



ARTS & CULTURE

UAE EXPO 2020 CORONAVIRUS GULF MENA WORLD BUSINESS OPINION LIFESTYLE ARTS & CULTURE TRAVEL SPORT POI

Art | Books | Film | Music | On Stage | Television | Comment



Iraqi artist Shakir Hassan Al Said was a genius who taught me how to balance art and life

► Hanaa Malallah tells writer Myrna Ayad her memories of her teacher. This first-person account is based on their interview



With Shakir Hassan Al Said at my first solo exhibition at the Saddam Art Centre, Baghdad, 1991. Hanaa Malallah

Myrna ayad

Apr 26, 2020



was quite the rebel. And for someone who grew up against a backdrop of conflict and revolution in Baghdad, that rebelliousness was my saving grace. I cut my hair short like a boy when I was 14.

I read books by Sartre and Kafka and delved into existentialism. It was serious literature for a young mind, especially one that did not understand it all that much. I steered clear of all things girly. Maybe it was that middle child syndrome – I am one, sandwiched between two sisters. And yet, however defiant I was, my father was tolerant. I guess that was because he was a lawyer and a leftist.

At 16, I worked as an illustrator and because I earned a salary and had economic freedom, my parents respected me more. They were proud to see my work in the newspaper. I did not want to study and did not want to listen to anyone, really. Except one man: Shakir Hassan Al Said.

The day I met him: not an academic, but a creative



Shakir Hassan Al Said at the Louvre in Paris, 1958. Henea Malallah

I still vividly remember the day I met him. It was in 1973, I was 15 and he was 48, but he looked so much older. When I think back to those days, he looked like he was in his sixties, with his white hair and salt-and-pepper beard. Even when he died at 75, in 2004, he looked 90. Maybe he looked older because of the weight of his thoughts.

In walks Shakir, this seemingly ageing art history professor, to the Institute of Fine Arts in Baghdad. We were all instantly captivated.



He would begin his classes with a traditional song, then laugh and discuss the song, and it was only then that the lecture would start. Nothing was delivered in a conventional manner

I, for one, felt immediately receptive to him. He would begin his classes with a traditional song, then laugh and discuss the song, and it was only then that the lecture would start. Nothing was delivered in a conventional manner. He was not an academic; he was a creative in his method of teaching. He did not treat us like children, he treated us like we were mature intellectuals. We had the freedom to speak and voice our thoughts. We were all influenced by him; it was impossible not to be.

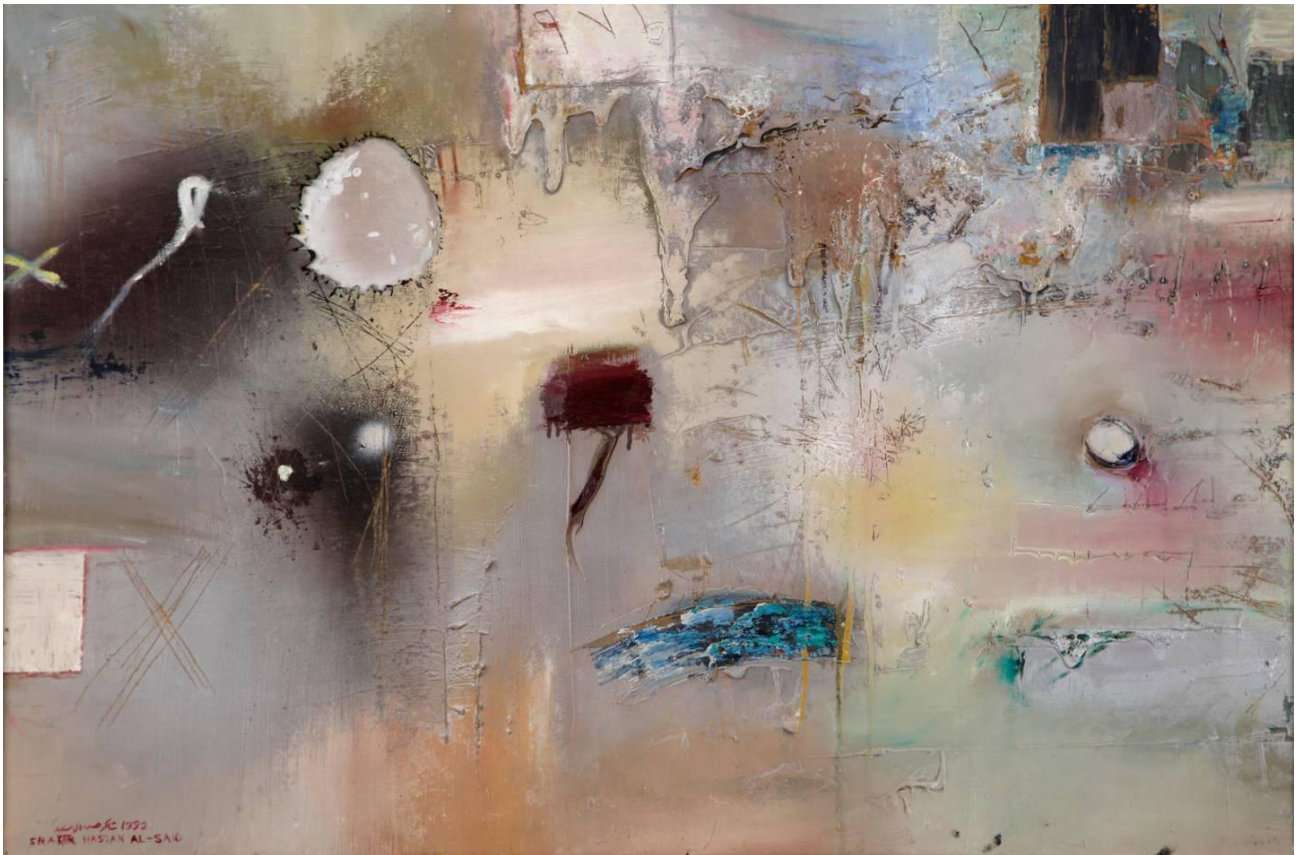
He talked about life, Sufism and existentialism, and I told him about what I had been reading. He gave me books on Surrealism and Martin Heidegger's *Being and Time*, which I pretended to understand just to hold his attention. He wanted us to interrogate our existence. That was Shakir, a fusion of these inquiries and anxieties. He was an institution. There was no one like him in Iraq. Shakespeare once said: "Though this be madness, yet there is method in it." Maybe Shakir was mad, but he was most definitely a genius.

He talked about life, Sufism and existentialism, and I told him about what I had been reading. He gave me books on Surrealism and Martin Heidegger's *Being and Time*, which I pretended to understand just to hold his attention. He wanted us to interrogate our existence. That was Shakir, a

The room was his; it was even called the Shakir Hassan Al Said Room. He talked about the Baghdad Group for Modern Art, whose manifesto he wrote and which he co-founded in 1951 along with fellow Iraqi artist Jawad Saleem. The group was intent on positioning art as a national identity and in ensuring the fusion of Iraqi heritage and tradition.

'He always said that art should be alive'

Shakir talked about himself and showed us his work, which came with lengthy explanations. He had a passion for archiving – actually it was an obsession – so there were a lot of records, interviews and material that he stored and shared. He always said that art should be alive. He detailed that sensitive line, that delicate balance between art and life and taught me how to live and practice that. He cultivated my ability to write and speak freely.



Untitled (1992) by Shakir Hassan Al Said. Meem Gallery, Dubai

I don't remember his exact words about my art but I know that he did like it. He wrote the introduction to my catalogue for my first solo at the Saddam Art Centre in Baghdad in 1991. In 1997, he asked me to participate in a group show that he was putting together at the National Museum in Amman. He also gave me some of his artworks.

Sadly, due to the economic situation in Iraq, I had to sell some to support my family. The people who bought the works were kind enough to say that I can take them back.

I went on to complete a bachelor's degree in 1988 and then a master's in 2000, in painting, at the Academy of Fine Arts in Baghdad, and I honestly cannot claim to have understood Shakir's philosophies entirely by then, especially the "One Dimension" theory, which is concerned with the soul of spaces. A new way of seeing, it is wholly rooted in the spiritual and also addresses the relationship between materialism and transcendence.

It was only when I did my PhD in philosophy of painting (from the University of Baghdad in 2001) with my thesis, *Logic Order in Ancient Mesopotamian Painting*, that I began to grasp his theories at a deeper level. I re-examined his work and found that he was a much more layered character than I had thought, with facets of spirituality, mathematics, abstraction and more in his body of work. Today, this is what I teach. His are the methods I still use.

Shakir was a profound thinker, an incredible one, and I believe that his ambition was to be a great educator. I still think about him a lot. Most of the time, I think about what he offered us and the numerous pearls of wisdom he imparted.

He was once late to a meeting and his way of apologising was to give me three parts of his diary. He later gave me the whole diary as a gift, and I have read it several times already. It includes sketches, too. I read something he wrote in it about Paris, while I was in the city and felt a very strong connection. It was a significant moment and there is some soul to this, there is definitely a sense of One Dimension.

I'm pretty sure giving me the diary was intentional, genius even, but I do not ask myself why. He knew that I was a dutiful student; he knew that with this, I could make him live on.

Remembering the Artist is a monthly series that features artists from the region

ART ARTS & CULTURE

EDITOR'S PICKS



UAE relaxes face mask rules: everything you need to know

UAE



Inside US-GCC meeting: Iran nuclear stalemate and regional behaviour dominate

US



Underwater hockey: quirky sport makes a splash in the UAE

UAE



What Dubai Expo will teach you about sustainability

COMMENT



How do you tell the age of a lobster? Scientists have solved the mystery

UK

NEWSLETTERS

Sign up to:

- The UAE Today (Sunday to Friday)
- The Middle East Today (Monday to Friday)
- Best of the Week (Saturdays)

Sign up

MORE FROM THE NATIONAL



Painter Sara Rahmani captures horror and hope in Afghanistan wi...

ART



Art Basel: which Middle Eastern artists are showing at art fair?

ART



Frida Kahlo self-portrait expected to smash records with \$30m sale

ART



Stunning deep-sea images unveiled in the Ocean Photography Awards...

ART

UAE

Courts Government Education
Heritage Health Transport Science
Environment UAE at 50
UAE in Space

Expo 2020

Coronavirus

Gulf

Saudi Arabia Bahrain Oman

MENA

Egypt Iraq Iran Jordan Lebanon
Syria Tunisia

World

UK US Africa Asia Australasia
Europe The Americas Health
UNGA

Business

Aviation Economy Energy Money
Cryptocurrencies Property Banking
Technology Markets
Travel and Tourism Start-Ups Future
Comment

Opinion

Comment Editorial Obituaries
Cartoon Feedback

Lifestyle

Fashion Food Motoring Luxury
Family Home Wellbeing
Things to do StayHome Comment

Arts & Culture

Art Books Film Music On Stage
Television Comment

Travel

Hotels News Destinations
Covid-19 Travel Airlines
Responsible Tourism