

Conflict as Currency

Iraqi artist Ahmed Albahrani explores the violence that has torn the Arab world apart through a series of exhibitions based on historic coins

by India Stoughton



Ahmed Albahrani, King Faisal II of Iraq, 2017, Bronze, D 75 cm, Edition 1/5

Iraqi artist Ahmed Albahrani has lived in exile for many years, a victim of the recurrent cycles of conflict and destruction that have devastated vast swathes of the Arab world for decades. In his latest solo show at Anima Gallery in Qatar, *Flip a Coin*, he explores the violence that has blighted the Middle East through a symbolic series of coins, each based on historic currency from the Arab world. Drawn to the motifs used to adorn coins, which he sees as proud representations of the all-powerful state, he subverts their nationalist messages by deforming them. By melting, scarring or piercing his coins with bullet holes, he undermines their idyllic vision, replacing it with forgotten narratives of violence.

The symbolism of the coin simultaneously encourages reflection on the economy of war, the profit-driven heartlessness of the weapons industry and the hypocrisy of foreign invaders who mask financial motives behind metaphors of selflessness.

Q: The concept of flipping a coin suggests two possible outcomes. Is it intended to evoke a sense that whatever the future holds, it is



Above left – Ahmed Albahrani, His Highness Sheikh Tamim Emir of Qatar His Highness The Father Emir, 2017, Bronze, D 110 cm, Edition 1/5



Above right – Ahmed Albahrani, Iraqi Army, 2017, Bronze, D 75 cm, Edition 1/5

Right – Ahmed Albahrani, Palestine 2017, Bronze, D 75 cm, Edition 1/5

Below – Ahmed Albahrani, Iraqi Army 2017, Bronze, D 75 cm, Edition 1/5

bound to be divisive?
AA: The title *Flip a Coin* is connected to my childhood memories when we played with coins in a game of chance. The probability of the coin is determined in the air. Today's Arab world is based on the equivalent probability of the coin flipping game, frightened by the fate of a new day. These vast, unpredictable adjustments in our life that came to us by surprise have left me at a stage of instability. The disruptive future made me stateless. I no longer feel I have a country.

Q: How did you approach the design of each coin? Are they based on real historic coins?

AA: Behind the coinage lays an artist's skills and idea of portraiture, and I respect it, therefore I decided

to keep every detail as it is. These coins are symbolic representations of our history, which should not be neglected but reinterpreted to portray the collapse of Arab history... Change is what we wanted, a new clean slate to reassure us, but due to the irrational consequences we are once again put in the same position of despair. The outcome of the coin is the product of war and what the Arab region is left with today.

Q: Can you share with us one or two examples of figures or motifs you have chosen and their significance?

AA: I would begin with King Faisal, who for me is an important figure in Iraq's history. He was the last king before the country became a republic. It was the beginning of hope for the country, a new young leader with an intuition to guide



the country. But once the king was killed in his youth, Iraq slowly moved towards a problematic and unsettled path. I used the melting process on this coin to portray the beginning of a decaying state.

The Palestine coin is likewise a necessary coin to have in this collection. This coin from 1948 united the Arabic, English and Hebrew languages on the coin. Palestine was a country with three Abrahamic religions, cultures and history that once united them all together. After the 1948 invasion,

the Israeli government began the war of annihilation. They denounced the existence of Palestinians by obliterating their identity in order to create their own. In the Palestine coin I have similarly used the melting effect, making the word Palestine and the olive leaf the only visible elements. I removed their identity in order to regain Palestine's, as Palestine remains the land of all religions and can never be monopolised by one.

Ahmed Albahrani's *Flip a Coin* continues at Anima Gallery until March 31

