

Existential expressions

Iraqi artist Sadiq Kwaish Alfraji's works express a deep angst about the eternal suffering of human beings, but remain hopeful of finding that ray of light beyond

BY JYOTI KALSI
Special to Weekend Review

Sadiq Kwaish Alfraji's work is an exploration of the meaning and purpose of human existence. In the past, the artist has taken inspiration from Samuel Beckett's well-known existentialist play, *Waiting for Godot*.

The title of his latest works, *Nothing, Nobody*, is also taken from the same play. Through this series, comprising paintings and a video installation, the artist continues to reflect on the transience and futility of human existence.

Alfraji was born in Iraq and has been living away from his homeland, in the Netherlands, for two decades. His feelings about the events in his own country add a personal dimension to his metaphysical musings on universal human suffering. His work expresses his despair at not finding any answers to his questions. But, just as the characters in Beckett's play wait endlessly for Godot to arrive, he also remains ever hopeful of finding some light beyond the darkness.

His paintings are minimalistic and repetitive. They are painted on fragile rice paper with charcoal and ink. And every painting features just one character — a dark, faceless, shadowy human figure with lifelike hands and eyes, digitally created from photographs of the artist's own hands and eyes. The multiple-screen video, titled *Sisyphus Goes on Demonstration*, is inspired by the ancient Greek story of Sisyphus, who was condemned to roll a large boulder up a steep hill for eternity. It shows a bent, dark figure walking endlessly.

The body language of Alfraji's lonely, desolate figure conveys an inner conflict, a futile longing for something unattainable and a deep sense of despair. The artist also

provides insights into his troubled state of mind through the titles of his paintings, such as *What's There Beyond, I Just Hear Nothing* and *This Cannot Be in Vain*. Other titles, such as *I Don't Want To Think* and *And Life Goes On*, suggest a sense of resignation and acceptance.

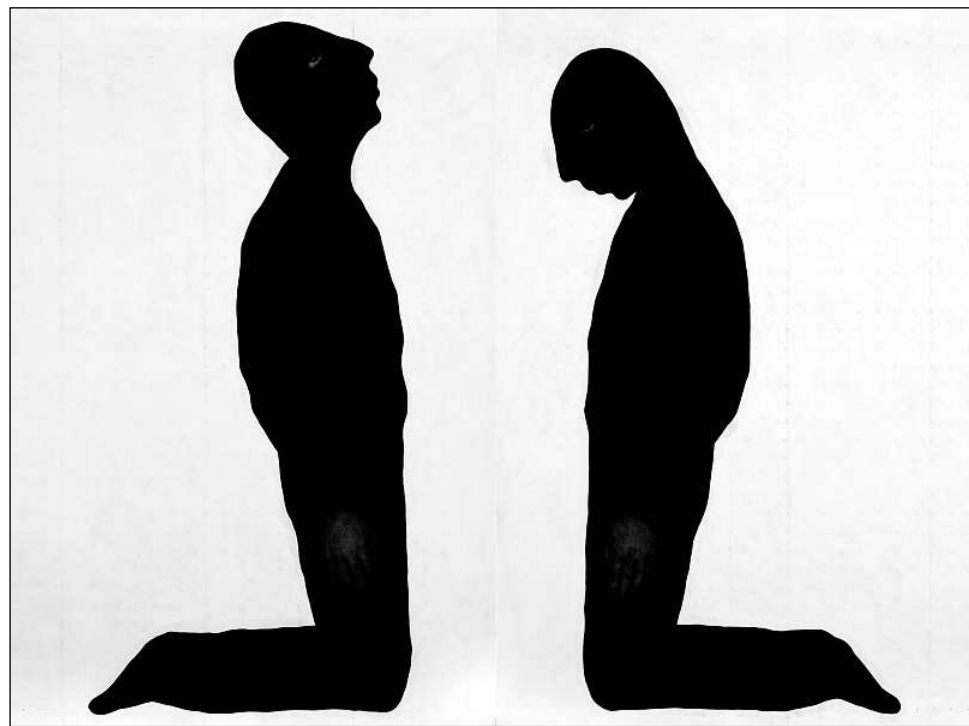
"The figure in my paintings represents every person with an awakened mind. And anybody who thinks about the major questions of existence knows that the reality is tragic. Life is sad because it is transient and we are just floating in time, not knowing where we come from and where we are going. We know we do not belong here, but we do not know where else we could belong. My work has always revolved around this theme. But the title of this series says that now I want to give up and stop thinking. I see nothing and nobody because knowing that everything is transitory makes me afraid to see or feel anything.

"So this is a narrative about eyes that stare into nothingness and a hand that dreads the void. It accepts that we are all like Sisyphus. Fastened to our places, we are intoxicated by the illusion of motion and ruminating on the same dreams repeatedly. And like him, we do not know if and when we will be released from this suffering," the artist says.

But Alfraji also acknowledges that try as he may, he cannot give up. The accentuated hands and eyes of his figure express the intensity of his desire to see and reach out beyond the darkness.

"It is painful to have all these questions and no answers. But when I accept seeing nothing and nobody, that raises new questions in my mind about whether something or somebody could be there just beyond my vision and hearing; or that I cannot see the truth because of the limitations of my mind, which is bound by my universe and unable to go beyond this cosmos to achieve a more holistic perspective. I cannot accept that this entire universe and all its amazing systems came from nothing and will disappear into nothingness," Alfraji says.

These new questions spur him to look inward for answers. In a painting titled *To be Holy*, the artist suggests that holiness exists



Every painting features just one character — a dark, shadowy figure with lifelike hands and eyes, digitally created from photos of the artist's own hands and eyes

within all of us and looking deeper within ourselves will help us see things more clearly and ease our suffering.

Similarly, *Godot To Come Yesterday* alludes to the concept that what we wait for is a creation of our own imagination. Hence, in a sense what we wait for already arrives when the idea of it first appears in our minds. But as long as it remains in our thoughts, we keep waiting for it — and it never comes.

The events in his own country and his

long separation from his birthplace make the artist's existential angst even more poignant. Paintings such as *My Mother's Flower* and *Elusive Beauty*, where the figure in the paintings chases a seemingly unattainable object, express these feelings.

"All art is personal and universal. Iraq is my identity, my home and the source of my memories. When I think of Iraq, I remember the embrace of my mother, the sound of my father's voice, the smell of my house, my first step and my first love. If someone destroys Iraq, they are punishing me by destroying my memories. It makes my pain deeper and pushes me further with my questions," the artists says.

Nothing, Nobody will run at Ayyam Gallery DIFC until December 15.