THE PERSISTENCE OF THE IMAGE: *DHĀKIRA HURRA* IN DIA AZZAWI'S DRAWINGS ON THE MASSACRE OF TEL AL-ZAATAR

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When Dia Azzawi published the drawings he made on the massacre of Tel al-Zaatar, a Palestinian refugee camp in Beirut, on August 12, 1976, in a book of silk-screen prints titled *al-Nashīd al-Jasadi*, or *The Body's Anthem*, he presented them as a form of memory, which he set over and against both the elegy and the document:

> [The drawings] are not to mourn nor are they to be a document of a dark massacre; rather they are an expression that attempts to create a free memory [*dhākira hurra*] that persists against oppression [*iniha ta'bir yuhawwal khalq dhākira hurra tatawasal dhid al-qhur*] until the time comes when its flame will burn forth brilliantly, a time that will summon the blood of friends and brothers, hastening the advent of those coming from the gates of martyrdom; a time when the nation will be as bread, unpolluted by blood and dirt, a space unhindered by black deceptions and nets of disguise, a beautiful time when feet will move safely and men will not sell their dreams.[1]

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1   Artist statement, in Dia Azzawi, *al-Nashīd al-Jasadi: Qasa'id marsumah lil-Tall al-Za'tar* [The body's anthem: Illustrated poems for Tel al-Zaatar] (Beirut: Dar al-Muthallath, 1980).

Azzawi described the memory he sought to create with his drawings as a memory that *persists* (*tatawasal*) *against* oppression (*dhid al-qhur*). Not a memory *of* violence and oppression per se, but a memory capable of standing against oppression. Contemporaneous with it, not recursive, yet existing apart, *free* (*hurra*). How we understand his drawings in the aftermath of the massacre of Palestinian refugees, and the relation between art and politics they instantiate, will depend on how we interpret the verb Azzawi uses to describe the operation of memory, *tatawasal*.

Dia Azzawi. *Ahmad al-Zaatar–Mahmud Darwish*, from *al-Nashīd al-Jasadi* [The body's anthem], 1979. Silk-screen print, 65 × 65 cm. Image courtesy of the artist.

The drawings portray a human figure confronted by a force of such magnitude that it cannot be seen or represented but is manifest instead in its effects on the body: in the look of muted horror, in the tangled mass of mostly unidentifiable fragments among which severed limbs can be discerned, in the hands that reach out from that mass of fragments, that strain against the rope binding them, and that in the

Dia Azzawi. *Ahmad al-Zaatar–Mahmud Darwish*, from *al-Nashīd al-Jasadi* [The body's anthem], 1979. Silk-screen print, 65 × 65 cm. Image courtesy of the artist.

same gesture grasp impulsively for freedom and express the pathos of hopeless capture. The force rips through him, seizing him from within, exerting such a pressure on the body that it appears to fracture it into the lines from which the drawings are composed. This human form is shown to be nothing but the animation of its own annihilation. The coincidence of the lines of fracture in the body with the lines of composition in the drawing indicates that this human figure is itself, even prior to its pictorial inscription, only an image. The body possesses no ontological depth or density, and its human form is the mere surface upon which the operations of a faceless violence are rendered visible. Holding it, at the moment of its annihilation, the drawings transform this embattled body into a vision that functions literally as an anamorphosis, producing an angle of vision from which it becomes possible to visualize the injustice of its death.[2] On the brink of collapse,

2   On anamorphosis, see Jurgis Baltrusaitis, *Anamorphoses* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1977) and Jacques Lacan, *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psycho-analysis* (New York: Norton, 1978). On the anamorphic function of the image in creating a representation and a critique of violence, see esp. Stefania Pandolfo, *Knots of the Soul: Madness, Islam, Psychiatry* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2013).
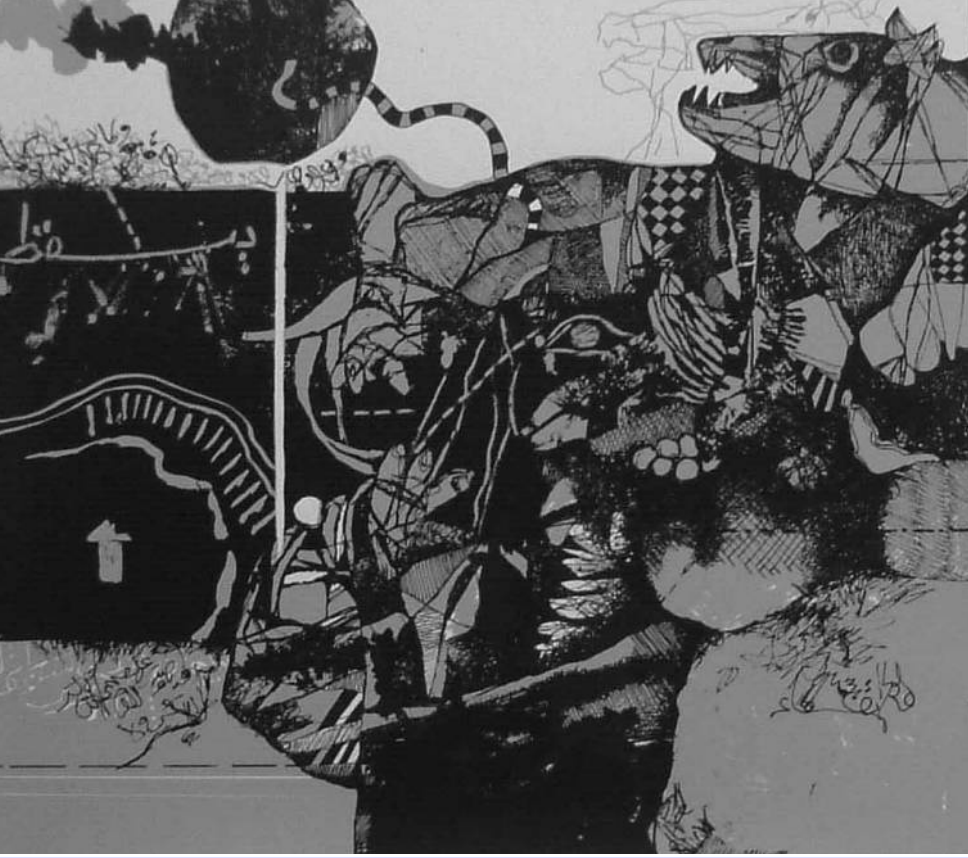
Dia Azzawi. *Left ... Toward the Mount of Olives—Yusef Sayigh*, from *al-Nashīd al-Jasadi* [The body's anthem], 1979. Silk-screen print, 65 × 65 cm. Image courtesy of the artist.

the body reflects back at its aggressor an image of itself, blinding it with its own dismembered reflection.

Paradoxically it was by producing an image of oppression that the drawings could "persist against it," that they could reach beyond it in the direction of "a beautiful time when feet will move safely and men will not sell their dreams." This is the sense of the phrase *tatawasal dhid al-qhur,* which I translate as a "persistence" of the image "against oppression." As an act of aesthetic expression, the drawings establish a space removed from the historical event of the massacre. In that space, neither were the dead mourned nor acts of aggression recorded. Rather, this space was a kind of opening in time, within the horizon of a justice to come. The image was itself such an opening, a projection in time where the experience of oppression could by the same token become visible and be surpassed. Tatawasal is this operation of the image—as a space of waiting, a state of suspension within which it is possible to create a "free memory."

If the image is often sought as a form of memory in the aftermath of catastrophic violence, and at the limit of the evidentiary capacities of the document,[3] the memory-image in Azzawi's drawings is a particular case, profoundly modern and yet ancient, at once theological and literary. As is evident from its eschatological horizon, this memory-image derives in part from the Islamic tradition, and the very possibility of aesthetic expression to execute a critical withdrawal is also a derivation of this tradition, though from a more obscure thread. But this memory-image derives also from the ancient epics of Mesopotamia. And, as I explain in this article, created within the modern artwork, it exceeds both traditions, the Islamic and the ancient.

Tel al-Zaatar was not the first Palestinian refugee camp to be destroyed during the Lebanese Civil War. In January, Christian militias, moving to consolidate the demography of East Beirut, had destroyed a camp at Karantina near the port. Then, however, there were witnesses; women and children were spared, and journalists and photographers were present to document the event. A photograph by Françoise Demulder of an elderly woman pleading with a faceless gunman became iconic of the massacre. In June, at Tel al-Zaatar, there were no witnesses, no photographers; all that remained at the end of a fifty-two-day siege were a few survivors, the ruins of the camp, and piles of bodies.

Made two years later, in 1978 and 1979, the thirty-nine drawings were produced in the context of a representational void. The Lebanese publishing house, Dar al-Muthallath, approached Azzawi, offering to produce from the drawings a limited edition collection of silk-screen prints, in order to raise some money for the children in the camp who had survived the massacre. Eighteen prints were made, which were exhibited in Baghdad at the gallery al-Riwaq and then published in Beirut, along with twenty-one ink drawings, in a book that included a short history of the camp, photographs of corpses and survivors heaving with grief, and three poems by Mahmud Darwish, Yusef Sayigh, and Tahar Ben Jelloun. The name of the series, *The Body's Anthem*, was taken from the poem by Darwish, "Ahmad al-Zaatar," which offers

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3 See notably Georges Didi-Huberman, *Images In Spite of It All: Four Photographs from Auschwitz* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008). In this regard, one might also think of the work of some contemporary Lebanese artists and writers such as Walid Raad, Joanna Hadjithomas, Khalil Joreige, and Jalal Toufiq.

itself as an "anthem for Ahmad, forgotten among the butterflies." Ahmad personifies the anonymous existence of "one exiled in the sea, between two rounds of fire," who "grows up in a camp that gives birth to thyme and fighters." It is an existence anonymous to itself.

> In everything Ahmad met with his opposite
> Twenty years he asked
> Twenty years he roamed
> Twenty years his mother is bringing him into the world,
>   in a few seconds on a banana leaf
> before withdrawing.
> He wants an identity, and yet it is hit by a volcano
> The clouds passed and drove me away
> The mountains threw out their ridges and concealed me.

Yet, without an identity, an existence in the symbolic, Ahmad is hunted: "from the Gulf to the ocean, from the ocean to the Gulf, they prepare his funeral and they decide on the guillotine." He offers his body:

> I am Ahmad al-Arabi—let the siege come
> My body will be the ramparts—let the siege come
> I am the line of fire—let the siege come
> I will besiege you
> Besiege you
> My chest is the door for everyone—let the siege come.

By composing this mythic narrative of Ahmad al-Arabi, Darwish's poem struggled, like those of Yusef Sayigh and Tahar Ben Jelloun, to generate meaning in the representational void left by the massacre.

Azzawi used these narratives to conceive the human figure in his drawings. For years it had been his practice to construct a human figure by emplotting it in a narrative. Narrative enabled him to model the human form and then evacuate it so that it could double as a critical representation of violence. This method put text and image into a peculiar relation. It was not one of illustration; as the subtitle of the book— *qasa'id marsumah*—indicates, the drawings were themselves poems. Rather it was a relation between text and image in which the temporal structure of text was displaced into the visual form of the image. In

text, representation unfolds over time, across a chain of metonymic fragments that cohere in the act of reading. Displaced into the visual image, these fragments are isolated, suspending their metonymic operation between two moments: their appearance as a signifier—or a form—and the signification they anticipate. It is the production of this metonymic fragment in painting that accomplishes the anamorphosis in Azzawi's drawings—that is, makes it possible for the human figure to function as a portrait of an unjust violence.

My purpose in this article is to trace the development of this formula in Iraq during the 1960s, not in order to detail the relationship between the individual drawings in *The Body's Anthem* and the poems, but in order to understand the intellectual work that this anamorphosis does in the drawings, how it operates as a means of intelligibility for the massacre of Palestinian refugees. The anamorphic formula originates in a reading of the epic *Gilgamesh*. It is what Aby Warburg called a formula of pathos (*Pathosformel*), the condensation or imprint of an ancient affect that reemerges at a later period to function as a tragic form. By tracing the consolidation of this formula in modern painting, I hope to demonstrate one way in which the introduction of modern painting to the Middle East established a particular relation to history, creating an opening in time through which forms of expression from other eras could be resuscitated as a means of critique in the context of contemporary political repression.

Just out of art school, in the aftermath of an episode of horrific violence in Iraq, Azzawi encountered a set of work by another artist, Kadhim Haidar, that demonstrated the capacity of forms from the past to function as an allegory for the present. This encounter set in motion a series of shifts in his understanding of history and form that brought Azzawi to search in popular literature for hermeneutical forms, ultimately finding in *Gilgamesh* a formula for articulating the pathos of modern life in Iraq, and in a way that doubled as a critique. It was that formula that put image and text into relation, producing the anamorphic fragment.

BAGHDAD, 1963

On February 8, 1963, in the middle of the holy month of Ramadan, a group of officers in the Iraqi military rebelled against the government of Abdel Karim Qasim. Over the next two days, led by members of the Ba'th Party, the officers fought Qasim and those who had stormed

the streets and squares of Baghdad in his defense. In part spontaneous and in part organized by members of the Iraqi Communist Party, this defense consisted mostly of the urban poor who lionized Qasim for the labor laws he passed, the housing projects he built, and his regulation of the price of food.

A few years earlier, the officers had worked with Qasim to overthrow a monarchy the British had installed when the state of Iraq was formed out of the three former Ottoman provinces of Mosul, Baghdad, and Basra in 1921. But after the revolution in 1958, the front that had united different groups in opposition to the monarchy fractured over the politics of Arab unity. Composed of provinces that previously had had little interaction with each other, Iraq included multiple ethnicities and confessions whose interests pulled in opposite directions. Political disagreements quickly devolved into armed conflict, particularly in Mosul and Kirkuk in 1959, finally culminating in the coup in 1963.

Following the coup, the Ba'thists moved to eliminate their primary opposition, the Iraqi Communist Party. For months death squads roamed the streets of Baghdad. The manhunt that ensued, with death squads going house to house, sometimes shooting on the spot, resulted in such a large number of people being arrested that cinemas and athletic clubs had to be converted into holding facilities. Many of those held in prison were tortured, raped, and buried in mass graves in the desert.

This violence has been explained as a result of the failure both of the monarchy to develop democratic institutions within which political disagreements could be settled and of the regime of Abdel Karim Qasim to establish a permanent government after the revolution.[4] It has also been explained as the reiteration of earlier forms of violence, in Mosul and Kirkuk in 1959, in the prisons of the monarchy, in tribal, racial, and family violence, and so on in an infinite regression.[5] Whatever its etiology, the violence of 1963 had decisive effects. It destroyed any framework of national identification and resulted in mass disillusionment with political parties and a recoiling from the

4   See Majid Khadduri, *Republican Iraq: A Study in Iraqi Politics since the Revolution of 1958* (London: Oxford University Press, 1969).

5   Hanna Batatu, *The Old Social Classes and the Revolutionary Movements in Iraq: A Study of Iraq's Old Landed and Commercial Classes and of Its Communists, Ba'thists, and Free Officers* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1978), 951.

state. Politics became the elimination of one's enemies—and for artists this posed a new problem of expression. In the 1950s the problem had been how to develop a formal vocabulary that could establish a modern art in Iraq. After 1963 the problem became how to formulate the pathos that resulted from political violence. Artists retreated into a private interiority, into what the critic Suhail Sami Nader called, years later, "the freedom of despair."[6]

THE EPIC OF THE MARTYR

That year the artist Kadhim Haidar returned from London where he had been studying theatre design at the Central College of the Arts. Before leaving for London in 1959, Kadhim produced work in oil and watercolor that might be described as a characterology of popular life.
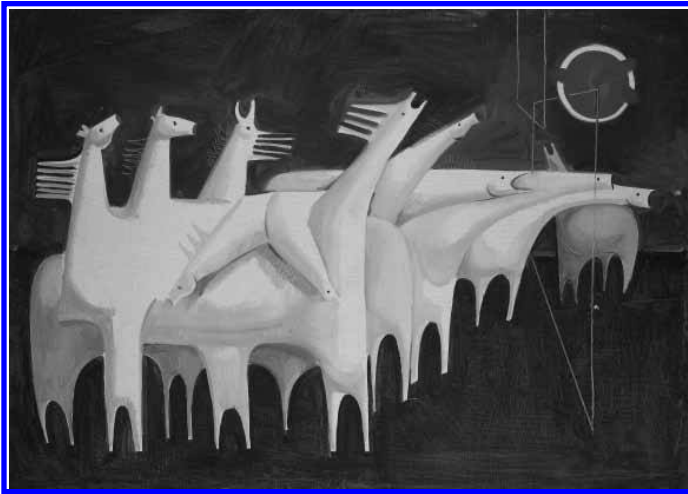
Kadhim Haidar. *Fatigued, Ten Horses Converse with Nothing*, 1964. Oil on canvas, 91.4 × 127 cm. Barjeel Art Foundation, Sharjah. Image courtesy of Meem Gallery.

He had studied literature at the University of Baghdad, and though he was interested in what went on in the streets of Baghdad, he would recast that life in his imagination, interpreting it, imbuing it with a personality. He then painted that personality he fabulated from scenes of everyday life.

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6   Suhail Sami Nader, "al-Tajruba wa al-thaqafa wa hurriyat al-ta'abir" [Experience, culture and freedom of expression], *Al-Jamhuria* (Baghdad), March 22, 1975, 6.

Upon his return to Baghdad in 1963, Kadhim began work on a series of paintings that transposed onto canvas motifs from a set of popular mourning rites that commemorated the martyrdom of the Imam Husayn. The grandson of the Prophet Muhammad, Husayn was killed in a battle in the 8th century at Karbala for refusing to recognize the right of an unjust caliph to rule the Islamic community. The rites that mourn his martyrdom, referred to as the *taziya*—Arabic for "mourning"—consist of poetry readings, processions, and theater performances that recount the Battle of Karbala according to an established chain of motifs. Transposing these motifs into painting was consistent with Kadhim's earlier interests in literature and popular life, but insofar as these motifs were embedded in a complex structure of representation into which a history and a theology had been sedimented, these paintings constituted a break not only with Kadhim's own earlier work, but also with modern art of the 1950s. Exhibited in 1965 under the title *Mulhammat al-Shahid*, or *The Epic of the Martyr*, at the new National Museum of Modern Art, the paintings inaugurated a new paradigm of the modern artwork in Iraq.

The earlier paradigm had been set in 1951 by Jawad Salim, who in his attempt to establish a practice of modern art in Iraq worked to situate it in time, in relation to the arts of earlier civilizations. Landscape painting had been introduced to Baghdad at the turn of the century by officers in the Ottoman military. Trained at the Military College in Istanbul, they had learned this technique of representation as a form of reconnaissance. In their retirement in Baghdad, these former officers continued to practice this type of painting as a hobby, which they taught informally to others. The government of the new state of Iraq took interest in the retired officers' painting, enlisting them to teach in its schools and later sending the officers' students to Europe for further study. When these students returned, the type of representational painting introduced by the officers was transformed into a space where a particular problem of form, and one that did not exist in European painting, came to be posed.

On the one hand this problem was historiographic. Not only was Iraq the site of the ancient civilizations of Mesopotamia, but the 1941 accidental discovery of a 13th-century manuscript indicating the existence of a medieval tradition of miniature painting had provided a precedent upon which a practice of modern painting could be based. So little of that tradition survived, however—and what did was in

Paris and Saint Petersburg—that the effect of the precedent was to frame the intervening seven-century gap, making modern artists vertiginously aware of their modernity, and trapping them in a temporal paradox formulated by the critic Jabra Ibrahim Jabra: "The history of modern art in Iraq (which possesses some of the oldest works of art in the world) is some 20 years old."[7] Jawad Salim was the first to address this paradox, and to attempt a resolution, by producing work that integrated elements from different aesthetic traditions—both modern and ancient—into a single formal vocabulary with which life in Baghdad could be imaged.

He was also the first to address the ethical dimension of the problem of form posed by modern art, the problem of how to situate the modern artwork in relation to the visual culture of Iraq. This was less an issue of the image in the Islamic tradition than of distinguishing the function of modern painting from that of family photographs, designer furniture, pop magazines, and erotic pinups.[8] Salim's attempt to resolve the historiographic and ethical challenges of modern art culminated in a bronze frieze he designed to commemorate the revolution, *Nasb al-Hurriyya*, or *The Monument of Freedom*. However, as the monument was being erected over Liberation Square, in the center of Baghdad, the revolution was collapsing into low-grade civil war. By 1963 it had ended in dictatorship, and Salim was dead.

This was also the paradigm within which Kadhim had been working. But in *The Epic of the Martyr* form underwent a shift; it was no longer aesthetic, situated on the surface, in the visuality of the painting, but on a sublayer where meaning was produced. The shift in form is evident in the vocabulary Kadhim used to explain the work in an interview several years later. "The point was to develop the apparent form [*al-haya*]: the figures and the horses were subjected to principles of design [*fikrat al-tasmim*] . . . more than that, the repetition is a continuation of something in ancient Iraqi art, particularly Sumerian art."[9] The Arabic word for form is *al-shakl*, but Kadhim described the production of the paintings in terms of developing *al-haya*, which refers to an

7   Jabra Ibrahim Jabra, *Art in Iraq Today* (London: Embassy of the Republic of Iraq, 1961), 1.

8   Jawad Salim, "Tajdeed fil-Rasm" [The renewal of painting], *Sawt al-Ahali* 491 (1951), reprinted in Jabra Ibrahim Jabra, *Jewad Selim wa-Nusb al-Hurriyyah: Dirasah fi Atharih wa-Ara'ih* [Jewad Selim and the monument of freedom] (Baghdad: Ministry of Information, 1974).

9   Interview in *Alif Ba*, 1982.

outward appearance, suggesting that what had the status of *al-shakl* or *ashkal* (plural)—the motifs of the figures and the horses—was located on a different level of the work.

This shift in the nature of form was a consequence of the fact that the motifs imported from the *taziya* had been constituted over centuries in the poetic tradition of the *husayniyyat*. The husayniyyat was a tradition of elegiac poetry, in popular Iraqi Arabic, that recounted episodes from the Battle of Karbala in order to mourn the injustice of Husayn's death. In the poetry the historical events of the battle became dilated, were made to swell, filling not only with the original grief of losing the prophetic legacy, transmitted from one generation to another, but also the grief of contemporary life. In the husayniyyat the narrative of the Battle of Karbala functioned as an allegory through which the suffering of successive generations could find expression. By the mid-1960s, when Kadhim made *The Epic of the Martyr*, this narrative had been so overwhelmed by new forms of suffering produced by social, economic, and political transformations (never had so many people participated in the taziya), that the narrative buckled, secularizing into literature.[10]

Thus the motifs were not simply aesthetic forms but hermeneutically dense symbols in which a particular cultural memory had congealed. Transposed into painting, these motifs were subjected to a kind of aesthetic reduction that exfoliated their narrative reference, releasing their emotional content. For example, in *Fatigued, Ten Horses Converse with Nothing*, a cluster of horses is set on a nocturnal landscape composed of blue-gray earth and a graphite sky studded by a red body, distinguishable as neither sun nor moon. The horses emit dry groans so violent that they strain their necks. As if forced into abstraction by the immensity of its grief, the motif of the white horse is reduced to an outline and is multiplied. Instead of staging the motif by providing a narrative context, the nocturnal landscape functions to suppress historical reference, releasing the affective content of the motif into the painting, where it becomes available to express the pathos of 1963. If the motifs from the husayniyyat were displaced from their narrative schema, in their transposition into painting, this transposition had a corresponding effect on painting, importing into it the symbolic structure in

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10   See Ibrahim Haidari. *Tarājīdiyā al-Karbalā': Sūsiyūlūjīyā al-khitāb al-shīʿī* [The tragedy of Karbala: A sociology of Shi'a discourse] (London: Dar al-Saqi, 1999).

which the motifs expressed contemporary pathos. It generalized this structure in painting, putting painting in the same allegorical relation to history, wherein the past had for the present the status of a reserve of expressive forms.

HISTORY AS ALLEGORY

After Dia Azzawi graduated from the Institute of Fine Arts in 1964, he got a job working at Riwaq al-Wasiti, a gallery recently opened by the architects Mohammad Makiya and Said Ali Mathloum in central Baghdad, and where that year Kadhim Haidar exhibited work he had done while in London. Azzawi's interaction with Haidar and his work at Riwaq al-Wasiti was formative for how he came to think about the artwork and its relation to history. Azzawi had studied archaeology at the University of Baghdad, taking night classes at the Institute of Fine Arts. But, now that he was just out of art school, and had spent two months in prison during the roundup in 1963, Haidar's work brought him to see history differently, to see how history could be an allegory for the present.

Years later, almost ten years after Haidar had died, Azzawi published an essay situating Haidar's work in the history of modern art in Iraq. Though an expansive historiography had emerged on this art, Haidar had been excluded from it. In the early 1980s, when Haidar was suffering from cancer and went to London for treatment that he couldn't afford, Azzawi, who was then the artistic director of the Iraqi Cultural Centre in London, arranged an exhibition for him where he could sell work in order to finance his treatment. By that time London had become the diasporic center for the Arab world, especially for Iraqis, who had begun to emigrate in large numbers in the late 1970s. Many people who had stayed away from the Iraqi Cultural Centre for political reasons came to the exhibition, and every piece sold. Still, Haidar despaired to Azzawi that in the context of the Iran-Iraq War, when the figure of the martyr saturated public discourse, no one seemed to remember that he had been the first to work with the martyr as a symbol.[11]

In the essay Azzawi wrote about Haidar, he located the significance of *The Epic of the Martyr* in this transformation of the icon of the martyr into a symbol of contemporary tragedy: "The exhibition of the *Epic of the Martyr* left a prominent mark in the history of the modern

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11   Interview with Dia Azzawi, March 2011.

art movement in Iraq; it was held in political and cultural circumstances that were complicated, making the concept of martyrdom [*istishhad*], stripped of any religious meaning, a contemporary symbol that cried out tragedy."[12] This concept belonged to a tradition that artists had previously not sought in their search for forms. Unlike Islamic architecture or Assyrian sculpture, it lacked aesthetic properties; and unlike scenes of everyday life, it did not have visible surfaces, was not something to be viewed. Once a year it was dramatized in the taziya, manifesting itself in ritual and poetic forms. But the concept of martyrdom exceeded those forms, it resided on a deeper level, on the level of social or cultural memory. It was an inherited affect, transmitted through those forms, from the ancient event of Husayn's unjust slaughter. What *The Epic of the Martyr* achieved was to convert that concept into a symbol capable of expressing the experience of 1963 and the political insecurity that followed. Making a symbol out of the concept of martyrdom did not evacuate it of its affective content, but rather used that content to bind the pathos of contemporary life. Doing so infused the modern artwork with the inherited affect.[13] The affect of an ancient tragedy was able to bind the affect of a contemporary one. In another essay, situating *The Epic of the Martyr* in the context of the 1960s, Azzawi wrote,

> 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, suqs and the other subjects taken up by artists of the 1950s. [Kadhim Haidar] tried to introduce something else into the artwork, forms taken from popular tradition and transferred to the structure of the canvas, *forms charged with popular emotion* [*al-wijdan al-sha'bi*]. . . . Kadhim's works incited the young artists to search for a new vision, sometimes in metaphysical depths and sometimes in epics.[14]

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12 Dia Azzawi, "Kadhim Haidar," *Nsus* 1, no. 1 (1994): 69.

13 Critics at the time commented on the tremendous affect of the work. See Sa'adun Fadhil, "Al-Mousam al-Fanni al-Akheer fi Baghdad" [The past art season in Baghdad], *al-Amiloun fi al-Naft* 41 (July 1965): 12; and Abdul Rahman Majeed Al-Ruba'I, "Rasid wa Mulhaathaat Fanniyya," *al-Adab* 13, no. 8 (August 1966).

14 Dia Azzawi, "al-Sitinaat: Izdihar al-w'ai al-tashkili" [The sixties: The flourishing of an artistic consciousness], *Faradis* 5, no. 4 (1992): 91, emphasis added.

Even though this affect was a sense of the loss of justice, originating in the loss of the prophecy of Islam, in the 8th century, with the slaughter of the Imam Husayn, Azzawi understood it to reside not in "religion" but in what was then coming to be called "folklore" or popular literature (*al-adab al-sha'bi*). A new, *literary* consciousness had emerged during the 1950s and 1960s, a consciousness of Iraq's textual inheritance and an understanding that the identity of people is their literature.[15] By drawing material from that literary tradition instead of the archaeological traditions, as the earlier paradigm established by Jawad Salim had done, *The Epic of the Martyr* opened up a different dimension of history, one accessible not through artifacts but through texts, ordered not into a chronology of discontinuous civilizations but a homogenous field of signifiers.

DIA AZZAWI

At the end of February 1965, at Riwaq al-Wasiti, shortly before the exhibition of *The Epic of the Martyr*, Dia Azzawi had held his first solo exhibition. The work he showed consisted mostly of *takweenaat*, or "compositions," a study of forms attempting to decipher the formal identity of Iraq. The ornamental forms of various cultural objects—rugs, amulets, Islamic architecture, and folktales—were isolated and set on solid colored surfaces where they were arranged into aesthetic masses. These investigations were exploratory, speculative. In them the forms have the status of fragments, piled up, as if excavated onto a space upon which they can be, as it were, held up to the light.

These paintings might be seen as an epilogue to the project begun by Jawad Salim to develop a formal vocabulary for modern art in Iraq. But in Azzawi's works, where forms do not produce a representation, the attempt to render contemporary life has expired, and the images of Baghdad have been blacked out by brilliant color backgrounds. It is as if the traditions from which the artists once had sought forms now had lost their integrity, collapsing into fragments, which in Azzawi's paintings lack any coherence beyond the artwork itself. The experimental character of these works, their objectivity, the sense of something being brought up for observation, produces a certain experience of time, of having shown up too late, of sifting through remains.

Azzawi's compositions mark the closure of what we might call the

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15   See Shafeeq al-Kamali, "Folklore," *Baghdad Observer*, February 21, 1968.

archaeological traditions. He did not seek in them the same thing that artists had sought just a few years before him. These traditions did not have for him historiographic value, a resource to solve the temporal paradox created by the introduction of modern art to Iraq. For Azzawi they were simply aesthetic forms, radiant in the half-life of their decay. When he was a student at the Institute of Fine Arts, he didn't have access to art books and magazines that would have exposed him to the formal possibilities of the techniques he was learning. In class the range of those possibilities was limited to live models and a truncated version of the history of European art, represented by black-and-white photographic reproductions. It was in order to expand his field of forms that he sought out the objects in the Iraq Museum, which he already knew from his studies in archaeology. He was particularly drawn to the squat frame of Sumerian figurines, with their tubular torsos, heavy feet, and enlarged eyes set in the center of their face.

The Epic of the Martyr demonstrated the existence of a vast domain of forms in literature that could be worked up in painting as an allegory for contemporary life. These were forms of a very different type; they were hermeneutical, not aesthetic, and when instantiated in painting, they opened a dimension of meaning that reduced painting's visuality. From the mid-1960s on, Azzawi moved away from the archaeological and began to explore modes of cultural memory, such as the popular imagination surrounding the icon of the martyr and texts like *The Thousand and One Nights*. He continued to produce compositions, but the formal masses began to consolidate into floating landscapes, setting the scene for the appearance of a figure. When that figure would in fact appear, it often did so as a ghost of itself, in silhouette, constructed with a cylindrical body modeled on Sumerian figurines. *The Epic of the Martyr* established a certain philosophy of history in which a cultural tradition could be interpreted as an archive of forms of tragedy. What Azzawi sought in cultural memory were not visual forms but means of expression that could be reactivated in painting as formulas for the pathos of contemporary life in Iraq. In an interview with the poet Muzaffar Nawab in the late 1960s, he described this historiography of tragedy and the conception of the artwork with which it was bound up:

> The notion of the victim is not strange to either Iraqi tradition or the Iraqi present. . . . The theme of tragedy, which is part of an ancient Iraqi tradition, in a religious and social sense, asserts itself

directly in my work, such that it becomes possible to transform the canvas into a witness [*shāhid*] of the tomb or the flowers placed at the feet of the martyr given over to death. The transformation of the human [*al-insan*] into the victim, which is to say, his transformation into his opposite, and the acceptance of the human to be a new Husayn, is the issue of our time [*mas'ala hatha al-'asr*]. But the victim is no longer on his knees, helpless beneath the sword of the executioner; rather he has become the splitting of untruth [*tamazaq al-zayf*] even in his death.

The idea of the victim in the Iraqi tradition was one of the modalities of the martyr. This was not a passive understanding of the victim but one in which the passion of the victim functioned as a representation of truth. When Azzawi claimed in the interview with Nawab that the "transformation of the human into the victim" is the "issue of our time" he was referring to the aftermath of 1963. The experience of torture in prisons was apprehended through a mythologized vocabulary of victim and executioner.[16] The Iraqi tradition, Azzawi insisted, offered resources for redeeming the experience of that dehumanization by transforming the victim into a representation of truth. The artwork was a site where this transformation could occur. That was its politics, modeled on the example of Husayn, to turn the pathos of loss into a representation of truth.
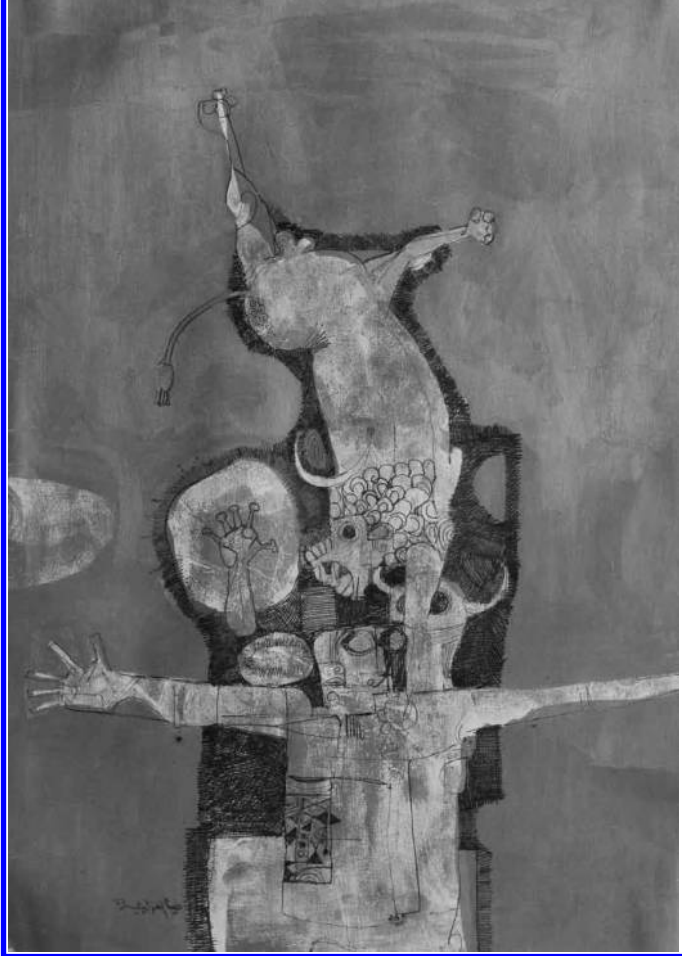
THE EPIC OF GILGAMESH

In addition to the compositions, at Riwaq al-Wasiti in 1965 Azzawi showed three *dirasat athariyya*, or "archaeological studies," two on Gilgamesh and one on Gudea. In the studies, sketched in ink, Gilgamesh appears in bust, looking out quizzically, motionless, fixed in a strip of ornamental motifs. Over the next couple years, these archaeological studies gave way to "mythological studies"—*dirasat mulhamat Gilgamesh*—in which Gilgamesh was rendered not in the modality of an object to be found in the Iraq Museum but as a figure in literature.

In the epic of the same title, Gilgamesh, the king of Uruk, is disciplined for the rapacious nature of his rule by being forced to confront his own finitude. He is given a companion by the gods, and then that

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16   See Fadhil Azzawi, *al-Ruh al-hayyah: Jil al-sitinat fi al-'Iraq* (Damascus: Dar al-Mada, 1997), 24.

Dia Azzawi. *Gilgamesh*, 1966. Ink and charcoal on paper, 52 × 32 cm. Collection of the artist. Image courtesy of the artist.

companion is taken away, leaving Gilgamesh to deal not only with the loss of his beloved companion but also with the fact of his own death. Reading the epic, Azzawi interpreted the hero Gilgamesh as a victim of political injustice, struggling in a space outside the law. In an essay analyzing how this experience of injustice is articulated in the epic, he wrote, "[T]he model of the adventurer [*al-insan al-mughammar*] who is not deterred by adversities, however many and even if their source is divine, creates a splendid literary opposition that, by going beyond the limits of historical realism, gives us the feeling of a loss of political jus-tice [*bi-faqdan al-'adala al-siyasiyya*]."[17] In the essay Azzawi focused on how the epic hero is constructed through narrative—he is what hap-pens to him—such that "little importance is attributed to the self."

17   Dia Azzawi, "Al-Sh'ir wa al-Insan: Fi al-asatir al-sumuriyya wa al-babiliyya" [Poetry and man: On Sumerian and Babylonian legends], *Al-Amilun fil Naft* 81 (December 1968): 2–6.

Because "he is not individualized or rendered with particular quali-
ties," the hero can function as a model for the universal figure of the
human. And because he is characterized through the challenges he
faces, his portrayal doubles as a manifestation and indictment of the
injustice he endures:

> [T]he features of the human being [*mulamah lil-insan*] inevitably
> appear as a complaint against oppression [*shakwa al-zalm*] . . .
> without this position entailing any specific activity. Rather it is
> enough that they maintain their spite [*tadhamar*] and their anger.
> Despite its negativity, this appears powerfully and as a challenge
> to the god oppressing man, and comprises the nucleus of human
> rejection of the worlds of tyrannical power and the legality, inac-
> cessible to human reality, that supports it.

Where oppression has a divine source and the law is itself complicit in
this oppression, the epic hero is constituted by his persistent refusal.
Lacking any forms of his own, his very being becomes an image of
injustice, reflecting back at oppression a vision of itself. It was in this
research, on the work of narrative in epic portrayals of injustice, that
Azzawi came to understand how narrative enables a mode of figuration
in which the human figure emerges as an anamorphosis of violence.

Dia Azzawi. *Ta'malat fi al-harb wa al-thawra* [Contemplations on war and revolution], 1969. 20 × 30 cm. Published in *Shi'ir* 69. Image courtesy of the artist.

Emplotting a human figure in a speculative narrative of struggle generated forms that, instead of rendering the figure as a passive victim, portrayed him as an imprint of the violence that could otherwise not be denounced.

Azzawi interpreted *The Epic of Gilgamesh* within a philosophy of history established by Haidar's *The Epic of the Martyr*—that is, seeing Gilgamesh as a martyr whose model was Husayn. But having done so, he then reconceived the martyr according to the narrative method he appropriated from the Sumerian epic. In 1968 he produced a set of twenty-eight drawings titled *Maqtil al-Husayn*, translated into English as *The Blood of Husayn.* Each of the drawings illustrates a scene from the narrative of the Battle of Karbala. Because they are conceived in a narrative context that exceeds any individual drawing, the drawings have a fragmentary character, each pointing beyond itself to a previous or subsequent drawing, where it will find its meaning. One of the effects of this fragmentation is that the figures, instead of emerging from the ground of the image, appear and disappear from the sides, as if in a reel. In the absence of any depth, the scenes unfold as if brought into existence by the movement of line across the white surface of the page.

The narrative method Azzawi took from *The Epic of Gilgamesh* drew text and image into a new relation, whereby the image acquired the features of text—the structure of a signifier whose meaning is deferred, its signification dispersed across the span of a sentence. In the image, the gap between the signifier and the signified is manifested in the fragmentary nature of the forms in the drawings. Constituting forms within a narrative where representation is extended across the time of language, and then materializing these forms as visual forms in an image that lacks the temporality of narrative, estranged the form from its representation, isolating it, leaving it in a state of suspension. This suspension, resulting from translating a literary form into a visual one, creates a hollow in the image, within which a buried pathos can find release and a contemporary pathos can find form.

1967

If the swift and spectacular defeat of the Arab states in a six-day war with Israel in June 1967 produced a sense of humiliation and disillusionment in other Arab states, in Iraq, it authorized an unprecedented

form of critique. After years of self-censorship imposed by the political insecurity that followed the coup in 1963, it suddenly became possible to publicly demand the establishment of democratic institutions, the release of political prisoners, and the reinstatement of those who had in the previous years been dismissed from their jobs for political reasons.[18]

Within that new space of critique, Iraqi writers and artists sought to rethink the relationship between art and politics. This rethinking occurred after art had been driven from politics by the terror of 1963, such that in the aftermath of 1967, it was necessary to reconceive not only art but politics as well. And since the state as a political actor had been discredited by the defeat of the Arab states in the June war, this attempt to reconceive politics was an attempt to reconceive politics outside the framework of the state.

Against the backdrop of the failure of the state, a type of political action developed by the Palestinian liberation organizations that had formed in the early 1960s emerged as an alternative. The culmination of a decade of activities among exiled Palestinians, in secondary schools and universities in Cairo and in the diaspora in the Gulf, these liberation organizations sought not only to reclaim the land of which the Palestinians had been dispossessed by the establishment of the state of Israel, but also to assert the existence of the Palestinians vis-à-vis the Arab states. It was in order to assert their existence that their method entailed the use of violence.[19] In the shadows of the Arab states, this method of armed struggle, or *kifah al-musallah*, instantiated a new political subject, the *fida'i*.

Though translated as "freedom fighter" or "guerrilla," and often left untranslated in the international press of the 1970s, fida'i signifies a political subjectivity constituted outside the framework of the state, individual, almost solitary, operating in the modality of affirmation and negation. After 1967, when writers and artists in Iraq sought to restore a relation between art and politics, the fida'i presented a model for rethinking a politics that was not based on political parties and not centered on the state. Beyond armed struggle, the fida'i demonstrated the possibility of individual resistance, and a number of Iraqi intellec-

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18   Azzawi, *al-Ruh al-hayyah*, 151–52.

19   Yazid Sayigh, *Armed Struggle and the Search for the State: The Palestinian Movement, 1949–1993* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), 88, 91.

tuals went to Beirut to join the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine (PFLP).

The initiative to rethink the relationship between art and politics was led by a group of poets who established a new journal called *Sh'ir 69*, where they published a manifesto outlining the ways in which the writing of poetry would have to accommodate the individuality of the poet, which was conceived as not just an artistic individuality but a political one as well. One could see in that individuality the flash of the fida'i. Dia Azzawi and five other visual artists followed suit, signing a statement called *Nahwa al-Ru'iyya al-Jadida*, or "Towards the New Vision," where the practice of art was defined in similar terms, in terms of "taking up a position vis-à-vis the world":

> The artist is a warrior who refuses to lay down his weapon, when he makes himself a spokesmen for the world and man, living through his perpetual sacrifice in the world, by expressing his intense desire to refuse to believe in the false [*iqna'a al-tazayif*] . . . the culmination of artistic achievements across history places the artist at the center of the world, and at the focal point of the revolution.[20]

Though the politicization of art entailed conceiving of the artist as warrior, and this conception of the artist as warrior was inspired by the fida'i, Azzawi cast that subjectivity back in time, finding a precedent in the 10th-century mystic Mansur al-Hallaj:

> At the focal point of the revolution, he transcends all that's given, transforming himself into another al-Hallaj against oppression [*zalm*] and intellectual enslavement. For the artist is a critic, and he is revolutionary by negating the world around him.

This telescoping of history into the present was the effect 1967 had on Azzawi's own work. In the first issue of *Sh'ir 69*, he published a series of five drawings on an Iraqi who had gone to fight with the Palestinians and was killed. In the drawings, the narrative formula he had identified

20   The text was printed in an extensive exhibition catalog and in a few Baghdadi newspapers. It can be found reprinted in Shaker Hassan Al Said, *Al-Bayanat al-Fanniyyah fi al-'Iraq* [Art manifestos in Iraq] (Baghdad: Wizarat al-I'lam, Mudiriyat al-Funun al-'Ammah, 1973).

in *Gilgamesh*, and then explored in *The Blood of Husayn*, is applied to the historical experience of the fida'i, as a political subject struggling on the frontiers of the state. Anonymous and alone, this subject is conceived in terms of the singularity of his opposition, as in *Ta'malat fi al-harb wa al-thawra*, where he is splayed beneath the sun, exposed to a row of hooded assailants. The exit from history into contemporary political events that occurs in this work seems to have entailed a visual reduction, the evaporation of color and the closure of space, leaving the stark and urgent reality of lines on paper.
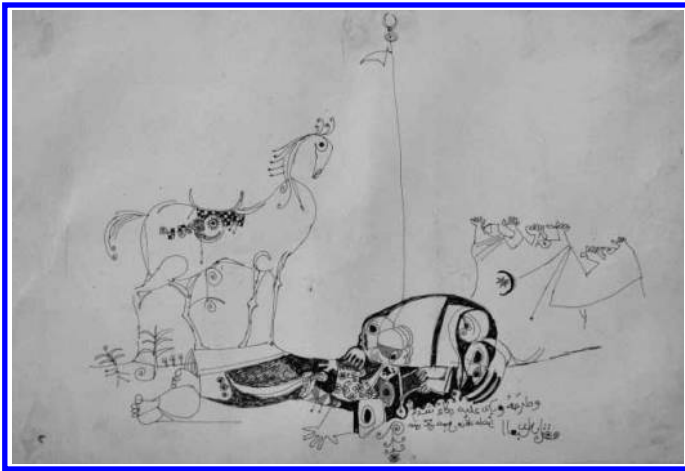
Dia Azzawi. *The Slaying of Abbas*, from *Maqtil al-Husayn* [Blood of Husayn], 1968. Ink drawing on paper, 20 x 30 cm. Collection of the artist.
Image courtesy of the author.

AMMAN, 1970

The Palestinian *fida'iyyun* moved into the political vacuum left by the defeat of the Arab states. Basing their operations in camps in Jordan, they tried to engage the Israeli military in combat. In 1969, in a skirmish at the village of Karama in the Jordan Valley, they appeared to beat the Israeli military. The effect of fida'i success in the wake of state failure was to create a groundswell of support in the Arab world that sent waves of volunteers—like the Iraqi portrayed by Azzawi—to fight with the Palestinians in Jordan. The fida'iyyun felt authorized by this support, and they began to encroach upon Jordanian sovereignty, setting up checkpoints and attempting to assassinate King Hussein. In September 1970, after the third assassination attempt, King Hussein

deployed the military to expel the Palestinian fida'iyyun in what is sometimes called Black September and sometimes the Jordanian Civil War.

Two weeks after the battles in Amman were over, the Beirut-based newspaper *al-Hadaf* published a journal kept by a fida'i named Bassam during the siege of the Jebel Hussein refugee camp in Amman. Azzawi used the journal to produce a series of drawings, according to the method he had been experimenting with in *The Blood of Husayn*. In 1972 he published the drawings along with the text in a book titled *Shāhid min hatha al-'asr: Youmiyyat shāhid qutl fi majzarat al-Urdun, aylul 1970* (A *Witness of Our Times: The Journal of a Martyr Killed in the Jordan Massacre, September 1970*). The journal documented the battle between the fida'iyyun and the Jordanian military. But, as it was a journal, composed in the first person, on the margins of that account it recorded something else. Because each entry was made without knowing what would happen next, the journal is suffused with a sense of uncertainty and expectation that breaks up the narrative of the siege into a chain of images that hangs suspended, like the shutter of a camera left open. In that suspension, what gets recorded is the emotional life of the fida'i confronted with the horror of death and witness to the destruction of the refugee camps.

> Suddenly something happened that we didn't account for. The tanks began to attack the houses randomly. Wildly. Indiscriminately. The view was terrifying. It paralyzed us. Floors collapsed and suddenly we saw among the debris unexpectedly the small, private things of people. . . .

> . . . The bombs fell on the camp without mercy and like a rain of fire. Suddenly death loses its meaning. Someone passing by would get the feeling that the people were sleeping, resting in the middle of the road.   September 17

The fida'i, the subject of armed struggle, is suddenly made a witness to "the intention to annihilate":

> At night the loudspeakers began to call for surrender . . . something like this hasn't happened in history, that they call on the *fida'iyyun* and young men (generally, who aren't *fida'iyyun*) to surrender. The young men: this is an unusual equivalence. But it

seems to indicate an intention to annihilate . . . and the reality is
that it demolished the camps. And with mixing up the fida'iyyun
with the young men. Mixing up the resistance and the camps.
Is that not the meaning?   September 21

The infantry stormed the camp . . . they executed a great number
of young men, a number I can't count; and then the cries swept
through the camp. Cries of grief, of having lost a child, of hunger,
of thirst, of terror, of waiting for the unknown, being left alone to
die alone under a hammer no one can withstand. . . .
                                                              September 23

As a witness, he is transformed into a representation of what he sees.
The storming of the camp, the execution of the young men, and the
cries of grief are recorded in his voice; it is in his reflection that an
image of the destruction of the Jebel Husayn Camp appears. In
Azzawi's drawings, this structure of witnessing is materialized in a
split image, wherein the figure of the fida'i appears with, but disjoint
from, various figures of death—dangling legs, bodies lying diagonally,
adorned with flowers—the two figures mediated by a line running
down the picture.

Dia Azzawi. *Shāhid min hatha al-'asr: Youmiyyat shāhid qutl fi majzarat
al-Urdun, aylul 1970* [A witness of our times: The journal of a martyr
killed in the Jordan massacre, September 1970], 1972, 21 x 21 cm.
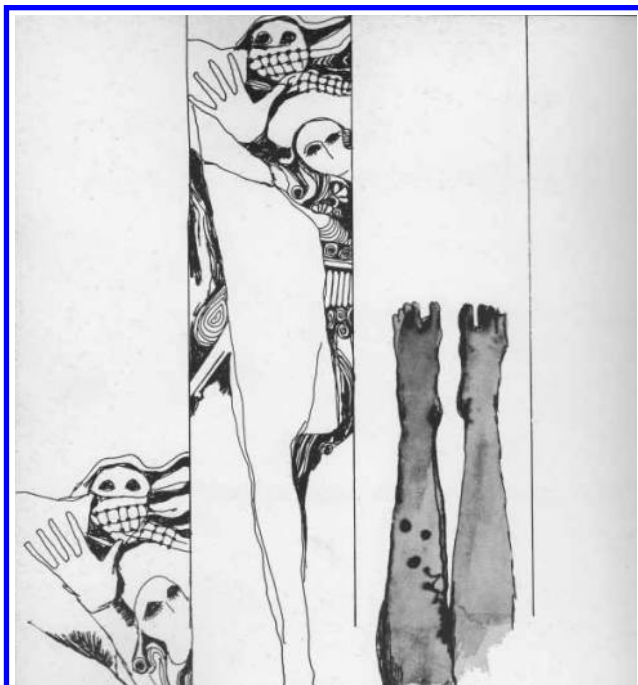
Dia Azzawi. *Shāhid min hatha al-'asr: Youmiyyat shāhid qutl fi majzarat al-Urdun,
aylul 1970* [A witness of our times: The journal of a martyr killed in the Jordan
massacre, September 1970], 1972, 21 x 21 cm.

TEL AL-ZAATAR, LEBANON 1976

In the reports of the United Nations Refugee Works Agency (UNRWA),
the entity that has administered the Palestinian refugee camps since
1950, the massacre of Tel al-Zaatar, like the destruction of other camps
in Jordan and Lebanon, is recorded as no more than a "disturbance" to
the agency's operations. Established to provide emergency relief in the
aftermath of 1948, UNRWA eventually came to assume the responsibil-
ity of not only housing and feeding Palestinians displaced by the estab-
lishment of the state of Israel, but also educating them and providing
health services. The refugee was not a political entity but an object of
humanitarian governance, and within the logic of humanitarian care
the political dimension of the massacres of refugees was unintelligible.
Considered against this unintelligibility, the drawings Azzawi made on
Tel al-Zaatar appear as an attempt to think about the massacre in politi-
cal terms, by generating intelligible forms for apprehending the radical
externality inhabited by the Palestinian refugee.

When the Ottoman Empire collapsed at the end of the First World
War, its former provinces were reorganized into a grid of nation-states
across which the Palestinians, left stateless, were cast as a remainder.

Though many acquired Jordanian nationality, most dwelled in camps, devoid of nationality and treated in their host countries with suspicion if not hostility. They existed in a kind of outside, not only outside the Jordanian or Lebanese state, but outside the entire political order organized into nation-states. The rise of the fida'i after 1967 as a figure of politics beyond the state, its repeated incursions upon state sovereignty, and its appropriation of the camps in Jordan and Lebanon opened a chasm in the nation-state. Though the Jordanian government succeeded in closing that chasm, it tore through Lebanon. Leading to the Syrian invasion in 1979, the Israeli invasion in 1982, and the rise of Hezbollah in opposition to the ensuing Israeli occupation, that chasm defines the political landscape of the Middle East today. Thus the massacre at Tel al-Zaatar has to be seen not only as an event of the Lebanese Civil War, but also as an event of another magnitude, the eruption into the postwar political order of that which it had excluded.

The drawings in *The Body's Anthem* are images of this political outside, rendered intelligible within a hermeneutic formulated out of a specific reading of history. That hermeneutic, a narrative formulation of pathos, derived on the one hand from the poetic tradition of the husayniyyat, and on the other from an ancient epic. Applied to the modern experience of the fida'i, that hermeneutic was able to generate intelligible forms for the political outside occupied by the Palestinians because it was itself outside, temporally heterogeneous, coming out of a conduit the artwork had furrowed into the past. And if the modern artwork had created such an opening in time, this was because that modern artwork was also "outside," without any living precedent in Iraq. The externality of the modern artwork proved to be a condition of possibility for a paradoxical relation to politics, in which by withdrawing from the political scene, art could, as Azzawi introduced *The Body's Anthem*, "create a free memory that persists against oppression."