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Sadik Kwaish Alfraji, *Nightmares of the Reeds*, 2019, oil and ink on paper, 118 x 110".  
DUBAI

## Sadik Kwaish Alfraji

AYYAM GALLERY | DUBAI (AL QUOZ)  
Street 8, Al Quoz 1 Unit B11, Alserkal Avenue  
March 12–April 25, 2019

In Iraqi artist Sadik Kwaish Alfraji's five-minute animation *The River That Was in the South* (all works cited, 2019), things melt into each other with great speed. In one sequence, large-petaled flowers turn into smiling faces, which darken to become sleepy, blinking eyelids. Plucking a single moment from the film is like trying to hold on to running water. Nothing can be separated from what precedes or follows it. Alfraji's understanding of time is liquid; what has happened in the past continues to bleed into the present. His preferred media—jet-black illustrations and stop-motion shorts made with charcoal, oil, and india ink—suit this well.

Here, Alfraji visits the history of the Mesopotamian marshes of southern Iraq. The marshlands' architecture is very particular: Houses called "*mudhifs*" are built on beds of woven reeds. In "Nightmares of the Reeds," a series of drawings collapse and fall into each other in a thick tangle of spectral faces and figures. In 1992, Saddam Hussein, in an effort to punish those involved in the Shia Arab uprisings, diverted the Tigris and Euphrates rivers away from the marshes, drying out over 7,700 square miles of the wetlands. Alfraji's grandfather

was a Marsh Arab, but they never met. In the series “Imagined Features of My Grandfather’s Face Which I Have Never Seen,” the artist obsessively maps possible iterations of his forefather’s visage. Alfraji lived through the Iran-Iraq War in the ’80s, moving later to the Netherlands as a political refugee. An existential quality burns through the show: Alfraji collects what has been forgotten or lost in order to remake what continues to survive.

— *Skye Arundhati Thomas*

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