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Inside the Artist's Exhibition: Himat Muhammad Ali

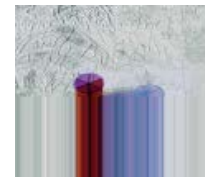
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COMMENTS OFF ON INSIDE THE ARTIST'S EXHIBITION: HIMAT MUHAMMAD ALI

ART

The Paris-based Iraqi artist explains longing for his homeland, the strong influence of Japanese culture on his work and the intrinsic links between art and poetry.

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Born: 1960, Kirkuk

Studio location: Himat, who is usually known by his first name only, has studios in Tokyo and Amman, but spends the majority of his time in Paris, where he moved in 1991. He has a studio at La Ruche, an artists' residence in Montparnasse that has hosted some of the biggest names in French and international art, from Amedeo Modigliani and Constantin Brâncusi to Diego Rivera.

Artistic origins: Himat began writing poems when he was around 15, and a few years later he progressed into visual art thanks to the art books of his brother, who is also an artist. He cites Cezanne and Gauguin as particularly important influences from his youth. "After that I began painting, and I avidly read about art in the newspapers," he explains. "I was very interested in one of the art critics, Shaker Hassan Al Said, who was also a painter. His writing was very complicated, with elements of Sufism, philosophy and psychology. Sometimes I didn't understand, but I always liked what I read and felt close to it. I decided I had to meet Al Said, so one day I brought my paintings to him, and this changed everything. He was very interested in my work and told me always to visit him whenever I had new pieces. We stayed in contact until he died in 2004. He was really my professor, without ever formally teaching me a lesson. He gave me confidence in myself, he wrote

Luxury Bed

Linen

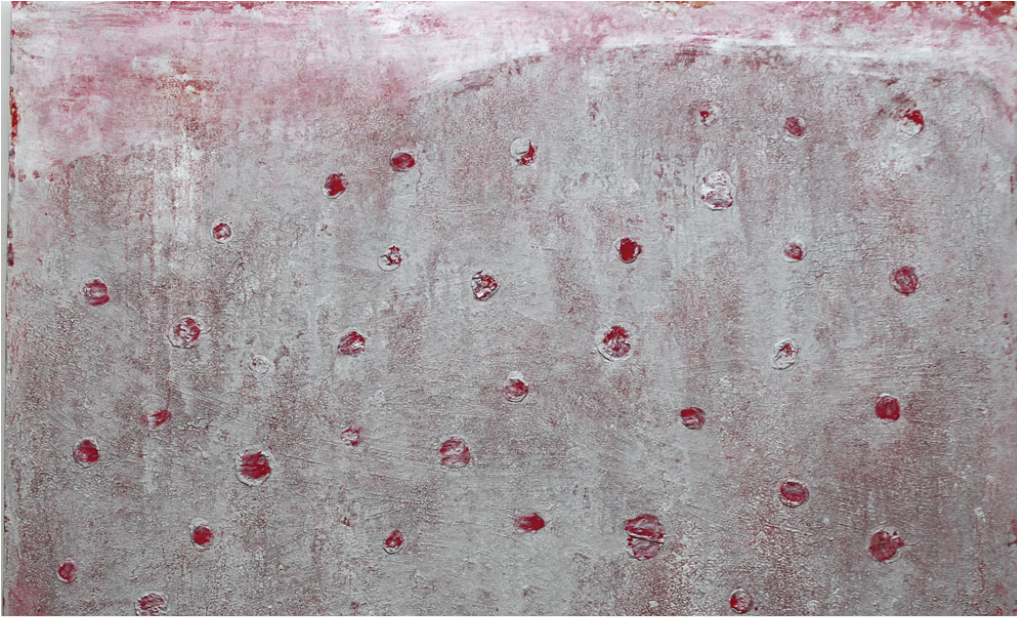
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about me and pushed me to get my first exhibition in Baghdad. In an article about Iraq's young artists he featured me, saying 'I'm sure this artist will never stop painting' – and he was right!"



Landscape 5, 2015, Mixed media on canvas

Education: Himat did not study art in any formal setting; save for a handful of short technical courses in Paris and learning through the support of other artists.

First exhibition: In 1982 in Kirkuk, under the title *Ard wal Insan (Earth and the People)*. "This marked the beginning of a theme for me, and little by little the human disappeared from my work and the earth took over."

First painting sold: "I was really surprised and happy but also sad. It was a young Spanish couple who came to an exhibition in Iraq and bought a couple of pieces. I was pleased that they had bought my work, but I was disappointed because it made me feel as if people in Iraq didn't understand

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what I was doing.”

Influences: Himat does not take inspiration for his art from the work of others. “I like the work of others, like Shaker Hassan; I like the paintings but I am not near to them because they don’t reflect my reality. I can’t do something like other people. But all the same, it is important to respect the ideas of others.” Instead, his inspiration tends to come subconsciously; “Sometimes we see things and we emulate them without knowing.”

Latest exhibition: Himat’s solo show, *Japanese Flowers in Kirkuk*, ran at Nabad Art Gallery in Jabal Amman from September 7 to October 7.

Japan: Himat has spent around two highly-influential years in Japan and is part of a collective studio there, which he tries to visit each spring. “The first time I went to Japan from Iraq everything seemed different – the people, things and places were all new to me. I made a lot of friends, including the poet Gotaro Tsunozumi. We decided to collaborate, and I was deeply influenced by his poems – they made me see flowers in a whole new way, and little by little this project became my style. I wasn’t surprised because flowers are part of nature, the same thing I had been working on and the same thing I am still working on today.”



Camellia 4, 2015, Digital print on Japanese paper

Working in exile: Himat is often described as an artist in exile, and

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longing for home is an on-going theme in his work. "I live in four different countries but sometimes I feel like I don't have my own country. It's sad but also encouraging because in this way you can go away and reflect. You're always yearning for somewhere else; all the time I'm still thinking about Kirkuk. Maybe that's why I must travel so much, because even if I return to Kirkuk then it will not be the same as in my memories, everything is always changing. Everybody experiences this to some degree. In the words of the Spanish painter Eduardo Chillida, 'Our roots are buried in one place but our arms reach out to the entire world.'"

Materials: The only material that Himat carries around the world with him is the Japanese paper that has become his signature. All other supplies he finds locally wherever he is, resulting in subtle variations according to availability. "What matters is the final product. Some people work with gold but they produce nothing extraordinary, while others work with next to nothing and their work is incredible. If you have an idea but nothing to do it with, you'll find a way, but if you have all the supplies and no vision you will not," he opines.



Camellia 3, 2015, Digital print on Japanese paper

On gratitude: "It seems like everything I have told you is sad but really I'm

happy; I know that I'm very lucky. I have three studios, and in Paris I work in the shadow of so many great artists; I am just one of many! So I'm lucky, and I appreciate all that I have. I don't want a lot in life, just to be able to live, to make art and to help people if I can. That's just as important to me as art."

Importance of art: "Art of every kind is important, because the more you experience the more you appreciate it. The problem in many places is that there is a lack of education, so people are not exposed to art, and so they are not so creative. We need more awareness and creativity, but we won't achieve this by force! It's all connected, art and society. If one aspect goes wrong then this will affect everything else; you can't just change one aspect without looking at the whole picture."

Advice to young artists: "Work hard and be true to yourself. Go and look at other artists' work, appreciate it but don't copy it. Once a man went to a famous Sufi and said 'I'd like to write poetry like you – what should I do?' The Sufi told him 'Take these 10 books and memorise them.' So the man took several years learning them by heart and went back to the Sufi, saying 'Finally, I know them all.' The Sufi replied, 'Very good, this is the first step. Second step: forget them all, then you can write.' So you have to see what came before, but then forget it so that you can be yourself."

