

johnjosephlyons

# Kadhim Hayder – Fatigued Ten Horses Converse with Nothing

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Kadhim Hayder, Utopia, Whitechapel Gallery



(<https://johnjosephlyons.files.wordpress.com/2015/11/kadhim-hayder-fatigued-ten-horses-converse-with-nothing-1965-oil-on-canvas-e1443794428996.jpg>).

Kadhim Hayder, Fatigued Ten Horses Converse with Nothing (oil on canvas) 1965

**Please note:** *The text below is a revised version of the post which appeared earlier today.*

Iraqi artist Kadhim Hayder's stunning canvas (pictured above) is currently on display at the **Whitechapel Gallery**, as part of an exhibition of Arab art on loan to the gallery from the Barjeel Art Foundation until 6 December.

In a spacious, well-lit room, full of striking paintings, all vying for attention, Hayder's stylized horses really catch the eye. Two things struck me when I first saw this picture. The first is that Hayder's war weary horses are every bit as iconic as the more widely known emblematic peace dove, and arguably the horses are more eloquent, captured as they are literally in conversation.

Over and above the most immediate element, namely the candid purity of these creatures, I find the composition particularly striking: here we are presented with a group of ten white horses in poses that suggest not only exhaustion but also the virtues of trust, affection and mutual support. An eleventh horse, of a different shade, would appear to be outside the group seeking admission. The fierce red warrior sun is clearly an element that alludes to battle, but these are not war horses, and in this harsh landscape they are clearly longing for rest and for peace. The respite from fighting allows them to engage in that most human activity: conversation, dialogue.

The second thought that struck me was the extent to which art transcends frontiers and ideologies, and the particulars of historical time to create, as it were, a universal plane or dimension of expression in which every single work produced contributes to a single, artistic, life-affirming communion, one of abiding relevance to our shared humanity. This community has a universal language of values which reflects the essential aspirations of humanity: love and solidarity along with truth and beauty. It is for this reason that artistic products do not date, or why, in a nutshell, all art is contemporary.

Jonathan Swift refers to Thomas More's *Utopia* (1516) in his 1727 preface to *Gulliver's Travels*, and I would suggest that no reader of Swift's dystopia could fail to see in Hayder's painting something of the wisdom of the Irishman's *Houyhnhnms* – the race of intelligent horses described in the last part of his satire.

Piling on the irony in his preface, Swift writes that even from the most degenerate specimens of these *Houyhnhnms*, he still had much to learn from their virtues. And in describing the time he spent in *Houyhnhnmland* under the wise tutelage of one of their elders, he says:

**Yahoo as I am, it is well known through all *Houyhnhnmland*, that, by the instructions and example of my illustrious master, I was able in the compass of two years (although I confess with the utmost difficulty) to remove that infernal habit of lying, shuffling, deceiving, and equivocating, so deeply rooted in the very souls of all my species; especially the Europeans.**

In authentic art, the thrust for truth and beauty is everywhere apparent, and although Swift's satire was directed at the political classes of his day, it transcends its historical context and is as relevant now as ever: and I would argue that the same could be applied to Kadhim Hayder's beautifully expressive canvas.