

KADHEM HAYDER

An Impenetrable Shield

Saleem al-Bahloly

The painting *An Impenetrable Shield* (1965) is centred on a helmeted human figure astride an enormous armoured horse, glowing brilliantly against the gravel sky and the grey ground-plane and positioned in the foreground of a dense band of bodies and spears that, in their multiplicity, merge into an indistinguishable mass of colour and form. The bodies of the horse and its rider are constructed geometrically, their anatomical features minimized and reduced to simple shapes, their contours sharp, and their surfaces smoothed down to a kind of enamel finish. This geometrization, though a kind of abstraction, does not however dissipate the bodies, but on the contrary reinforces their presence in the painting. Their surfaces, rather than dissolve into a field of colour and shape, create resistance, inertia. And yet, despite the recalcitrant presence of these figures, the painting is not a picture of a scene; the horses and its rider face out, not in the manner of a portrait but in the manner of an address. It is as if something in the painting were about to speak.

This work belongs to a series of paintings exhibited in April 1965 at the National Museum of Modern Art in Baghdad, under the title *The Epic of the Martyr* (1964-65). The paintings had been conceived in the aftermath of a coup orchestrated by members of the Ba'ih Party two years earlier in February 1963, and in them Hayder reproduced the rhetorical forms of a mourning ritual celebrated annually in Iraq to mourn the martyrdom of the Imam Husayn.¹ Transposed onto canvas, these forms not only articulated the pathos of the coup's aftermath; they also restored the space of speech that the coup had closed.

The Imam Husayn was the grandson of the Prophet Mohammad, and in 691, refusing to recognize the right of the reputedly corrupt caliph Yazid to rule the Muslim community, he was killed, with almost all of the Prophet's family, in a battle in the desert, west of the Euphrates river, in a place that came to be called Karbala. Among



An Impenetrable Shield (1965)
Oil on canvas
76 x 102 cm

much of the population of southern Iraq, the event is considered on the one hand the loss of the Prophetic legacy but on the other a loss that, in unjust circumstances, testified to truth. Each year, during the first ten days of the month Muharram and on the twentieth day of the following month Safar, enormous public celebrations, collectively called the *taziya*, which means 'mourning' in Arabic, re-stage the pathos of that loss. The celebrations consist of various performances organized around a popular tradition of elegiac poetry, in colloquial Arabic, called the *husayniyyat*. The poetry is a lamentation that narrates the battle, not as an historical event, occurring in a distant past, but as something that has just happened, in the tense of the present past. This construction of time implicates its audience as a witness, and the alteration of the poetry, from the imperative (look!) to the first-person indicative (I), executes an identification between the audience and the protagonists of the tragedy. The effect is to re-open the time of the event, and in this way to induce a bodily experience of mourning, which the performances set up: men march in street processions beating their chests to the rhythm of the poetry as it is chanted by a *radoud*; a pageant of horses and costumed characters embodies the *dramatis personae* of the battle; and the killing of Husayn and his family is re-enacted in a kind of theatre performance held in the street. The different rituals arouse in their participants an affect that materializes into a kind of living image, a memory-image of both the martyrdom and of the truth to which that martyrdom bore witness.

Hayder's paintings seemed to recreate in the art work this living image. In a review of the exhibition published in the newspaper, *al-Thawra al-Arabiyya* (see fig. 1), the artist and poet Ibrahim al-Zayr wrote that the paintings:

stir in the spirit [al-nafs] that powerful rhythm which recurs each year, when the remembrance of the martyrdom of Husayn comes around, as it does these days. While I was at the exhibition, I heard the beat of the drums, and I saw in the background

the men, boys and children in the mourning processions [*mouakib*] ... In the paintings I see the horsemen, the heroes and the enemy, I see the summer sun, I see the headless martyrs, the sad, tired horses which have lost their courageous riders. I see the battle in all of its violence in which everything perishes.

In the paintings of this epic, I take assurance and conviction in the truth which they express, and that is the lesson of the martyr Husayn and his tragedy, which affirms that truth is eternal, and that it will be victorious...²

The paintings were based on a poem that Hayder had composed, on the one hand keeping with the centrality of poetry to the *taziya*, but on the other hand breaking with the *husayniyyat*, by composing a poem in free verse that did not follow the cycle of motifs according to which the martyrdom of Husayn was traditionally narrated. These motifs were drawn from a body of biographical literature called the *Books of the Dead* (*Kutub al-Maqabir*), and they consisted of episodes from the battle that dramatized the injustice of the battle.³ Hayder's poem however traced the profile of a single anonymous martyr. Though the poem has not survived in its entirety, it can be partially reconstructed from fragments that have, in a review of the exhibition by Anwar al-Ghasan (fig. 2):⁴

Tell the generations what has happened
On my people

He wandered with the heart of a martyr

He is that structure that will arise anew
Do you think the knight will one day return?
That heart of the martyr
Disappears, disappears only to return

He is the memory of the encounter

For it was a battle



fig. 1 Ibrahim al-Zayr, 'Ma'na Kamd 'an Masaa' al-Husayn' (Pioneering Work in the Art World: A Whole Exhibition on the Tragedy of Husayn), in *al-Thawra al-Arabiyya*, 9 May 1965



Fig. 2 Answer al-Ghassani, 'Kasim Jideiri & Mulhamat al-Shahid' (Review of The Epic of the Martyr), in al-Thawra al-Ansiyya, 7 May 1965.

A forest of a thousand, fierce swords
 waiting
 ...
 An impenetrable shield
 Everything is still as it is, oh moon
 ...
 He is that sword, tired and sterile
 ...
 Here is the voice of my village calling

Each painting in the series is an interpretation of a line from the poem, constructed from the iconography of the street performances: the white horses, the black banners, the pageant of characters. In the paintings, these forms are animated, not in such a way as to illustrate the battle but rather to release the affect that they condense. Thus in *An Impenetrable Shield*, modelled on the ritual representation of the Umayyad general, 'Umar ibn Sa'ad, the horse, in contrast to the stillness of its rider, emits a deep even if silent groan that strains its neck into a horizontal line, makes its mane rigid, causes its belly to inflate and its legs to arch. It is the peculiar characteristic of the series that the recurring motif of the horse and that of the figures drawn from the Prophet's family, seem to quiver at the cusp of abstraction, and that the force of that abstraction originates from within, a muted cry sublimated into aesthetic form.

When officers in the Iraqi military rebelled against the regime of Abdel Karim Qasim on 8 February 1963, in co-ordination with civilian members of the Ba'th Party, by deploying tanks to different parts of Baghdad and air bombing the Ministry of Defence where Qasim had his office, they were resisted by thousands of people who came out into the streets in opposition to the coup, blocking the advance of the tanks and amassing in the square in front of the Ministry of Defence. They were the poor who had benefited from the housing projects Qasim had initiated and the labour laws he had passed; and their unarmed protest was received with barrels and turrets, and – in the absence of cameras, whether of journalists or mobile phones, in the absence of the gaze of

the international community – they were felled by the hundreds, without witness.

Over the next two days, even after Qasim had surrendered, the Iraqi Communist Party mounted, from the poorest neighbourhoods of Baghdad, an armed resistance to the rebellion. Once that resistance had been crushed, the militia of the Ba'th Party carried out a sweeping house-hunt, aided by the CIA, to eliminate any possible opposition to the new regime. Some were shot on the spot. Inordinate numbers of people were arrested. The historian Hanna Batatu has written that 'the number of those seized so taxed the existing prisons that sport clubs, movie theaters, private houses, an-Nihayah Palace and, in the first days, even a section of Kifah Street, were turned into places of confinement.'³ In the basement of the Nihayah Palace many were tortured, summarily executed, women were raped, mass graves were dug in the desert for the dead.

Whatever form of political life had developed under the monarchy, and in the years after the revolution in 1958, collapsed with the coup of 1963. The significance of *The Epic of the Martyr* lies on the one hand in its response to not only the violence of the coup but also the suppression of dissent, by re-opening a space for speech in the art work; and on the other hand, in the way that it was able to open this space by relating to the cultural traditions of Iraq differently. It showed how in that silence imposed by the Ba'thist regime, these traditions stood as a vast archive of forms that could be revived in the art work as means for expressing what could not otherwise be said. In the silence that hung over Baghdad after the events of 1963, history – the archaeological record, the country's literary heritage – could become in the art work a sign of the injustice of Ba'thist rule.

This was a particular mode of critique of which the art work was uniquely capable; and it was a mode of critique that resulted from the displacement into the art work of a concept of memory derived from the Islamic tradition. When the practice of mourning the martyrdom of Imam Husayn first developed in the eighth century, it was part of a broader opposition to the absolutism

of Umayyad rule. That opposition resulted on the one hand in the formulation of the sharia, as a check on governments that departed from the principles of justice introduced by the prophecy of Muhammad, and on the other in the overthrow of the Umayyads by the Abbasids in 750 CE.⁶ The remembrance of Husayn constituted a political response to oppression that operated neither through the law nor through revolution, but rather through a particular work of memory. This was a memory of injustice, one that functioned negatively as an image of truth. To mourn Husayn was to deny the ruling government the authority it claimed for itself, and for this reason, the remembrance of Husayn was for centuries suppressed. By staging the forms of that remembrance in painting, *The Epic of the Martyr* introduced into the modern art work the form of theological protest that the remembrance of Husayn had posed to worldly power—i.e., a form of protest that on the basis of a prophetic event, withdrew towards the horizon of a justice to come. The concept of memory integral to the remembrance of Husayn was secularized in the art work, such that in the following years, when neither recourse to juridical process nor revolutionary change was possible, the art work became the site of a withdrawal, a place outside the political order from where oppression could be denounced and a claim to justice could be made.

It was not the first time that Kadhem Hayder had done work drawing on the narrative of the martyrdom of the Imam Husayn; nor was it the first time that he had done work that was politically engaged. During the 1950s, while he was studying literature at Dar al-Mu'alamin – the Higher Institute for Teachers, which until the University of Baghdad was established in 1957 was the country's primary school of higher education – and enrolled in night classes at the Institute of Fine Arts, Hayder was a member of an art group called the Pioneers (*al-Ru'ad*). The group was established in 1950, in an effort to provide some structure for the collectivity of young artists that had been forming

in previous years around the artist Faiq Hassan. These artists had been in the habit of socializing together, maintaining a pattern of sociability that went back to the wartime Society of the Friends of Art. They took regular trips to the suburbs of Baghdad to paint, and this perplexing activity had earned them the label among confused onlookers of *bid'aiyyin* (primitives), which they took on for themselves, but re-fashioned in French, as *Société Primitive*.⁷ However, by 1950 a new artistic self-consciousness was developing, and it brought them to break with the organizational form of a *société* and to deliberately form an art group. Initially the purpose of the group was mainly to provide a framework for exhibiting work but by 1958, responding to the pre-revolutionary ferment in the country, the Pioneers had come to base their practice on a definite programme of socially critical representation. The curatorial text to their eighth annual exhibition articulated this shift:

At the end of 1950, in a small house on the banks of the Tigris, a group of artists held a first exhibition under a new name, the Pioneers [*al-Ru'ad*]. Those who participated at that time would not ever have thought that that exhibition of theirs would be a beginning of a new period of Iraqi art, a period full of movement, activity, and creativity. For they were just a group of friends brought together by their common orientation towards life and their strong desire to develop Iraqi art. Eight years have passed since this exhibition during which the understanding of both the people [*al-naas*] and the artists have developed. If it is possible for us to relate the Pioneers to a particular artistic practice, then it is very clear that they reflect in their work during this period a powerful impulse to express the world around them, a solid connection to the ground which trembles beneath it, and a deep perception of the turbulent era through which they are living. That small exhibition which was held one evening years ago on the banks of the Tigris will always

remain the point from which contemporary Iraqi art departed in its new dispensation.⁸

Hayder's work followed the arc of the Pioneers' practice. In a watercolour from 1953, of boats moored to the shore of the Tigris, a bright and sandy sunlight buoys the colours on the surface of the paper (fig. 3). It is the light that bears the colours in the painting, even as it dilutes them in heat and dust. By 1957, the year Hayder graduated from the Institute of Fine Arts – and a few months before the revolution – the airy, atmospheric quality of that watercolour, with its lack of focus and its lethargic combination of light and shadow, has dissipated (fig. 4). The surface of the painting has closed hermetically in on itself, as if in reaction to the curtailment of civil liberties by the regime of Nuri al-Said, which governed Baghdad under emergency law from 1954 to 1958. In *He Told Us Everything As It Happened* (1957, fig. 5), the painting is divided into panels that lock around a human figure seated in the centre. Sitting in a tribal posture, his body is folded into a square, his arms and legs rendered in a way that is less anatomical than it is sculpted, in hard, clean lines. The stone musculature, particularly evident in the fluting of his left arm, is heroizing, and yet, despite the monumentality of his body, he is confined. His feet are crunched against the wall of the black square he occupies; the pressure of this wall on his body indicates that it is not just a framing device, but a form of constraint, and that it is the box that forces the body of the man to take on the geometry of a square, a geometry that repeats itself in the folds of his clothes and the fluting of his muscles.

The geometry functions semantically to characterize the figure, to cast him in a plot of political assertion and suppression. This narrativization makes him absent to himself; thus he gazes into the distance, his eyebrows furrowed in contemplation, his eyes focused on the memory visualized in the frieze of stick figures running to the left. Drawn in thin, black lines and circles, the figures dramatize scenes of violence. The scenes are obscure but vivid: a man is beaten, a plane drops bombs, another man pulls

the injured to safety, a boy waves in duress, a woman cradles her child, tanks advance; on the side of the painting, a woman is dragged into a room, or perhaps raped, another woman is held captive, a policeman kneels down to fire on what looks like a group of veiled women, lined up on the shore of a river.

The minimalism of these figures, their reduction of life to the faint marks of broken bodies and desperate gestures, is itself the representation of a second violence, one that forces the memory of the event to take this esoteric form. The frieze recalls the narrative depiction of war in Assyrian stone reliefs, but here that narrative depiction of violence is employed as a supplement to the restrained figure who, though speechless, dominates the painting. He tells us, and he doesn't tell us.

This figure of the worker appears throughout Hayder's work during this period, as it does in the work of other members of the Pioneers, like Mahmud Sabri. From the mid-1940s until the revolution in 1958, Baghdad was beset by constant protests and demonstrations, of workers and students, sometimes against the soaring price of food and sometimes against what was interpreted as the anti-Arab foreign policy of the Prime Minister, Nuri al-Said – and these protests were repeatedly put down with force. The protests, and their repression, transformed the worker into an emblem of not only toil, but also an experience of violence and a struggle against it. Thus, *He Told Us Everything As It Happened* is constructed in such a way, with the encased, geometrized figure joined to the frieze of panned stick figures, that renders the figure of the worker as a figure of indicted speech.

The first time Hayder employed the narrative of the Battle of Karbala was as an allegory for the struggle of workers in contemporary Baghdad. In fact a number of poets, such as Badr Shakir al-Sayyab used the narrative in the same way. In *The Struggle of the Hero* [*Mesra' al-Batt*], made in 1958, the same mythologized labourer that appears in *He Told Us Everything As It Happened*, as well as in other paintings of that period, with his massive, herculean muscles, sharp jaw and shaved head, is projected onto the scene where al-Shimr,

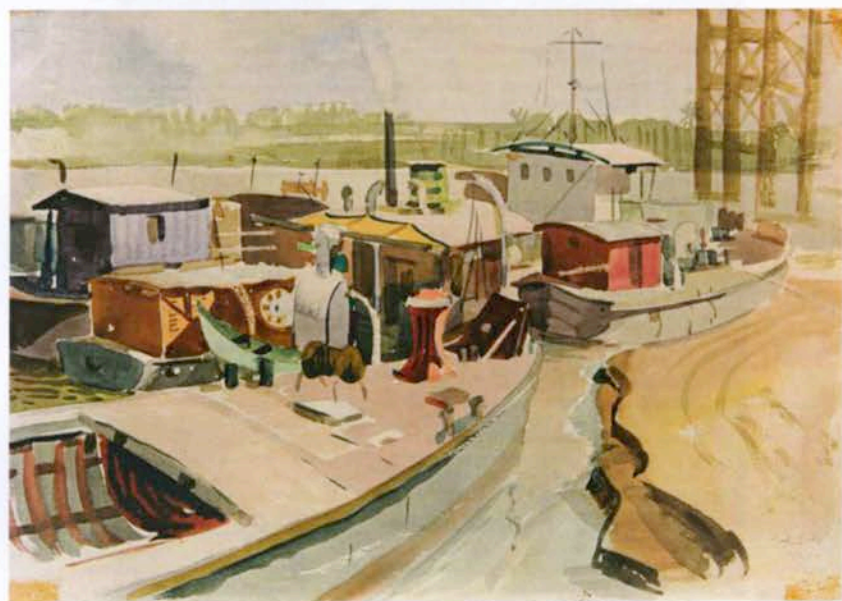


fig. 3 Kachem Hayder
 Title Unknown (1953)
 Watercolour on paper
 29.5 x 42 cm

Photo: Wael Maneour, courtesy of Malhal: Arab Museum of Modern Art, Doha



fig. 4 Kachem Hayder
 The Struggle of the Hero (Masra a'Bal), 1958
 Oil on canvas
 40 x 60 cm
 Private Collection

standing at centre over the decapitated body of the imam Husayn, glaring deviously at us, holds out the severed head of Husayn, dripping with blood. Looking on from the right, constrained by the black casing in which he appears on the scene, the figure of the labourer is a passive witness, immobilized despite his strength and the sword in his hands, before an injustice against which he is powerless. The narrative of the Battle of Karbala seemed to provide, like the Assyrian frieze, a set of terms for articulating the struggle of the worker in the 1950s. The worker was not a sociological figure but a political one, embodying not only the economic inequality of the monarchy, but also the monarchy's suppression of civil liberties.

The ban on political parties, the revocation of newspaper licences, and the regular imprisonment of intellectuals had made civil liberties perhaps the major motivation for the revolution that in July 1958 overthrew the monarchy and established a republic. It restored a freedom of political expression that the premiership of Nuri al-Said had for a long time ruthlessly suppressed. However with this new-found freedom of expression, the country then proceeded to tear itself apart over the issue of Arab unity, as it came to be pulled in different directions by the conflicting interests of its heterogeneous population of Arabs and Kurds, Sunni and Shi'a. This issue had taken on concrete urgency after the merger of Syria and Egypt into the United Arab Republic, and disagreements over Iraq's prospective merger, falling along political and not sectarian lines, had begun to be settled by the militias of opposing parties, the Ba'th Party on the one hand and the Iraqi Communist Party on the other. The Ba'th Party coup in 1963 was the culmination of that ongoing struggle, in which oddly the post-revolutionary freedom of political expression had created a space for extra-judicial violence; but as the coup resulted in the total liquidation of any opposition, it inaugurated a new era in Iraqi politics that would continue until 2003, one in which politics was reduced to the elimination of ones enemies.

It was in this context that Hayder returned to the martyrdom of the imam Husayn. In 1959 he

had gone to London to study theatre design at the Central College of the Arts; he returned to Baghdad in 1962. In the aftermath of the coup, with the political scene having been radically transformed, and the type of political subjectivity of the worker as a figure of interdicted speech that he had worked on in the fifties foreclosed, Hayder drew not on the historical narrative of the Battle of Karbala but on the forms of mourning in the rituals of the *taziya*. These forms were a particular kind of memory, that though originating around the event of Husayn's martyrdom, had evolved under different historical circumstances, and thus were conditioned by that history; the memory had a theological kernel, the loss of the justice promised by the prophecy of Mohammad, but its forms were cultural forms, and thus were in excess of the Islamic tradition.

The remembrance of Husayn seems to have begun almost immediately after his death, and it had a political significance, as the people of Kufa, out of regret and in resistance to Umayyad rule, gathered at his grave in Karbala. Indeed the Umayyads and after them the Abbasids sought to prevent people from visiting it, until finally the Abbasid caliph Mutawakil destroyed the grave and forbade visitation to the site.

The earliest instance of mourning recorded in the hadith dates to the ninth century, and it took the form of a lamentation – *ni'aha* – in which Husayn and the other family members of the Prophet killed in the battle were eulogized in poetry. This poetry gradually developed into a genre of biography, called *maqtil al-Husayn*, that was read in private, behind closed doors. In the tenth century, after centralized rule of the caliphate collapsed, and the Shi'i dynasty of the Buyids came to power in Baghdad, the lamentations were permitted to take place in public. The practice arose whereby people would march through the street wailing, and over time this march of wailers became ritualized into processions accompanied by chants called *latmiyya*. These processions became the dominant feature of the mourning of Husayn. However, under Seljuk and most of Ottoman rule, they were banned, and people

reverted to the form of private poetry readings, where individuals gathered secretly in their homes to hear poetry lamenting the martyrdom of Husayn.

In the first half of the nineteenth century, the Ottoman governor of Baghdad, Ali Rida, relaxed the ban on the mourning of Husayn and allowed public poetry readings, which he attended himself. The *latmiyya* processions first introduced during the reign of the Buyids were revived, and gradually the public recitations of poetry narrating the Battle of Karbala came to be supplemented by interpretative gestures, which by the end of the century developed into a kind of theatrical performance called, *al-tashabih* or *al-shabih*.

The Iraqi anthropologist Ibrahim al-Haidari has been studying the *taziya* since the mid-1960s, when he conducted fieldwork on the celebrations in Kadhimayn, a suburb of Baghdad where the two Shi'i imams, Musa al-Kadhim and Mohammad al-Taqi are buried. Al-Haidari has observed that at the beginning of the twentieth century the mourning of Husayn underwent a transformation. The martyrdom of Husayn had been mourned as part of a more general loss of justice in the world, and historically that mourning had entailed an expectation of the day when the Mehdi would come to restore the justice that had been lost. In the twentieth century, the mourning of Husayn loses this telos, and becoming a cultural form, acquires a folkloric character.⁸ This folklorization occurred with the expansion of the *taziya* celebrations in the post-war period. The number of processions increased, and in addition to the traditional *latmiyya*, where men would beat their chests with their fists, new processions developed, where men beat their backs with chains and cut their scalps with swords. By the 1960s never had the mourning of Husayn been so extensive.

Al-Haidari attributes the dramatic increase in participation to the influx of migrants from the countryside, who brought to the mourning rituals the pathos of a peculiar form of suffering that arose in southern Iraq in the previous fifty years. It was that suffering that infused the *taziya* with its significance and its intensity. The history of this suffering is one of the major themes of Iraqi

historiography. In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, a number of nomadic tribes settled in southern Iraq, where they took up agriculture. Land was owned collectively and farming was to meet the needs of the tribe. However a sequence of legal, economic and political developments beginning in the mid-nineteenth century transformed the relationship between the sheikh and his tribesmen into one of landowner to indentured peasant. As agricultural production in Iraq was integrated into the world economy, agriculture became oriented towards export.

This coincided with the late Ottoman attempt to register land-holdings, which resulted in large amounts of land being registered in the name of the sheikh. When the provinces of Baghdad and Basra, along with Mosul, were consolidated into a new state, under British mandate, the British granted the sheikhs sovereign power over their domains, and allotted them seats in the parliament so as to consolidate a counter-weight to the power of the king. With this inscription into politics, the authority of the sheikh was no longer based on the recognition of his tribesmen, but on the power of the state. His erstwhile tribesmen were reduced to a source of labour, for an enterprise to whose profits he was the unique claimant. The exploitation was severe, and the peasants, who having been tribesmen never had a strong relation to the land, fled the countryside, even though it was quite empty, and settled in slums of mud huts that arose on the perimeter of Baghdad.

The mourning rituals of the *taziya*, al-Haidari claims, offered these deracinated peasants a set of forms for expressing their suffering, both in the countryside and in the migration to the city.⁹ He suggests that it is the sheer magnitude of the misery they poured into those forms that infused the *taziya* with its intensity, leading not only to the multiplication of processions but also the development of more aggressive forms of flagellation involving metal chains and swords. At the same time as the mourning rituals of the *taziya* received this new, modern species of misery, they underwent a secularization, whereby the remembrance of Husayn's martyrdom takes place



Fig. 5 Kadhim Haydar
He Told Us Everything As It Happened (1967)
 Oil on canvas
 96 * 65 cm
 Signed and dated by the artist
 Barjeel Art Foundation, Sharjah



Fig. 6 Kadhim Haydar
Animal Anatomy of the Human Being (1960)
 Copper etching
 39 * 50 cm
 Private Collection

no longer as an expectation of a justice to come but as an allegory for contemporary experience. As the mourning rituals were transformed into an allegory, they became a site for critiquing the rule of the country. Thus in the thirties the government sought to ban the *taziya* and in the fifties arrested a number of its poets. So when Hayder drew on the iconography of the *taziya* performances, he was drawing on a set of forms that were already in use as a formula for condensing the pathos of modern experience and doing so in a context where that formula was a site of political critique.

In a late interview, in 1984, with the magazine *Alif Ba*, Hayder explained that what he had sought to do in *The Epic of the Martyr* was 'to develop the apparent form [al-hal'a] [of the imagery]. The figures and horses were subjected to principles of design [fikrat al-tasmim], but more than that, they were subjected to a principle of repetition derived from the ancient art of Iraq, particularly that of Sumer.'¹¹ In describing his practice, Hayder referred to the imagery in terms of their *hal'a* – their external appearance or likeness – rather than in terms of their form, or *shakl*. In doing so, he distinguished between on the one hand the visuality of the figures and horses, a certain aesthetic plasticity they acquired when transposed into painting, and on the other their semiotic form as representations, determined by the poetic and performative traditions of the *taziya*. This distinction between the aesthetic and the hermeneutic structures the paintings in the series, and it allows for a particular semiotic operation to take place, whereby the aesthetic devices employed in the painting, primarily concentrated on the modelling of figures and the construction of space, function to modify the signification of the imagery. That is, their effect is not visual but intellectual, working to neutralize the iconographic reference of the imagery to the martyrdom of Husayn, while retaining their semiotic form.

These devices had already been developed in work that Hayder did while he was studying in London, and that he exhibited at his first solo show at the Al-Wasiti Gallery in Baghdad in 1964. Much of that work consists of prints, etchings and drawings

(of the fifty pieces exhibited, only two were in oil), and they tend to comprise a kind of character sketch, that explored on paper different aspects of a variety of figures. It is significant that the work in which he develops the devices used in *The Epic of the Martyr* are prints, and that they are character sketches—in two respects. For one, they arise in a context that is interpretative, that seeks to collapse a narrative existence into a visual appearance. Thus the modelling of figures and the construction of space does not aspire to experiential realism but rather to a kind of representation that we might describe as literary—figurative without being referential. Secondly, the modelling of figures in outline and the schematized landscape are to some extent effects of the techniques of printmaking.

In a print, the image is created by being etched onto a metal plate – in Hayder's case, copper – and then pressed onto paper. Because the image is etched, line is the primary means of rendering bodies and space. This is evident, for example, in *Animal Anatomy of the Human Being* (1960, fig. 6), where a quadruped with amphibious feet moves awkwardly across a moon-lit terrain. On the one hand the hind legs of the creature recall the musculature of the worker in Hayder's earlier work, and the luminosity of its body anticipates the figures in *The Epic of the Martyr*. However on the other hand, lacking the clean, sculpted finish of the worker's muscles, the creature's 'anatomy' is given definition by way of a system of thin lines—rather than through painterly devices like shading. And the landscape across which it moves is composed simply by drawing across the image a line of horizon, creating a ground plane, and by placing a moon in the upper left-hand corner, creating a sky. Superimposed on the landscape is a grid of teal bands that, crossing the scene, seems to lock the figure in a sort of matrix, which is both an ecology and a system of constraint on its movements.

In *The Epic of the Martyr*, this linear construction of figure and space is translated into oil painting. There, the rule of line creates a particular kind of play of absence and presence that performs in the very structure of the paintings, the configuration of memory and loss that characterizes the *taziya*. It

reduces the bodies without dissolving their figurative nature, making it possible for the figures to be suffused with a tension – evident in their rigidity – and for this tension to be the source of the threat to their form. It sets these figures on a landscape so minimally rendered that its graphic construction makes it itself, not only in its barrenness but in its geometry – in the straight line of the horizon and the errant lines that cross the ground plane – an image of loss. The emptiness of the landscape is offset by wide, heavy brushstrokes, a counterpoint in the paintings to the geometry of both the landscape and the figures. A translation of the grid-work of bands in the print, these brushstrokes are neither subordinated to representation nor do they subvert it, but rather function to create weight – the weight of memory – in the void of the barren landscape.

In the paintings the figures do not dramatize the battle; nothing happens in what is depicted, and they are positioned frontally, confronting the viewer as they might in the context of the ritual performances. What the modelling and the construction of space do is to re-contextualize the figures. They create a kind of negative illustration, a representation that de-representationalizes the figures, such that in the paintings the figures stand in a state of suspension, and in that suspension constitute an image of pathos.

Nothing in the paintings directly refers to the violence of the coup in 1963 or its subsequent suppression of dissent. Nevertheless when *The Epic of the Martyr* was exhibited in April 1965 at the National Museum of Modern Art, it was seen as an allegory for that experience. In his review in *al-Thawra al-Arabiyya*, Ibrahim al-Zayr, a member of the Iraqi Communist Party, and thus with direct experience of the events of 1963, circled around the way in which the 'epic' [*muhiama*], neither a religious representation nor a historical one, seemed to express something else, a number of unnamed 'ideas' [*afkar*].¹² He does not say anything himself, but the review is topped by a quote from a recent philosophy graduate named Ismail al-Na'ib: 'The

idea expresses what a people lives through [*an al-fikra tu'abbar 'an qadiyya ash-ha sh'ab*] and a historical period in a modern way.' This statement in the first instance points to the fact that the paintings are something other than what they are, and then in the second instance takes it back by pointing to the representation of an 'historical period' in modern painting. Pursuing this expression of an experience, al-Zayr interviews Rafa Nasiri, then a professor of graphic arts at the Institute of Fine Arts, pushing him on the possible hidden meaning of the paintings:

IZ: Do you not notice that most of the paintings are done with a sense of being out in the open [*marsuma l-ajwa kharij al-jdran*]?

RN: The Battle of Karbala of course did not take place indoors [*dakhil jdran*]. This observation is important – especially in regard to his other works – which also are not set between walls, and I think that this goes back to the metaphysical nature of his work [*fiathat metafisica moujouda 'andu*] ...

Then having cited Na'ib's quote, which in the newspaper type is set off in bold, al-Zayr asks:

IZ: Do you think that what made him paint is the subject here?

RN: This of course goes back to the idea the artist had, and I believe that he lived his idea himself, and the period he treats is significant. What's important is that he lived through the period and expressed it ...

IZ: Are the paintings suitable to be exhibited in a public place [*mahal 'amm*]?

RN: Yes, they are suitable to be exhibited in religious places, if care is taken in their exhibition and a wider public will see them.

IZ: Do you think that in addition to being great art the paintings offer something else?

RN: The most important thing is that they are on the level of the public [*mustawa jamahir*]. In painting them, the painter painted his ideas, and this creates a link between him and society. The exhibition is very important because it takes a deep sociological and religious direction. Truth is, I have not seen an artist express an historical period the way Kadhem Hayder does.¹³

The prolix questions and evasive answers, the pointing to a metaphysical element in his work, the allusion to a vague experience of a 'period' that was the subject of the paintings, and the sense that there is something in them that exceeds the art work—all indicate a critical function performed by the art work that would only be explicitly articulated many years later.

In the early nineties it became possible to talk about what had happened in the sixties.¹⁴ In a special issue of the journal, *Faradis*, devoted to that decade, the artist Dia Azzawi published an essay on the cohort of artists that began practising in the sixties, and came to be known as the 'sixties generation', and in that essay, he identified the exhibition of *The Epic of the Martyr* as paradigmatic for the work of these artists.

In the complicated political conditions that followed the bloody coup of 1963, there was a spiritual need for subjects of this sort, subjects that went beyond the common subjects of Bedouins, cafes, souks and the other subjects taken up by artists of the 1950s. [Kadhem Hayder] tried to introduce something else into the art work, forms taken from popular tradition and transferred to the structure of the canvas, forms charged with popular emotion [*al-wijdan al-sha'bi*]. Even though the artist relied upon the popular epic, the titles of the paintings did not have any religious reference; rather he drew them from a poetic text he composed himself. Kadhem's works incited the young artists to search for a new vision, sometimes in metaphysical depths and

sometimes in epics, as we find the deep effects it had on the work of artists like Omar Obaidi.¹⁵

By giving form to the sense of pathos that followed the breakdown of national politics in Iraq, *The Epic of the Martyr* demonstrated that the art work could be more than just a picture, that it could respond to a certain moral-existential state. Furthermore, by drawing on the iconographic forms of the *taziya* to do so, it pointed to a body of forms that artists had not considered before, forms that did not belong to any artistic tradition but rather that dwelled in the depths of what might be called cultural memory, forms that had the character of signifiers and were accessible by the mediation of text.

Not long after, Azzawi published a longer piece on Hayder's work, attempting to remedy his absence from the copious historiography on modern art in Iraq. Again, he situated *The Epic of the Martyr* in relation to the coup and the period of political insecurity that followed, but here he drew attention to the operation of allegory in the paintings, a specific conversion of the popular form into a symbol: 'The exhibition of the *Epic of the Martyr* left a prominent mark in the history of the modern art movement in Iraq; it was held in political and cultural circumstances that were complicated, and it made the concept of martyrdom [*istishhad*], stripped of any religious meaning, a contemporary symbol that cried out tragedy.'¹⁶

Making an effort to show that the concept of martyrdom was not religious but popular, Azzawi emphasized that it was not the martyrdom of Husayn itself that functioned as the symbol but the memory of that martyrdom, the body of forms that developed over and against the historical event. He pointed to the fact that, in using imagery from the processions, Hayder sought to recreate in painting the effect of the *taziya*, to 'preserve a clearly, celebratory, theatrical air consistent with the staging of the epic scene which takes place each year in a number of Iraqi cities.' Of popular origin, the processions were in excess of the religious significance of the martyrdom of the imam Husayn.

For this reason, it was an interpretation [*muw'alan*], and not an exposition [*sharhan*], of the epic. From here comes its symbolic dimension, as something socio-cultural and not religious, especially as Kadhem relied upon a modern poetic text he wrote, such that each line would be the title of one of the paintings, as if he were telling his own version of the *Maqtil al-Husayn*, differing in its metre and flow from the popular text, and yet still carrying in its fold the 'blood-soaked' secrets of this epic event.¹⁷

In those years, in 1964 and 1965, a number of Iraqi artists returned from studying abroad, and they began to hold solo shows for the first time, in private galleries that had opened in Baghdad and at the new National Museum of Modern Art built by the Lisbon-based Gulbenkian Foundation. Of those exhibitions, Azzawi claimed, *The Epic of the Martyr*, and a show by Ismail Fattah at Al-Wasiti Gallery, were seminal for the future of modern art in Iraq.

Kadhem's exhibition stood apart from these other exhibitions, as an extension of the project to produce work in relation to the national tradition. This relation, which a number of artists outside the Baghdad Group were working on, by elaborating these elements transmitted in cultural memory, made the exhibition one of the touchstones for the art movement in Iraq, along with the exhibition of Ismail Fattah, which was interested in a treatment of subject matter and technique that were the opposite of what Kadhem was trying to achieve. Nevertheless, both exhibitions were foundational, compelling new artists to enter a new space that the generation of the Pioneers had not known and to deepen debate and research into the importance of producing work that is contemporary in technique and style, in addition to the interest in producing work that possessed a

dimension that was Arab and international, and not local, as promulgated by the Baghdad Group.¹⁸

In Azzawi's analysis, *The Epic of the Martyr* took further the practice of the Baghdad Group of Modern Art, founded by Jawad Selim in 1951, and surpassed it. Where the Baghdad Group had sought to develop a style grounded in 'local' forms, *The Epic of the Martyr* demonstrated how forms drawn from cultural memory could be re-tooled in the art work—subjected to stylistic elaboration rather than constituting style itself. Thus revitalized, they could function as forms for a more universal experience.

Azzawi saw *The Epic of the Martyr* as the culmination of both an earlier interest Hayder had in popular culture that went back to the 1950s (evident, for example, in *The Struggle of the Hero*) and an interest in the human that he developed while in London, and that would occupy his work for decades. Hayder rendered the human in terms of a tension between it and its surroundings, often in the form of a cube, which over time evolved into a kind of landscape. According to Azzawi, he borrowed the composition of the cube, and its symbolic representation of the forms of constraint, from Francis Bacon, with the difference that:

for Kadhem, the human, as he conceived it, had fewer movements, his features less distorted. His canvases draw their value from a notion of the human as a fixed being, confronted by the contradictory worlds that surround him; they are constituted between the impassive fixity of the human, on the one hand, and the cruelty of the oppressive boundaries of the cube, on the other. Out of this antagonism emerges a structure that radiates the energy of rejection and protest.¹⁹

This tension between the human and his surroundings, which we can see, from *He Told Us Everything As It Happened to Animal Anatomy of a Human Being to The Epic of the Martyr*, constituted the core of Hayder's practice.

Azzawi is perhaps Hayder's greatest inheritor, and for that reason his reading of Hayder's work reflects the influence it had on his own practice. Hayder's work drew particular attention to the human figure as a representational device in the art work, a device that had critical and not only aesthetic functions. The crackdown in 1963 on the University of Baghdad, thought to be infested with Communist cells, had been especially harsh; a large number of students, teachers and professors and intellectuals were arrested. At the time, Azzawi was still a student at the Institute of Fine Arts, and as an artist, was mistaken for a Communist, and spent two months in jail.

During the forties and fifties, a kind of public sphere came into existence in Iraq, even if under repression, as students, workers, intellectuals and politicians formed opinions and organized to participate in the governance of their country. In the 1960s the violence of the militias, the successive instability of a government that fought with itself, and the anti-parliamentarian ideology of Ba'athism resulted in the collapse of that public sphere. The significance of *The Epic of the Martyr* is that it demonstrated a way in which the art work could restore that zone of critique which had first been established in the forties and fifties—and arguably the subsequent modern art of Iraq developed along this course, as a form of critique.

BIOGRAPHY

Kadhim Hayder was born in Baghdad in 1932. He studied literature at the Higher Institute for Teachers, and in 1957 earned a diploma from the Institute of Fine Arts. Between 1959 and 1962 he studied theatre design at the Central College of the Arts in London. Upon returning to Iraq, he taught at the Institute of Fine Arts, opening a department of design. He continued to teach at the Academy of Fine Arts, when it replaced the Institute of Fine Arts; his book *al-Takhtit wa Ehwān* (Sketching and Colours) became standard reading for students there. In 1971 he organized a group called the Academicians, based on an exhibition and around a text he wrote reclaiming a Platonic notion of the

academy as a way to relate the different arts to each other, and to the arts of the past. He served as president of the Union of Iraqi Artists, the Union of Arab Artists, and the Society of Iraqi Plastic Artists. He died in Baghdad in 1985.

Hayder began showing work while he was still a student, at a number of collective exhibitions held at Nadi al-Mansur, the major exhibition space in Baghdad during the 1950s. When his work and that of other young artists was rejected for exhibition at Nadi al-Mansur in 1958, he organized a counter-exhibition of the rejected. He also displayed his work at Al-Wasiti Gallery in Baghdad in 1964, and in 1965 he exhibited the series *The Epic of the Martyr* at the National Museum of Modern Art. Selected works from the series were subsequently shown in Beirut, both on their own, and as a prominent part of a collective exhibition of work by Iraqi artists at the Sursock Museum, a show that toured a number of European capitals under the sponsorship of the Gulbenkian Foundation. His work was included in many major exhibitions throughout the 1970s, such as the First Arab Biennale, Baghdad, 1974; Musée d'Art Moderne de la Ville de Paris, 1976; and the International Art Exhibition for Palestine held in Beirut, 1978. In 1984 he held a final solo show at the Iraqi Cultural Centre in London.

His work was quickly acquired by private collectors, and thus it is only in recent years that it has entered public collections beside that of the Museum of Modern Art in Baghdad, such as that of the Barjeel Art Foundation in Sharjah, and Mathaf: Arab Museum of Modern Art in Doha.

FURTHER READING

Maureen Ali, 'The Powerful Art of Kadhim Haider,' *JR*, no. 1 (1985), pp. 34-36.

Dia Azzawi, 'Kadhim Hayder,' *Nsus* 1, no. 1 (1994).

—, 'al-Sitinaat: Izdihar al-w'ai al-Tashkil' (The Sixties: The Flourishing of an Artistic Consciousness), *Faradis* 5, no. 4 (1992).

Kadhim Hayder, 'Kadhim Hayder: Akhafa al-Majhoul wa al-Ustuh hus Ana' (Kadhim Hayder: The Unknown is Terrifying, and the Style is Me). Interview with Alif Ba (1982), reprinted in 'Iraqiyyun min Zaman al-Tawahj', no. 232 (Thursday, 25 August 2011), vol. 8.

Faruq Yusuf, 'Kadhim Hayder 1932–1985: Portrait of an Artist,' *Gilgamesh*, no. 2 (1986), vol. 1, pp. 7-10.

¹ A number of preliminary sketches published in *Alwajih* 3 (March/April, 1965), p. 3, on the occasion of the exhibition of works from the series in Beirut, date the conception of *The Epic of the Martyr* in 1963.

² Ibrahim al-Haydar, 'Mawjiz Kamal 'an Mawjiz al-Husayni' (Pioneering Work in the Art World: A Whole Exhibition on the Tragedy of Husayn), *al-Thawra al-Artiyya* (9 May 1965).

³ See Anatoly Kovalev, *Le martyre de Husayn dans le monde populaire d'Iraq* (Geneva, Dissertation, 1979).

⁴ Anwar al-Ghassir, 'Kadhim Hayder il-Muhamad al-Shahid' (Review of *The Epic of the Martyr*), *al-Thawra al-Artiyya* (7 May 1965).

⁵ Hanna Batali, *The Old Social Classes and the Revolutionary Movements of Iraq: A Study of Iraq's Old Landlord and Commercial Classes and of its*

Communists, Ba'athists and Free Officers (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1978), p. 165. My description of the events of 1963 is mostly based on the account provided by Batali.

⁶ On the violence of 1963, see also Fadhi Azzawi, *al-Ruh al-Hayy: Ji al-Sitnat il-Iraq* (The Living Spirit: The Sixties Generation in Iraq), (Damascus: Dar al-Mada, 1997).

⁷ Merilee Hodgson, *The Venture of Islam: Conscience and History in a World Civilization* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1974), pp. 241-279.

⁸ See Khalid al-Cassab, *Dhikrayat Fanniyyah* (Memories of Art), (London: Dar al-Hikmah, 2007).

⁹ Reprinted in Jassid Kamal Al-Din, 'Tama'at il-Murakh al-Ru'at' (Some Thoughts on the Pioneers Exhibition) *Al-Adab* 6 (5) 1968, p. 87.

¹⁰ Ibrahim al-Haydar, 'Tawajjuh al-Karbala' (The Tragedy of Karbala: A Sociology of Shi'a Discourse), (London: Dar al-Saq, 1999).

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 218.

¹² Kadhim Hayder, 'Kadhim Hayder: Akhafa al-Majhoul wa al-Ustuh hus Ana' (Kadhim Hayder: The Unknown is Terrifying, and the Style is Me), interview with Alif Ba (1982), reprinted in *Iraqiyyun min Zaman al-Tawahj*, no. 232 (Thursday, 25 August 2011), vol. 8.

¹³ Ibrahim al-Zay, 'Taqab Raqda il-Maydan al-Fann: Murakh Kamal 'an Mawjiz al-Husayni'.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁵ See for example, Fadhi Azzawi, *al-Ruh al-Hayy: Ji al-Sitnat il-Iraq*, and Sami Mard, *al-Mawjiz al-sakhabah: shi'r al-sitnat il-Iraq* (The Rising Wave: The Poetry of the 1960s in Iraq), (Baghdad: Dar al-Shu'un al-Thaqafiyah al-'Amma, 1994).

¹⁶ Dia Azzawi, 'al-Sitnat: ghar al-wai al-Tashkil' (The Sixties: The Flourishing of an Artistic Consciousness), *Faradis* 5, no. 4 (1992), p. 91.

¹⁷ Dia Azzawi, 'Kadhim Hayder,' *Nsus* 1, no. 1 (1994), p. 89.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 89.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 89.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 89.