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LUNDI 23 JUILLET 2007

## The Art of Kareem Risan and the Uranium Civilization



Occupied Baghdad - Kareem Risan

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"Uranium Civilization" Kareem Risan

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The Art of Kareem Risan and the Uranium Civilization

Maymanah Farhat , Electronic Iraq

Jul 23, 2007

Characterized by two coinciding histories since its first cities were founded six thousand years ago, Iraq has experienced both the pinnacles of world civilization and large scale destruction at different times in its history. Subjected to unyielding violence and ruin, Iraq currently has the world's attention. Yet its rich cultural narrative continues in the work of its artists.

Conscious of their complex history, contemporary Iraqi artists employ a diverse visual culture that utilizes and projects its multiple identities. Having lived through various periods of Iraq's modern history, the art of Kareem Risan reflects a multidimensional cultural heritage that has survived decades-long devastation.

Born in 1960 in Baghdad, like countless Iraqi artists of his generation, Risan's work is visibly rooted in what seminal Palestinian writer and artist Jabra Ibrahim Jabra described as "an indigenous quality...achieved when they [Iraqi artists] have struck roots in their own soil and delved into the historical layers of a vast uneven heritage,

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the accumulation of forty centuries or so." 1 The fundamental nature and creative force that has propelled the evolution of Iraqi art is what curator Ulrike al-Khamis has described as "Its conscious and committed attempt to create a synthesis between historical Iraqi art forms and modernism." 2 Concurrently, modern and contemporary Iraqi art has remained impacted by that endured by its people. Whereas the function of art and its role in a given society continues to be disputed, for nearly a century art has negotiated every defining juncture of Iraqi society for the majority of its artists--whether political, historical or cultural.

This element is ubiquitous in Risan's paintings, books and objects. Drawing from a vast history of modern painting in the Arab world, one which incorporates both regional and international aesthetics, his work is often a testimony of a dramatically shifting environment. Early on in his artistic development, painting became a response to turbulent surroundings. After graduating from Baghdad's Academy of Fine Arts in 1988, Risan served in the Iraqi military, an experience he subsequently explored in a series of drawings. Despite the increasingly tragic fate that befell his homeland and the difficult living conditions that resulted, Risan continued to live and work in Iraq until 2005; he was forced to leave when the violence following the 2003 American-led invasion escalated to such heights that his life was threatened.

Consequently, much of his recent work was created while living in exile in Jordan and Syria, an experience that separated Risan from his native country only in physical proximity, as his work remains absorbed in its past, present and future. Thus we find reflections of Iraq's changing political landscape in his work, while the cultural and social ramifications of living under repression, wars, sanctions and occupation are articulated in composition, palette and title.

Two compelling examples are the commanding mixed media handmade books *Uranium Civilization* (2001) and *Occupied Baghdad* (2004). Several of Risan's books recently appeared in the British Museum's groundbreaking 2006 exhibition "Word into Art" and "Dafatir," a touring exhibition of contemporary Iraqi book art that originated at the University of North Texas in 2005.

Comprised of several double page spreads, the artist's accordion books are part of a recent resurgence in Arab art that pursues a cultural

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legacy derived from a reverence for literature, calligraphy and text--one that has transformed and traversed visual culture in the region for centuries. In Uranium Civilization, the artist employs text and painted imagery to create powerful expressions reflecting the lingering turmoil plaguing his homeland, while simultaneously calling attention to the fact that the destruction of Iraq began long before the recent invasion. Rendered in dark unsullied colors, the painted series speaks of the nightmarish effects caused by depleted uranium used during the Gulf Wars by American and British forces. On one page of the artist's book, aggressive crimson red brushstrokes seep through a tar-like black formation evoking an oil spill, while elsewhere Arabic writing insinuates a human form and tallied marks suggest a body count. 3 In another section, a black form placed in the center of two pages is punctured by separate foreign bodies. Gaping holes marked by thick red brushstrokes are reminiscent of blood stains, as the black form is caught moments before its inevitable destruction. Caught in motion, the destruction appears slow, as the cancer-like orange and purple forms rip apart the central body.

In 1994, in her critically acclaimed collection of diary entries "Baghdad Diaries," **Iraqi artist Nuha al-Radi** wrote: "The depleted uranium left by the U.S. bombing campaign has turned Iraq into a cancer-infested country. For hundreds of years to come, the effects of the uranium will continue to wreak havoc on Iraq and its surrounding areas." 4 In 2004, al-Radi died of leukemia, a fact that points to the tragic state with which Iraqi artists are faced and thus respond to with profound urgency, as seen in Risan's Uranium Civilization.

Dominated by a vibrant and warm palette consisting of mostly red, black and brown hues, Occupied Baghdad employs Risan's distinct abstract color-saturated compositions. Dramatic lines fragment spaces, rendering multiple planes in which inundated colors merge as colliding forces. The precision of these thin lines, as they cut through, interrupt and dictate the nature of the composition, resemble military barricades, checkpoints--even the foreboding of the "security" barriers now dividing the city.

**Various nuclei formations of color lie surrounded or marked by dark blotches and holes where the white, grainy nature of the paper from which the book is constructed is revealed. This serves as a haunting reminder of the extent to which the peril effects of the American occupation of Iraq have**

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## permeated and destroyed every aspect of daily life in the war torn country.

Evident departures from earlier works in which compositions were executed in earth tone palettes that evoked Iraq's celebrated sun-drenched terrain, Uranium Civilization and Occupied Baghdad speak of an artist's response to an unfathomable reality, while simultaneously demonstrating that just as one's home becomes unrecognizable amidst mass destruction, creative expression responds.

Maymanah Farhat is a freelance writer and researcher of visual arts and culture, and is a specialist in Modern and Contemporary Arab art. Copyright Maymanah Farhat, 2007.

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