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MONO (KODO)
CHROME:
Inside the mind of
Sadik Al Fraji

Sadik Al Fraji's new show at the freshly-opened Ayyam Gallery in London this March, 'I Do Not Feel That I Am Free' continues the Baghdad-born painter's explorations into the dark night of the human soul... By Arsalan Mohammad



Sadik Al Fajri's paintings investigate the philosophical and existential crises and dilemmas the artist encounters in daily life. Encompassing angst, metaphysical statements and a deep-seated sense of sorrow at the futility of existence, Al Fajri's work nevertheless avoids nihilistic despair. This is because of Kodo, Al Fajri's creation, an alter ego of giant character that recurs frequently in his paintings. Kodo is less a self-contained entity and more a vehicle or metaphor into which the artist transfers aspects of his emotional and spiritual quest to find solace. Using thick, repeated layers of dark shades, there is nevertheless a redemptive quality to Kodo, exemplified by the sudden appearance of human skin or a peering 'real' eyeball, worked into Kodo's dense textures. As a symbol of hope and, the unquenchable resilience of the human spirit, Kodo is, as the artist says, in a way, all of us.

Born in Baghdad in 1960, Al Fajri moved to Amersfoort in Holland in the early 1990s, where in one way or another, his Iraqi heritage and identity continues to loom large in his practise. Drawing on philosophy and literature, his frame of reference expands to encompass the gamut of human experience and emotion. Such meditative works have brought Al Sadik international acclaim - with his pieces having been collected and exhibited worldwide.

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In his forthcoming show at Ayyam - notable in itself for nabbing the not inconsiderable honour of being the second solo at the gallery's New Bond Street space - Al Fajri brings a selection of compositions that see him refining and re-examining the metaphorical power of his painting, alongside a video installation, 'Godot To Come Yesterday', a piece that takes Beckett's concept and reworks it with two Kodo-like characters, who summon the existential despair of the play's premise in Sadik's inimitable style.

Talking to the gently-mannered, incredibly courteous painter is a pleasure, all the more reason therefore why we print his responses to our interview in his own words. English answers are paraphrased beneath.



[far left]Sadik Al Fraji
[above] 'Untitled' (2012)
(Courtesy Ayyam Gallery)

The works display a continuation of the figure which featured prominently in much of your painting. Is this figure a metaphor for a specific theoretical entity or an analogy, a narrative device to pose a question or a theory?

I combine in this figure the two senses that have the most direct and continuous link with the existence and the brain - sight and touch which are the senses with which we realise our existence and think about it. I focus on the figures and surround them with blackness because all what we know is surrounded with the darkness of inevitable ignorance of the reality of things. In reality, we are lost in this vast world and the more we know, the more we realise that we are ignorant.

هو ليس شخصية معينة بذاتها، لكنه في نفس الوقت انا وبكل ما يعتمل بداخلي من مشاعر وذكريات وأسأله.. وهو ايضا الآخر الذي يراقب وجودي بعينه وكلماته واشاراته، هو ليس رمزا لقضية محددة او نظرية، لكنه يمثل تلك اللحظة التي اصطدمت فيها مع الوجود، انه تكثيف عالي لاحساسني بالوجود، (وجودي انا ووجود العالم من حولي)، وبكل ما يعنيه هذا الاحساس من ذهول ودهشة. بكلام اخر، هو هذا الذي ينظر الى ذاته والى الاشياء ويعرف ان ذلك الى زوال

The intense texture of the figure itself is really interesting - the contrast in the shades of blackness, the surfaces of the figure - and then the intervention of 'real' eyes and or hands. Could you tell me a little about the way you approach and structure these elements?

In darkness, our eyes by instinct, search for a spot of light and our hands will spontaneously grope their way through. In this way, the person is built by these elements. With these elements I build the faces and minimise physical features to an eye and hand in the blackness.

انني اجمع في هذا التكوين اكثر حاستين على صلة مباشرة ومستمره مع الوجود ومع العقل وهما الرؤية واللمس والتي بهما ندرك هذا الوجود ونفكر فيه... اركز عليهما واحيطهما بالسواد

السواد لان ان كل ما نعرفه في النهاية انما هو محاط بعتمة الجهل الحتمي بحقيقة الاشياء... نحن في الواقع نتخبط داخل هذا الكون الواسع وكلما عرفنا اكثر كلما أدركنا اننا مازلنا نجهل الاكثر.

في الظلمة تبحث عيوننا غريزيا عن بقعة ضوء وتندفع ايدينا تلقائيا لتلمس الطريق. في هذه المعادله يتكون نسج هذا الشخص. وفي هذا النسج ابني الشكل واختزل ملامح الجسم في عين ويد وسواد.

Your backgrounds, dominated by the figure, are extremely simple and stark. By working in deceptive monochrome - on closer inspection actually very detailed - do you allude to a shadow?

A shadow which works on many levels in our wider perception of the world? Yes, the shadows have two meanings. The world consists of light and shadow, and my perceptions of the things and other people around me converts automatically to shadows. I take out all the features and characteristics that comprise the human being and I keep the one element that I cannot cut down - the fact that he exists. It is like, by my focus on this shadow creature, I want to say that we are still living imprisoned within ignorance, inside the cave of Plato where we only see shadows.

بالاضافة الى ما ذكرته في جوابي على السؤال السابق، فان للظلال مغزى بين اخرين

- العالم متكون اصلا من الظل والضوء. وادراكي للاشياء والاخرين من حولي انما يتحول تلقائيا الى ظلال بعد اختزاله. انني اختزل كل الملامح والصفات المكونه للانسان وابقى على صفة واحده لا يمكن لي ان اختزلها وهي صفة انه موجود. - كانبني وبتركيزي على هذا الكائن الظل اريد ان اقول اننا لازلنا نعيش مسمرين ومسجونين داخل جهلنا، داخل كهف افلاطون الذي لا نرى فيه سوى الظلال.

How do you relate to your figure personally?

This creature is me, it is you, it is the document that represents me and you in this world

هذا الكائن هو انا، وهو انت، انه الوثيقة التي تمثلني وتمثلك في هذا العالم

'I Do Not Feel I Am Free' is a very complex statement as it has so many possible interpretations and possible allusions. Could you shed a little light on your perspective for me?

Well, with life, we're certain of its shortness and 'incompleteness'. We are always between the start of a thing and its completion, which never comes. Nothing is completed, nothing is satisfactory. What we want is always there and we are continuously trying to reach it. The Kodo script describes this outlook, and it is fundamental. I am Kodo, he is me, and yet as being me, I couldn't be him. **HBA**

'I Do Not Feel I Am Free' by Sadik al Fraji is at Ayyam Gallery, London between March 14th - April 27th. For more details see www.ayyamgallery.com