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Being Sadik: Home, Existence, and Figures in the Shadows

Sadik Kwaish Al Fraiji in conversation with Fawz Kabra

Fawz Kabra: How do you describe your work and practice at large?

Sadik Kwaish Al Fraiji: I follow a passion that is hard to describe. Perhaps it is a blend of nostalgia, anxiety, fear of annihilation, and the heart's surrender to the unknown – something I think we always anticipate. I do not seek beauty in my art work. It is not a practice that I use to fill a void or use for pleasure. In the end, my mission is to try and make peace with my existence in this world and make living in it possible.

FK: Your work tells many stories. I am wondering if these stories are borrowed from life experiences but also very curious to know if any particular literature inspires these stories.

SKF: My work stems from multiple sources, the stories you find in my works could be inspired by a book or stories that I have heard of. However, most of the time they come from my own experience or the experiences of the people around me. It may so happen that our circumstances overlap, or we run into each other. These stories can be texts that I write myself that are sometimes influenced by the writings of different authors who are mostly poets, novelists, philosophers or Sufis such as in, *Biography of a Head* or *Godot to Come Yesterday*, or derived from mythological texts such as in, *Enuma Elish*.

In the end, our existence is a fabric made up of countless stories, which weave in our dreams, fears, love, heartbeats, and all the little details that make up our daily existence. These stories are in fact a massive repertoire of concepts, questions, exploration and artwork at the same time.

FK: Can you tell me about waiting and expectations as inherently human characteristics?

SKF: Both our life and consciousness are built upon the concept of waiting, which implies some sort of anticipation, which, in turn, cannot be without imagination. We find ourselves endlessly spinning within this triad: waiting, anticipation and imagination. I

don't think we can even conceive of our existence without the wait or imagination that carries with it the image of an anticipated thing.

As far as I am concerned, waiting and anticipation take an existential shape that brings with it questions of identity, meaning and the fragility of our existence, one that is engulfed by nothingness on all sides. For me, waiting takes the shape of a question; of anticipation, bewilderment, and stupor. It is like gazing at a vacuum, trying to catch the impossible. In one way or another, my artworks revolve around this concept, as you might see in *Godot to Come Yesterday*, particularly in that look that is filled with bafflement and awe when peering towards empty space. This is a recurring theme in most of my works.

FK: Can you tell me about your family's background and the journey that life has taken you on?

SKF: I grew up in a poor family. We lived in a neglected, densely populated area called Al Thawra City just outside of Baghdad. My family was a mixture of simplicity, frugality, love and sadness. You could see this sadness in the singing heard around the house, the folkloric poems my father used to recite, sickness and the death of relatives, weddings and funerals, and especially accented in Ashura seasons with all the eulogies and lamentation through which everything turned into a reason for weeping. Yet, that sadness was full of colours, shapes, and tales that provoked both imagination and passion.

That house and that city, where days carried along endless stories and events, sowed the seeds of my consciousness, which also blossomed in all my works from the very beginning.

FK: The figures in your work are silhouettes with life-like hands or eyes. Can you explain this choice of representation?

SKF: The hands and the eyes are the human sensory organs that are most in touch with the world. They are the most influential agents of our cognitive formation, and by emphasising them I try to reaffirm my existence. Furthermore, underlining the realistic shape of the eyes and hands while blurring all the other features, or even concealing them inside the blackness, is an attempt to highlight the contradiction that surrounds our relationship with the world.

I cannot say that the hands and eyes are a permanent feature. But they have been appearing more so in my recent works. This feature might well phase out or even develop into something completely different.

FK: Can you describe your process as you make your work?

SKF: I am initially prompted by an emotional tension and from there my work develops into a concept that consists of different elements that materialise as multimedia works or coal, ink, and paper.

I cannot set boundaries as to which work morphs into a multimedia project and which remains as mere emotions on paper. I can say, though, that if there are certain cases connected to ideas or concepts, this is then enough for me to express them in terms of a painting or a drawing. I can see my feelings developing into a stream of thoughts that form the basis of an art project. This is exactly what happened with *The House That My Father Built*. This work was the outcome of a profoundly deep emotional moment that had lived inside me for an entire year before I was able to bring it out in the shape of a complex work with multiple elements.

FK: Can you tell me about scale? The figure such as the one in *The House That My Father Built* from 2010 is enormous as it looks down on its viewer side-by-side to the clothing that hangs from the wall amongst small black and white portraits of a man and woman. I am curious about this use of scale.

SKF: Regardless of size or content, all stories seem small, fragile, and intangible when seen through our memory – as if the wind carries them away among countless other stories. When we remember something, we see it through this memory aperture, like a moving picture, that keeps changing before our eyes without being able to catch even one specific pure moment. In the exact same way the figure in the work leans forward while watching the house and its surroundings.

I did not intend on the figure's size to be that way. What was more important to me was conveying that when we look at our memories, all stories seem much smaller than we imagine them to be. All stories belong to the past now, and what I see as a small representation is mere memory, no more no less.

In this sense, the giant figure in *The House That My Father Built* was not looking at a real house, rather a home that once was, or the place where he grew up but later was estranged from. This home lies deep inside his sentiment and memory.

I believe size here represents absence.

FK: Can you tell me about the particular story belonging to *The House That My Father Built*? Is the house still there? Do you go back to it often?

SKF: Yes, it is my story. It is the house where I lived my childhood before moving away from Iraq. When I went back twenty years later, I simply did not find it. It was the same address, but the building itself had dramatically changed except for the smell, the coffee, and my mother's face. Even my father's clothing was kept neatly hung in the closets, although months had passed since he passed away. Those clothes smelled exactly like my father when I said good-bye to him years and years before my return.

That experience was full of memories, sadness, the voices of the past and the innocence of childhood mixed with the profound feelings of losing my father. I was in complete awe as I examined his belongings still scattered throughout the house.

In terms of your question, whether I still visit the house or not, I can say that it is not a matter of one particular house in a specific place anymore. After so many years of absence it was no longer the actual house I had kept in my memory. The house erected at the moment does not look at all like the one residing in my memory. Yet because it exists inside me I still feel a highly intimate relationship with it. It is my home, the place that knows me as much I know it. Several details may be missing, but I feel it beating deep inside my inner being.

We carry our childhood homes with us forever. Regardless of how many features may change, or corners become reshaped, they still breathe inside us gently like a guardian spirit.

FK: In *Sisyphus Goes on Demonstration* from 2012 one cannot help but think of the protests in Tunisia, Egypt, and Syria that started back in 2010 and changed the landscape of the Middle East. There seems to be more than just the so-called Arab Spring rising in your work. Am I wrong to assume so? If not, can you elaborate on the work, the aesthetic, and the motion of the figures that forever move in place?

SKF: Yes, I completed this project having been influenced by what people know as the Arab Spring. On the other hand, I did not want it to be purely political. This is why I associated the events taking place on the streets of Arab cities with freedom, as I understand the term, in its existential dimension. I found that the character of Sisyphus most accurately represents this mixture of both revolting against pain and dreaming of freedom. I could not separate the Sisyphus I imagine from the multitudes of people carrying their dreams of deliverance and liberation. In this work, you read that Sisyphus has all the right to go out on a demonstration and cry out loud against his destiny, but the inevitable question always haunts you: will he ever find freedom? I believe this work offers an answer based on my own perception of freedom and the realities of our Arab societies. The freedom we seek will always be an unattainable quest. Sisyphus will forever keep pushing the rock, making his efforts to reach anywhere futile.

FK: I am curious about how you see the term “violence” functioning in your work. It does not have to be an overt and literal violence, as I see it occurring in both *The House That My Father Built* where the violence is inflicted on the landscape by the departing of its inhabitants, just as much as *Discussion* where the title and image of your figure holding a gun can be ominous.

SKF: Generally, violence is man’s destiny on Earth. Every civilised effort is an attempt to change this destiny. Sadly, violence engulfs our lives in the Middle East on a large scale because of so many social and historical realities, and as far as I am concerned, violence and my life in Iraq were inseparable. Since childhood, we were always in fear

of parents' slaps on the face and their punishments, the teacher's cane and the superintendent in the classroom. Violence surrounded us from all directions. And then it was the dictator with his bloodthirsty mood that began a cycle of oppression and uncalled-for experiences that set Iraq in a permanent state of war.

Yes, violence may directly appear in *The House That My Father Built* and several other works, but not all. Though it is one of the main components of my human experience. Its influence still resides in my innermost conscience and vision of the world.

FK: It is tragic that this land is ravaged and continues to witness many tragedies. This is very apparent in your work. The figure, which comes from the land, narrates the story. Can you tell me more about this?

SKF: I don't know what to say. This is my homeland, where I grew up. It witnessed my first love story, the first book I read, and all my other firsts. What is happening at the moment is a disaster that digs deep into our consciousness. We are witnesses to a pivotal historical era to which we are both the fuel and victims at the same time.

Yes, this figure has come from there. It is the result of what happened, and continues to happen, there. On the other hand, I belong to this world in general and carry inside me an entire human legacy with all its achievements, defeats, and unanswered questions. Therefore, my homeland's tragedy takes a global dimension directly connected to our existence as a race. This figure tells this particular story, an experience that concerns all human existence in general and not just one specific city or country.

This figure is like a storyteller who narrates his anecdotes in the form of adages or depictions that refer to much larger meanings.

FK: Can you tell me about *In the Name of Freedom* from 2007? The image of a black figure being devoured by monstrous serpents is very unsettling. It also feels like a foreshadowing of a violence that is about to come. I am curious about how you negotiate the images you create to those that we see in news media?

SKF: This painting is part of an installation that was first exhibited in 2007 at the Stedelijk Museum in Den Bosch, the Netherlands. Titled *Born on April 9th*, the date Baghdad fell to the American Army in 2003. The installation meant to say that April 9, 2003 was not a liberation day as much it was the day a stifling plague started to fill the air – the plague of occupation and all the death and devastation associated with it. In that painting, I wanted to depict Iraq as I saw it: a prey ripped apart by the talons of the 'four corners of the world' as depicted by the four monsters in the painting.

For this work, I was inspired by the Assyrian relief sculpturing techniques used in the renowned Assyrian carving of a wounded lioness. Images of fear, anxiety, and death that came out from Iraq on a daily basis contributed to shaping this painting, in addition to my own experience with the Iraqi army and death itself when I watched, and even

touched, scores of the corpses that arrived everyday to their families during the Iraq-Iran war. Wrapped in nylon and enclosed in casket, the bodies would reach their final destination in my miserable city. All of this contributed to the dramatic vision of the painting.

FK: Do you think that Art has a responsibility to be part of the political and social spheres? Do you view your work as being politically and socially charged?

SKF: Sometimes art can be part of politics and the society as a whole, but not necessarily all the time. It's true that the socio-political system affects artists, but they do not necessarily have to express it or be part of it. There are absolutely no rules governing this issue, except that art is the product of its age and will surely be influenced by its contemporary events and systems, express them, or even belong to them.

For me, the political and the social have strongly blended into my being. I mean all my 'self' components: reason, emotions, life experiences, readings, dreams, fears, and anxieties and so on. I do not take on politics or sociology as researchers or documentaries do, rather I deal with them through my overall vision of the world and existence. This was the motive behind *Sisyphus Goes on Demonstration* and *Born on the April 9th*.

If a politician assassinated my freedom, for me, it is not only because he is a dictator in the political sense of the word, but also because he is the 'other' as an existential concept – the other who takes away my freedom and adds many conditions that strictly confine it.

FK: You have been making these figures for a long time. They appear in such works as *Vitruvian Man* (2006) and continuing to take a more assertive shape in *I Am Just Tired* (2008), *It is a Long Way to Go* (2008), and *Give Me A Poem* (2009). Have you developed a relationship with this figure? Is it the same persona each time? Can you describe what you imagine to be this figure's narrative?

SKF: I have been making the figure since the early 80s, and the blackness developed and crystalised with my early attempts of wood and zinc carvings and calligraphy. I used to draw the figure considering it to be the other, and dealt with it through the concept that it is an existing being that dreams, loves, and suffers, just like me. Over the last few years, though, the figure developed more into becoming the specimen that represents any one of us. It is the sense that the word 'existent' suggests when we mean the human existence. The figure is you, him, her, and most certainly me. When I draw the figure, it feels like I am portraying all my human conditions in all their different aspects.

FK: In *Bio of a Head* (1984-2014) you use text to tell the story. Where is this text derived from? I was especially taken by the phrase "ya ilahi". There is a powerful gesture in that phrase that seems very appropriate for a lot of your work.

SKF: *Bio of a Head* is one of my old scripts, which I wrote as a screenplay for an animated movie I thought of creating using an 8mm camera. Yet, poverty and inability to find most of the materials forced me to complete this text as a book by printing the engravings on linoleum. This was in 1984.

I reproduced the work in 2014 for two reasons: first because its theme is still valid today and aligns with my current vision of art and the world in general, and second, because I still wanted produce it as a film. I also found that it would be most appropriate if I reproduced it in a way that preserved the original shape of the pages in the book because that would be in harmony with the concept of seeking salvation as I had originally intended.

“Aah” or “ya ilahi” represent the pain of the soul, mind and body. The most genuine expression that comes out of us in this situation, this particular “ya ilahi” is always there in all my works.

FK: Can you tell me about the use of animation in your works? You start off with static images that you poetically bring to life. I am curious about your concept in using such a technique.

SKF: Originally, I am a graphic artist. I love expressionism, black inks, charcoal, printing, and calligraphic works. I am also a painter who loves mass, line, and space. But my mind is hums with persistent concepts that aspire to go out and own their place in my work. In fact, I have always found it difficult to be content with what I apply on paper or canvas, thus moving to Europe and opening up to new art mediums and materials, coupled with my previous experience of creating many works on film, gave me a formula that completely fits my true nature: animation.

In short, animation is my tool. It allows me to think without limits.

FK: Can you share your thoughts about identity and contemporary art?

SKF: As I mentioned previously, belonging to the whole wide world has become a fact, especially after much overwhelming technological revolution. In a situation like this, where boundaries are blurred, identity takes a mutant shape, which makes it even more difficult to define or outline different identities. Currently, we are facing what can be called a compound identity where human beings equally belong to the cities where they live and the world in general. We carry two identities, think and act in two different ways, and so on. Of course, it gets more complicated when the cultural gap between our cities and the world widens. Postmodern thought has introduced several ideas that left their mark on the concept of identity, and consequently on contemporary art in which the identity crisis is ever so evident. The best proof that an identity crisis exists is the scarily immense gap between art in our region and the calamities, tragedies, and daily violence our cities witness.