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# Interview With Hanaa Malallah: Iraq's Pioneering Female Artist





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Hanaa Malallah, a female artist from Iraq whose philosophical artworks have guaranteed her a place in the international art market, works with a unique, abstract technique in which her medium follows her concept. We spoke with the artist about her place in the physical and artistic world, the significance – and inaccuracy – of labels attached to Iraqi artists, and Hanaa Malallah's own identity, which goes beyond the descriptors of 'woman,' 'Iraqi,' and 'artist.'





Hanaa Malallah, Vivid Ruin On I Image courtesy of The Park Gallery and the artist

**Do you feel (if this is possible)  
that your work would have been  
different if you'd stayed in Iraq?**



Undoubtedly. In Iraq, I operated within the cultural circle of one country, whereas upon arrival in Europe I have been able to experience the artworks of internationally recognized artists firsthand. The fact that I live and work in London means that I am not only aware of my broadened cultural surroundings, but also that my art will be considered in an international context and these factors are reflected in my artistic practice. Leaving Iraq and settling in London has affected my artwork in every aspect, both in my materials and my concept, but I view this positively. I don't struggle outside of my country of birth, but rather flourish in exile.

**When many of your peers were, or are working with traditional materials, even today, was there ever a point when you questioned your abstract technique?**

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What are traditional materials? I believe there is traditional style, rather than traditional material. Some artists work with so-called traditional materials, such as oils, and achieve very contemporary outcomes with their artwork. For me, the material is not as important as the concept. My material follows my concept and not the other way round. My work is philosophical and conceptual, and I utilize my materials to express these ideas.

**Tell us more about the numbers that make up your artistic signature. How did it come about and why?**

It is simple; the numbers in my signature refer to each letter of the Arabic alphabet. I started to work with numbers instead of letters after doing my PHD in the Philosophy of Painting with my thesis titled *Logic Order in Ancient Mesopotamian Painting* at the University of Baghdad. My thesis dealt principally with how one can express clearly a concept with just numbers. These ideas stemmed at first from my

weekly meetings with Shaker Hassan al Said, where we would discuss, amongst other topics, the magic square.

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**Can you give a brief overview of how this has influenced your artistic practice?**

My thesis focused on a time before the alphabet we know today existed. The Ancient Mesopotamians wrote with shapes, which I learnt to read. As a consequence, I can understand the intricacies of a written language without letters. This has caused me to

become much more sensitive to every line and every drop of paint in my work.







Hanaa Malallah, Barzakh Obstacle | Image courtesy of The Park Gallery and the artist

**How do you feel your artwork fits into the international art market?  
A three-fold question really: as a woman, an Arab and an abstract artist.**

I never think about the market when I

create an artwork – I think of my art solely as a practice. I consider myself outside the restrictive connotations of labels, such as a ‘woman’ and ‘Arab’ artist. I am not an abstract artist; I am in the liminal space between the figurative and the abstract.

**You have exhibited your work internationally since 1991. Would it be possible to choose any highlights in your career?**

In 1991 I had yet to exhibit my work internationally and, from 1991 to 2000, there was a US sanction on the movement of artworks. Outside of Iraq, the only place I was able to exhibit my work was Jordan (Amman) during that time. In 2000 I exhibited at the Institut du Monde Arabe in Paris and that was a great opportunity for me. After 2000 I exhibited in New York and Texas, and these opportunities to exhibit internationally greatly affected my career. Before this point, there were no opportunities for Iraqi artists.

**Being regarded as one of Iraq’s leading contemporary female artists is a major title to hold; do these words mean anything to**

## **you? Any pressure?**

I don't like to use the terms 'male' or 'female' artist. I think of art without gender, or nationality or identity. Provided their artworks function well technically and conceptually, then why shouldn't Middle Eastern artists be considered in the same category as Western artists. I don't care about titles like "leading female." When I work in my studio I forget my gender. I consider labels like that restricting, and I don't want any limits or boundaries to what I can do.

## **Your material-focused production is named the Ruins Technique. Is this in reference to ancient Iraq or contemporary Iraq? Or both?**

I developed the Ruins Technique because I was in Iraq, not because I am Iraqi. I am influenced by the place and not by my identity. This technique refers both to ancient and contemporary Iraq. On the one hand, it relates to the damage that objects undergo when they are destroyed – something that I am familiar with, having seen destruction of buildings, objects and relics up close. On the other hand, the Ruins Technique

allows me a unique way to express my sensitive reading of shape and colour which I gained from my studies and writings on Ancient Mesopotamia, a topic that was central to my PhD thesis. With this method I am not creating an image of ruins, but I am re-creating the process by which a material becomes a ruin.

**You lived in other parts of Europe but have settled in London; is there any particular reason? Do you feel that London has hindered or encouraged your artistic development?**

London is a special city, and for that reason it is like Baghdad to me. I could have stayed in Paris when I arrived there in 2006, but I chose to come and settle in London. My artwork has developed greatly here. Some people say I am in exile in London but I am not – I have flourished here. Maybe this is because it is a global city and maybe because it is the centre of the art world. I feel it is a great opportunity to be here and this motivates me.

**It can be argued that you have emerged twice in the art world; the first time during the Gulf War**

**in Iraq, and the second in the UK during the American invasion. Do you agree with this statement? Do you see it as a complex link of artist-war-market or just natural progression?**

I would say that there are three major points in my career that affected my practice. The first was in 1991 when the Gulf War commenced. The second was the 2003 invasion of Iraq – I used to continue working, even without materials. I had to learn to work with cheap materials and everyday items, and without colours or paints. We were isolated as artists due to our inability to travel freely and to move artworks out of the country. I view this period positively and negatively in terms of its effect on my work as an artist. The third ‘emergence’, so to speak, in my career was in 2007 when I arrived in London having left Baghdad a few months prior. In London I am able to see original artworks by artists of all nationalities, as this city is filled with museums and galleries. It is like starving someone then giving them lots of food! For me, this worked positively. Over the last few years I feel I have found my feet here and refined my technique.



**Many terms have been used to describe you, namely that you are from the '80s generation,' or the 'generation of war.' Do you feel that your position as an artist can be relegated into these terms?**

HM: The 80s generation for me refers to the artists trapped in Iraq between three wars. Those who left in the 1970s cannot be considered in the same way. The '80s generation' couldn't travel for 30 years and wasn't able to seek education outside Iraq. We had to find our education from our teachers in Iraq. I am in a completely different situation now, as I live in London and I view the occurrences in Iraq externally.

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