

Art of war: Serwan Baran's 'raw, direct' take on armed combat

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Serwan Baran's 'The Last General.' (Supplied)

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- Inside 'Fatherland,' Iraq's exhibition at this year's Venice Biennale
- "I try to convey a specific idea — the drama experienced by a person who lived 45 years of his life in a continuous war."

DUBAI: At the Venice Biennale this year, the Pavilion of Iraq showcases a topical solo exhibition, "Fatherland," in which two poignant works of art evoke the atrocities of war. The site-specific works were created by Kurdish-Iraqi artist, and former soldier, Serwan Baran.

The work was commissioned by Baghdad's Ruya Foundation, which was co-founded in 2012 by a number of Iraq-born individuals, including Iraqi-Lebanese historian and author Tamara Chalabi, who co-curated the exhibition.

“We are interested in, and concerned about, the state of culture in Iraq in the absence of any proper civil society or serious support and sustenance to be able to culturally and artistically create a bridge between Iraq and the world,” Chalabi told Arab News. “There’s been this cultural isolation that’s been going on for decades. People don’t have access to Iraq, but also artists from inside are doing their own thing without any kind of knowledge or access to what’s going on outside — in a formalist way, in a way that allows them to be part of a larger conversation, such as the Venice Biennale.”

Although the theme of the exhibition is universal, it is deeply personal too. The Beirut-based artist became accustomed to brutal war growing up in Iraq, and was once employed to document ‘the victories of the Iraqi army’ for propaganda purposes. Of the body of work he developed for the pavilion, Baran said: “I try to convey a specific idea — the drama experienced by a person who lived 45 years of his life in a continuous war.”

Chalabi says she thought “long and hard” about whose work should be shown in Venice, finally settling on Serwan “because of his skill as a painter and the subject matter. I think he’s one of the few artists of his generation that really addresses the reality of this history and heritage in a very raw and direct way.”

He certainly does. “The Last Meal” is a ceiling-high, predominantly green- and brown-toned painting that shows a bird’s eye view of piles of bodies — soldiers killed while eating — into which Baran incorporated paint-covered plates containing scraps of bread and strips of items from deceased soldiers’ uniforms — donated to the artist by bereaved families.

The piece is monumental in both scale and emotion, leaving a lasting impression. It is reminiscent of timeless war-themed images including Pablo Picasso’s “Guernica,” Francisco Goya’s “Third of May,” and even John Singer Sargent’s “Gassed”.

“The Last General,” meanwhile, is a life-size sculpture — molded in clay and cast in fiberglass — of a skeleton-like army general laying in a traditional boat known as a ‘mashhof,’ a metaphorical and classical reference to sailing into the underworld.

The officer’s body is half covered in medals, while the other half is decaying — emphasizing the double-edged sword of warfare.

“What’s very telling about the work is the fact that it’s on the floor and when you look at it, it’s almost like you’re stumbling on a sarcophagus in a museum — you don’t get so emotional as it happened so long ago. And by doing that, it gives you a sense of distance from the piece and a philosophical reflection on the futility of the whole story,” said Chalabi.

Just as the works of art are thought provoking, so is the title, as Chalabi explained.

“‘Fatherland’ is a particular iteration of the term ‘Al watan’ in Arabic, which could also be translated to ‘motherland,’ ‘country’ and so on. But it is specifically ‘Fatherland’ because it is fathers and patriarchs that have been sending their children to die in the name of the fatherland, and the idea of the punishing figure who demands even your life for the sake of an ideological ego,” she said. “At the end of the day, what (good) is the fatherland if all you’re asked to do is die?”