

These Artists Refuse to Forget the Wars in Iraq

By [Jason Farago](#) and [Tim Arango](#) Nov. 14, 2019

A powerful new show at MoMA PS1, featuring artists from the U.S. and the Persian Gulf, revisits two conflicts most Americans have tuned out.



Hanaa Malallah's series of portraits, "She/He Has No Picture," at MoMA PS1, are made from collaged pieces of burnt canvas. They commemorate the 400 civilian victims of the U.S. Air Force bombing of the al-Amiriyah shelter. "Iraqi artists confront Americans with Iraqi pain," says Tim Arango. Walter Włodarczyk

Over the last month, Iraqis fed up with corruption and unemployment have staged the country's [largest protests since the fall of Saddam Hussein](#) in 2003. Hundreds of them have died at the hands of national security forces. The Iraq conflict is still going on — and yet the country has largely disappeared from America's news broadcasts, social media streams and campaign trails.

[“Theater of Operations: The Gulf Wars 1991-2011,”](#) a major exhibition that fills MoMA PS1, returns American audiences to a place some would rather ignore. It offers an unprecedented encounter between Western artists (among them Jenny Holzer, Luc Tuymans and Richard Serra) and more than 30 artists from Iraq, Kuwait and their diasporas. Together, their works narrate the entanglement of the United States and Iraq over two ruinous decades of violence, sanctions and insurgency. The result is a powerful view of the cultural impact of the Persian Gulf and Iraq wars with which American art institutions too rarely engage.

Jason Farago, a New York Times art critic, and Tim Arango, The Times’s bureau chief in Baghdad from 2010 to 2017, saw “Theater of Operations” together — and afterward they discussed Mr. Arango’s memories of war and the ethics and aesthetics of art from Iraq.

JASON FARAGO The show begins in 1991, when George H.W. Bush ordered the U.S. military to storm Iraqi-invaded Kuwait. One of the first things you see are small, gnarly paintings of ghosts and martyrs by a Kuwaiti artist, [Khalifa Qattan](#); and a video by the French artist [Michel Auder](#) that shows pounding footage of CNN and other vintage news broadcasts, projected at full scale, high volume. The war looms large in the cultural field, because of its reputation as the first “media war.”



Installation view of Michel Auder's video of television footage from the war zone, "Gulf War TV War" (1991, edited 2017).Matthew Septimus



Detail of "Gulf War TV War."Walter Wlodarczyk

TIM ARANGO I was in high school in 1991. When I think back, I still have that image of a sanitized, sterile, high-tech war without a lot of casualties. Very easy, very quick.

There's a giant fake gold necklace in the lobby here, by the Swiss artist [Thomas Hirschhorn](#), that really grabbed me. It treats the CNN logo like a gangsta rapper's chain. And to me it speaks to a certain brashness, a sense of self-importance, of CNN at the time.

FARAGO The gulf war made CNN. This was the real birth of the 24-hour news.

ARANGO Right — television in Vietnam was very, very different. In the earliest days of the Vietnam War, reporters could really go anywhere, whereas the media in the gulf war sort of presented what the government wanted. Those strict embed rules continued after the invasion of 2003.

FARAGO This show's catalog reproduces a famous essay by [Jean Baudrillard](#) from 1991, called "The Gulf War Did Not Take Place," which pushes to the extreme the idea that TV images subsumed the real losses on the ground. All you have to do here is look at the art of someone like Nuha al-Radi, a ceramist who lived through the war making assemblages from debris, to see how provincial Baudrillard's analysis was.

ARANGO When I spoke to Iraqis and asked them what was the worst part of their recent history, many would say the sanctions period in the 1990s. It hollowed out society. And the memory of that period had a huge impact on the American occupation after 2003 — when we thought Iraqis would greet us as liberators. And I think they did, briefly, but the combination of American ineptitude and the ghosts of the past quickly subsumed any good will.



Above, Layla Al-Attar, an Iraqi artist killed in a U.S. air strike, with her "Unfinished painting" from 1993. Below, portable books of wood and canvas by Mohammed Al Shammarey, an Iraqi-American artist. They include "My Trip from Basra" (2003), based on his journey from Basra to Baghdad after the Gulf War in 1991, when he was leaving the Army; below, "Desert Storm," (2002). Matthew Septimus

FARAGO The sanctions period explains, to some degree, why so many of the Iraqi artists in this show are exiles. Before the 20th century, Baghdad was a cultural capital of the Arab world. But the period this show looks at, many of the Iraqis are working from London, New York, Toronto.

For artists still in Iraq under the sanctions regime, even lead pencils could be contraband. This show includes a lot of *dafatir*, or hand-painted notebooks, which were an especially resonant medium for artists in Iraq without access to materials and information.

ARANGO The notebooks of [Kareem Risan](#) really brought me back to Iraq. There are several of these books in the show, and one of them has these dripping, blood-red handprints, and to me those represented the blood of all Iraqis. It's much more direct than what American artists were making.

FARAGO Another central theme of this exhibition is the role of digital imagery in the Persian Gulf war. It still took place in the age of mass media — a “CNN war.” When [Tarek al-Ghoussein](#), a Kuwaiti-Palestinian artist, documented TV footage of the '91 war, he did it with Polaroids.

But by 2003, we have the first low-res digital cameras. The American artist Sean Snyder, at the beginning of the Iraq war, [downloaded images that U.S. soldiers had posted](#) to an early photo-sharing website —

ARANGO Which are very vanilla, very anodyne. But technology had changed, allowing the soldiers to become photographers themselves, capturing their ordinary moments. War is like that: Most of it is banal, and then it's punctuated by these extremely tense moments.

Snyder's photos made me think of this time in 2014, when American troops came back after the rise of ISIS, when I visited a base that the Americans had left. It was like a time capsule: the soldiers' living quarters, the calendar on the wall from 2011, the Maxim centerfold.

FARAGO If we're talking about soldiers taking digital photographs, there's no more difficult gallery in this show than the one devoted to [Abu Ghraib](#). It includes Iraqis like Risan and Western artists like [Serra](#), who in 2004 made a grease-pencil drawing of the notorious hooded detainee; and, unexpectedly, Fernando Botero — who painted a scene of prisoner torture in his usual fat-boy style. Abu Ghraib is the turning point of the show, both politically and visually.

ARANGO I went back to Abu Ghraib many times, not the prison, but the town, which is very close to Baghdad. Long after these atrocities, it was a persistent source of grievance. Iraqis never forgot that humiliation. But there was always an ambivalence — Iraqis were caught between the American occupation, with all its horrors, and the corruption of their own rulers. [I remember going to Abu Ghraib in 2011](#), just as the Americans were leaving, and there were some Iraqis worried about what their country

would become without the Americans there.

What hit me hardest was the video by [Tony Cokes](#), “Evil.16 (Torture.Musik).” He projects very direct, bureaucratic texts about the torture of Iraqis with this soundtrack of heavy metal, Britney Spears — which was used at Abu Ghraib as a torture technique. I wasn’t fully aware of the role music played in torture.

FARAGO The Cokes video is one of the most powerful pieces in the show. It gets to this enduring question: What are the ethics of representing extreme violence? For Cokes, projecting only text and refusing to show the torture images is primordial. [Tuymans paints Condoleezza Rice](#) biting her lip: an intentionally vacant, blank image that stands for all the horrors not painted.

But then you have Hirschhorn, who shows us wrenching images of destroyed bodies, even children’s bodies. It’s extremely hard to look — and the art abides in the ease with which we turn away.

ARANGO There’s intentionally no context, and I think that’s powerful: Were they killed from an American missile? A suicide bomber? Something else? It didn’t actually matter, and these photos let the viewer just sit with the face of death.

I thought a lot about this tension between art with a more traditional aim of self-expression versus works that feel very documentary. There are photographs from the early ‘90s of mass graves in [Kurdistan by Susan Meiselas](#) that look like evidence.

FARAGO For the Iraqi artists, all this fretting about the right or wrong way to show violence is academic. Next to the Hirschhorn slide show are drawings by an artist that you know, Tim.

ARANGO [Ghaith Abdul-Ahad, who did the pen drawings](#): a street filled

with rubble, or a bound prisoner. Around 2003, he started as a stringer-fixer for The Times, but very quickly became a major journalistic talent in his own right at The Guardian. I remember seeing him after the Mosul campaign in 2017, and he had a book full of drawings. It was quite special to see them here in New York.

FARAGO The Iraq war also coincides with an unprecedented boom in the art market, which was particularly visible in other parts of the Middle East. Iraq was completely left out of this — and of course the war saw rampant looting of the country's museums, and destruction of its antiquities.

Peter Eleey and Ruba Katrib, the curators of this show, have been shrewd in letting this less familiar Iraqi art, such as the illustrated books, sit awkwardly amid so-called "contemporary art." The Iraqi art doesn't fit as easily as art from Dubai or Abu Dhabi, and that's the point: Artists inside Iraq cannot participate in the global "contemporary art" game.

ARANGO Did you see anything beautiful, in a traditional sense?

FARAGO It has moments of visual refinement, such as the mural of the occupation by [Dia al-Azzawi](#), an Iraqi artist, who channels Picasso as well as Arab calligraphy motifs and Iraqi abstraction.

ARANGO There's a room of open books by Rachel Khedoori, printed with page after page of news, that appears pristine in the gallery — though it made me think of the destroyed book market in Baghdad, [on al-Mutanabbi Street](#). It had been bombed several times, but it always came back. The streets were just haphazard, but in a lovely way, covered with worn books.

FARAGO As Baghdad bureau chief in the period after this show ends, you [covered the rise of ISIS](#) — who, for all their brutality, had a highly sophisticated understanding of how digital images circulate. And yet a lot of Americans stopped paying attention to Iraq in this decade.

ARANGO I don't know if people are going to want to come to see this show. But if they do, I wonder if they will think about their own responsibility for what happened. Because as an American seeing this show I was constantly thinking: *What would contemporary Iraqi art look like today if it weren't for America's wars?*

FARAGO One group that cannot come to PS1, even if they want to, are several of the Iraqi artists themselves. There's a young artist from Baghdad named [Ali Eyal](#), who has one of the tenderest works in this show: pillowcases that he embroidered with records of the dreams and nightmares his family has while sleeping. He lives between Baghdad and Beirut. While some artists who wanted to come to the opening of the show in New York had their visa applications denied, Mr. Eyal did not try to apply. He knew his application would be rejected.

ARANGO He and the other Iraqi artists confront Americans with Iraqi pain, and our complicity. For me the art that did this most powerfully was by Hanaa Malallah: "She/He Has No Picture" (2019). It's a series of portraits that commemorates the victims of [the Amiriyah shelter](#), which the U.S. bombed during the gulf war [in 1991] — it had the highest number of civilian deaths of either war, more than 400 dead.

FARAGO She made dozens of portraits of these fatalities, including children. They smile, or just sit calmly, and the pictures have these burned, crackled edges, like they're fading away with time. There is no beauty in "Theater of Operations," but this was the closest I felt to something like grace.

ARANGO [I went to al-Amiriyah in 2016](#), and saw the photographs that this artist was drawing from. Fraying, gray images of children who had died there. It brought me back to that place, and to the layers and layers of trauma — from the Iran-Iraq war to '91 to sanctions to 2003 to ISIS.

You can drive around Baghdad and see a destroyed building, and wonder

what happened: Was it from the gulf war, the 2003 invasion, the insurgency that came after? This show conveys that same layered feeling: one trauma after another.

Theater of Operations: The Gulf Wars 1991-2011

Through March 1 at MoMA PS1, 22-25 Jackson Avenue, Long Island City, Queens; 718-784-2084, moma.org/ps1.

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