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LONGING TO RETURN

BY **NEWSWEEK STAFF** ON 10/20/02 AT 8:00 PM

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Up the dank stairs of a London public-housing block, past the signs warning against littering and drugs, artist Faisal Laibi Sahi has cultivated a little corner of Baghdad. Inside his tiny apartment, bold cobalt and russet oil paintings of Iraqi street life blot out London's gray skies: Baghdad bazaars, an Abbassid mosque, a coffeehouse where a mullah, a decorated soldier and a wealthy merchant sip tea, staring down the viewer with surly hauteur. "Baghdad, Baghdad, Baghdad," says Sahi, shaking his shoulder-length gray curls. "Wherever I go, I take it with me."

Similar shards of Iraq can be found across the world, on the walls of distant galleries and cluttered studios, tucked inside computer hard drives and specialist journals. Under Saddam Hussein's 23-year regime, much of Iraq's large and energetic artistic community has scattered, continuing its work in temporary refuges from Stockholm to Chicago. Many of these exiled writers and artists haven't seen their country since the late 1970s, when the Baathist regime's campaign against communists forced intellectuals--most of them leftists--to flee. More than two decades on, an Iraqi sensibility flourishes in plenty of unlikely places. "There's no European capital without its band of Iraqi artists," says Samuel Shimon, assistant editor of the Arab literary journal Banipal. Iraqi exiles in Sweden recently arranged for Iraq's most celebrated poet, Saadi Youssef, to tour the country. And this week the San Francisco-based poet Sargon Boulus will give readings to Iraqis in the Netherlands and Belgium.

Now, with a potential war between America and Iraq looming large, their homeland is on their minds more than ever. Though the exiled artists are united in hoping for an end to Saddam's reign, they disagree about how best to achieve it. Sahi, for one, hopes diplomacy will triumph, and that "the American administration will use its wisdom, and push by peaceful ways." Others, like Shimon, compare reasoning with Saddam to appeasing Hitler, and believe force is the only solution. What they all share is the dream--which for so many years seemed impossible--of bringing their art home.

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Their works, vivid and unsparing, express both longing and fear. Iraqi exile literature is rife with autobiographies of childhoods in pre-Saddam Iraq. In "The Long Way Back," Tunis-based novelist Fuad al-Takarli meticulously evokes the scents of Iraqi soap, orange blossoms beside the river Diyala, a janitor's cheap meatball sandwich. In his autobiography, poet Abdul Kader El Janabi, now living in Paris, recalls an evening "as lovely as a watermelon" at Baghdad's Institut Francais: "I was seated next to a young Jewish girl who talked to me in a chanting voice, while the teacher carefully inscribed the word 'je' on the blackboard with pink chalk."

Other forms of exile art are not so coated in nostalgia. Many visual works in particular are haunted by Saddam and the effects of the U.S. sanctions. Sahi's paintings explore power relations. In one, a man in flowing robes and turban fingers a hookah, a naked woman curled submissively behind him. In another, a group of veiled women burying a body stare straight from the canvas. Behind them is a frieze of an Assyrian ruler, evoking the specter of raw political power. Both painters and writers explore their ambivalent feelings about America through their work. In "America, America," Youssef, who currently lives in London, writes:

The overwhelming sense of such artists as Iraqi--rather than simply Arab--reflects their country's hardy esthetic tradition. Iraqis are quick to note that writing first began on clay tablets in Mesopotamia, site of modern Iraq. When the League of Iraqi Writers started in exile in Beirut after the late-'70s Baathist purges, it had 500 founding members. Even Saddam Hussein's fiercest critics acknowledge that his party promoted the arts, encouraging Iraqi Shiites to make art instead of revolution, and waging a successful literacy campaign. "Egyptians write, Lebanese publish and Iraqis read," goes a popular Arab saying.

To be sure, the art scene inside Iraq is far from dead. Artists continue to paint and write despite censorship and sanctions, which ban materials like paints. And Saddam's regime, conscious of the power of art in Iraqi society, pays salaries to some artists. Fear makes for weird art: one Baghdad painter opened his veins to produce a portrait of the dictator with his own blood. One of Saddam's official poets is famous for using the 99 names for Allah in his poetry praising the Iraqi leader.

Not all art made inside Iraq is part of Saddam's self-glorification machine. "The real literature is underground," says Fadhel Sultani, a translator and cultural editor of the London-based newspaper Asharq Al-Awsat. Writers who remain in the country keep any politically sensitive work in drawers or on hard drives, then try to smuggle out photocopies through friends. If they want to publish, they stick to safe subjects like love, Sufism or ancient Meso-potamian glories. Painters inside continue to paint, show and even sell in Iraqi galleries, says Maysaloun Faraj, a London-based artist and curator. "People need money," she says. "Because of the terrible circumstances, now is bargain time."

A huge rift has opened between artists living in Iraq and those who have fled. Those who have left, the suggestion is, have forsaken their Iraqi-ness, while those who have stayed have compromised their artistic freedom. Faraj recently tried to unite the two with an exhibit titled "Strokes of Genius: Contemporary Iraqi Art," featuring works by Iraqi painters and sculptors from both inside and outside the country. The exhibit, which has been touring since it opened in London two years ago, is scheduled to open in Chicago this autumn. "It was my ambition to bring together all these scattered energies," she says. But nothing will unify them better than a new regime.

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