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Iraqi artist reflects a lost generation in a time of chaos

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BEIRUT: As a prominent member of the second generation of modernist artists in Iraq, Saadi al-Kaabi is lucky. Born in Najaf in 1937, he came of age at a time when the arts in Iraq were celebrated, when painters were put on a pedestal and promoted, and when young talents were given resources and funds and travel grants to develop their skills. More basically, Kaabi has lived and worked in Baghdad for more than 40 years. His studio lies in a posh residential district. He feels safe in this space, despite the U.S. invasion and occupation and the ever-more pathological spread of anarchic violence on the city's streets. At times, the materials that Kaabi needs to work have grown expensive, then scarce, then nonexistent in the local market. Yet he has been able to continue painting.

From now through the end of January, 18 of Kaabi's canvases are on view at the Agial Art Gallery in Hamra. All were produced between 2002 and 2004. And all are typical of Kaabi's contemporary work - subtle earth tones seep from background to foreground; human figures haunt the compositions like abstracted ghosts rendered in thick black lines; the surface of the work alternates from the smooth resin of ceramics to the rough texture of chiseled stone. In the 1960s, Kaabi's style was more cubist in composition, with a garish blue and red drenched color palette borrowed from fauvism. He painted women with enormous eyes, oceanic enough for a viewer to drown in, and desert scenes. His early work was brash, stylized and expressive. His late work is spare, pensive and subdued.

Kaabi was able to travel to Beirut for the opening of this most recent exhibition, his fourth in Lebanon, having shown twice at Gallery One in the mid 1960s and once at Agial in the late 1990s. His physical mobility is a mark of his social status, he suggests, as an artist who has been established for a long time in Iraq. But his psychological resilience at a time when his country is splitting its seams is uniquely, impressively Kaabi's own.

"Usually a crisis makes you feel better about your presence in the world," he explains. When you feel more aware of your presence, when it burns your insides, you can produce. If you have five fingers and you lose one, you feel the importance of the other four even more. A crisis makes you feel the importance of your existence, which makes you produce more, and better."

"[Iraq] is not a safe place," he acknowledges. "But I do whatever I can to make it feel safe. I have an underground," he adds, "and a dog." The community around where he lives has also developed its own mechanisms for self-defense.

Kaabi may deal well with his day-to-day existence, but he's not especially optimistic about the impending elections. "I feel afraid," he admits. "Should I vote for someone I don't know, whose program I don't know?" There are 280 electoral lists, he explains, and it would take him two months to read through them and another two months to understand the policy initiatives behind each list, if they were to be made available for the public. They have not.

"Plus, I hate sectarianism. Everyone is there for their private interests so why should I dirty my hands?"

To hear Kaabi's thoughts on the political situation in Iraq is to view the country through the eyes of its artists (those who stayed, as opposed to those in exile). It is also an exercise in understanding all that Iraq has lost, and stands to lose still, as there will likely never be another generation quite like Kaabi's.

Flipping through a recent catalogue of the artist's work, there are old photographs of him with his classmates, horsing around in front of Baghdad's Institute of Fine Arts in 1957; Kaabi debonair, dressed in a suit, and painting a landscape on an outdoor easel; the artist on trips to Tunisia, Japan, Bangladesh, in front of the Great Wall of China. Besides the sepia-toned nostalgia of these pictures, there's a sense of possibility in them that has since been dashed.

When asked whether or not there will be any continuity between Kaabi's generation and the next to come up in Iraq, he answers definitively, "No. Everybody pities them [the younger generation]. The government - nobody is interested in anything related to people anymore. In my time, the government cared about people. They gave grants, sent artists to travel. In the past there was a system to take care of the collectivity, where now, no one cares." And, he adds, "The newly rich people who are supposed to help artists don't know anything about art."

In Kaabi's day, he and his colleagues were concerned with laying the groundwork for a viable art practice. "First, identity was very important. Second, we were interested in the conceptual underpinnings [of creating art], so we wrote a lot. And third, we were organizing the art." Kaabi's generation was heavily involved in shifting folkloric traditions in ceramics into sculptural techniques, something that can still be seen in Kaabi's work today. For his own part, Kaabi was, and remains, intent on developing a visual language adequate to represent the nuances of the human condition.

The outlined figures in his works, he explains, "are meant to cancel the time factor. This human being can belong to any time, the past or the future. The point is to reflect my own interior. And my interior is also the result of my environment, my heritage, and the rest of the world. I digest them all and project them back into the paintings. I don't want [my figures] to belong to any particular period in time."

As a young man, Kaabi earned a reputation among his peers as an impressive draughtsman. This pushed him to draw better and he started to win prizes. "From then, I felt I was a big artist," he recalls. "Later on, I realized I was not."

About 25 years ago, Kaabi woke up one morning and burned his entire archive of press clippings. He suddenly felt that everything that had been written about him had been said to please him. He felt trapped by an image that had been created around him. He said to himself, "This is not real!" and torched the whole lot. The effect was a symbolic liberation, freedom by fire. His act of destruction allowed him to begin working from scratch. "The real thing is working," he says simply.

"I still consider myself to be always learning and getting better." After the episode with his archive, he says, "I became very motivated. In bits and pieces, I started to discover something a bit blurred, which is the dialogue with the self. That helped me to understand things that looked very mysterious in my paintings. The knowledge of the unconscious in the work, from that point, I am always working on and thinking about."

To this day, Kaabi is chaotic in his working process. He doesn't paint at regular times, but rather insists on keeping his canvases prepared, so they are ready when inspiration strikes. "When I am not satisfied," he says laughing, "I run away or I sleep." Then, after running away or sleeping, when he returns to his studio or wakes up from a nap, he says he can see clearly the ways in which a painting is not working. The break is necessary for him to understand where his work has escaped him.

Kaabi insists that he remains optimistic about the Iraq his children will inherit. He believes the current crisis will pass and the arts will blossom again. "But for myself," he says, "I don't think I will see stability in my time. I'm 70," he exclaims, throwing up his hands, "What am I going to do, wait?"

Saadi al-Kaabi's *paintings are on view at the Agial Art Gallery in Hamra through January 29. For more information, call +961 1 345213*

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