was once the keeper of graves and the carrier of souls into the afterlife. At different times, it was a dog with two heads that carried bodies into the other world. The dog took over a large space in my mind and work, as a new element of war."

For Baran, concept always comes before technique and composition. While at times his work can be simplified and reduced, it can also be dense with details.



Coffee and charcoal sketch for The Last General. Image courtesy of the artist and Ruya Foundation.

“Researching the concept is the most important element for me and it has to lead to satisfactory results,” he said. “The harshness in my work satisfies my desire as an artist before all.”

The Venice Biennale is running until 24 November.

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