



THE WORLD IS
STRANGE AND
BORDERS THE
FANTASTIC: AN
INTERVIEW WITH
SADDAM JUMAILY

Visual artist [Saddam Jumaily](#) dedicates his life and work to inverting the typical, the usual, the expected. Hailing from Basra, Iraq, the painter, writer, and illustrator traces his artistic evolution to a tumultuous history and personal struggle – against the scarcity of a country that refuses freedom of creative expression; against ignorance, fundamentalism, and stereotypical views; against direct threats to his life and the life of his loved ones. His paintings open endless worlds of meaning; darkness surrounds humanity and obfuscates real

connection; bodies are resting or in motion, waiting, fearing, dreaming, or dying. Jumaily's dark elements follow his experience: "I paint what I feel," he explains, subtly evoking the relationship between art and freedom.



Saddam Jumaily

For artists such as Jumaily, whose work is rejected in the space it emerges, everything exists together with its opposite: life floats around death, freedom rattles the chains around its ankles, hope gathers its last strength in the face of utter hopelessness, and running away is constantly accompanied by the hope of return. Life is the same for all of us, his paintings seem to declare. Shapes are harsh and fragmented, hybridised – strangely familiar, yet unrecognisable. Fear, hunger, death, disease, loss – they spread and grasp humanity, cemented in their own morphed bodies. Nostalgia and memory are frequent plots in Jumaily's paintings; rich in symbolism and grabbing at their universality, these tropes complicate the visual language of the works, whose intention is to avoid sympathy as a reaction, and instead produce shock, disturb stereotypes, and exist beyond immediate categorisation. The artist avoids complacency and comfort, not to directly advance political discourse, but out of a conviction that art has the power to change the world, and this is the only power he has left.

In 2019, Saddam Jumaily became artist in residence the city of Helsinki, in a programme run by the [Artists at Risk](#)

organization. We sat down with Saddam to hear about his residence, his artistic vision, and his life and work in exile.

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Old photograph, 70 x 60 cm, acrylic on canvas.

Elena Stanciu: From an early age you were drawn towards art and painting, and these early influences stayed with you in your career. Did you ever feel any pressures (social, personal from your family) to pursue other lines of work?

Saddam Jumaily: My family was supportive and encouraging, as I showed interest in art. Studying art is a different story – I started at the university just at the beginning of the siege on Iraq; there were no materials, no art spaces. My peers and I started finding alternative and neglected materials that were available – we would use cement bags as canvas and paper and burn tree branches to make charcoal; we'd mix metal pigments with wax to make oil colours and use our own hair as a brush. It wasn't working out, but we had no other choice, we had to keep going, with love and determination. The post-2003 shifts in power brought more restrictions on the art world: everything was forbidden, no one can paint nude or figurative. My art is critical of politics and religion in Iraq, which made it worse for me. My name was removed from an exhibition in Kuwait and I became a persona non-grata. This is the hardest thing for an artist – to be an outcast because of your opinions and vision.

ES: You said in an interview that "painting is an opportunity to err." What emotions do you most often express through your work? What makes painting special as a medium for you?

SJ: I believe art can portray what we feel, not what we see. We live in a complex and incomprehensible world, and emotion helps experience it. We must express how we feel about what surrounds us – the sensual world and its political, social, and psychological problems. This is the role of emotion in my art; it follows my vision for our world – a confused, puzzled, contradictory world; we die for life, we are imprisoned for freedom; we cut trees to make paper we use for pamphlets against cutting down trees; we pollute life thinking we seek happiness; we protect animals, but we neglect humanity.

I choose painting as a medium because it so easily tells a story; it's very emotional and closer to the senses and it touches people so profoundly. It also offers some freedom in showing your vision; a freedom to repeat yourself, when repetition is necessary to fully go through the process you're chasing.



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Ma: , , , 70x cm acrylic on canvas. 2015 (London Special Collection).

ES: What was your biggest dream as a young student of arts in Basra? What is your biggest dream today?

SJ: My biggest dream was to learn art, be good at it and become a remarkable artist. Today, the dream is to show my art in galleries, museums, and publications around the world. I want to get my vision across and be able to use my voice and express freely my creativity and my intellectual concerns. I don't have any other power than art; I've lost everything else.

ES: Your home country has been in turmoil in the years you were active as an artist – has conflict (loss, sadness) been a part of your creative expression? Was art ever a way to respond to social and political issues?

SJ: My entire life I've lived in response to turmoil in our country, which of course got me thinking intensely about its problems and its future. Loss, sadness, people dying, war and politics – it all makes me a part of it. I don't like to be direct in my art; I don't want to make political statements or speeches. I am an artist first, and I depict what I feel and what I need. I believe art should speak about human life, critique it, and add value, but I'm not sure how directly involved with politics the artist must be – art itself will do its job. Nevertheless, we must all say what we feel and fight killers, extremists, corruption, war, destruction, and defend our lives.





Foucault Picnic, 150 x 150 cm, acrylic on canvas.

ES: What is the role of the human body in your work? How did you navigate to the corporeal as an element that became so central to your practice?

SJ: The body helps us understand the world and the important human questions. It has a great expressive power in painting, and it draws everyone closer to the problems it depicts – we all experience life through our bodies. It is the pillar of life, the beginning of all problems, and the space of absolution. We recognise sorrow and our pain through our bodies – it's the most accurate sign of our existence.

ES: The mood in many of your paintings is often dark and challenging, heavy in symbols and staging grotesque scenes, where the human form is transformed and hybridised. What informs this aesthetic? What do you want the viewers to take away from your work?

SJ: The world is strange and sometimes borders the fantastic. No one can absorb totally what happens around us, and I try to depict it the way I see it, the parts of it that I see. I paint recurrent strange scenes in similar spaces, to provoke some shock and odd feeling in the viewer, as they face the unfamiliar. This is only to invite people to think differently; I use my art as a starting point in asking questions that wouldn't be asked otherwise. It's not comfortable, but that's the point.



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 ye c see, 150 x 150, acrylic on Lighted Room, 150 x 150 cm, Acrylic
 an s. on canvas. MUSIC FASHION ARCHIVE

ES: You lived for some time in exile in Jordan – what was this like?

SJ: It was a new life for me, and I met many Iraqi artist there. It was difficult too; my art was not in demand there, they had a different artistic taste, very traditional, where art is primarily decorative. It was a bad experiment – I spent eight years without hope, looking at what seemed a dark future. I was also stuck – I couldn't travel to show my works.

ES: But you made it out and you've been recently appointed Artist in Residence in the city of Helsinki, together with your wife, in a programme run by the Artists at Risk organisation. Can you elaborate on this residency and the associated artistic programme here?

SJ: This opportunity is golden for me – it saved me from a very bad situation. Life, communication, artistic opportunities – they were all on stand-by. My dreams were broken, my life was literally under threat. It's an immense relief to be able to express my vision in a city and a society open to art. Now I feel safe; I have a studio and a house, and I can get all the help I'm asking for. Every artist needs freedom and a safe life, and this is what we have now – I'm very motivated to make the most of it.



Ejection, 90x70 cm, oil on canvas.

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ES: How do you relate to the Western art world/community? Do you think there's something missing in the relationship between the West and the Middle East from the point of view of the art world?

SJ: I think art is the same, but the background and history are different. Despite contemporary cultural differences, we all live in the same world, only different in details. All cultures are unique, but art falls under very similar structures: art refers to history and identity, but it doesn't have to mean that we can't think of our future, in an art-making context. To eliminate difference, we have to see what the artistic vision boils down to: a desire to be equal, to be able to speak our minds and express ourselves; in this, we are all the same.

ES: Do you experience any limits to creativity – namely, that there is a tokenistic expectation that as an artist from an area of conflict you should be directly engaging with these issues?

SJ: When we make art about identity and label it, some people will become “the other,” with a line drawn between East and West. In this case, no one will see our art impartially. The viewers will be told that we are “backward” relative to Western art, that all we have is problems, and they will show us sympathy and ignore the art.



195 x 100 cm, acrylic on canvas.

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The world sympathises with us as with endangered animal species. As humans, we need to occupy the same space. Art from non-Western areas is often seen through stereotypical filters; it's not good in itself; it's only worth the story it says. That's why a lot of visibility is given to art that is very clearly political or refers to identity and tells a moving story, using stereotypical imagery: Islamic decoration, Arabic calligraphy, the harem, various political fears. It's all incredibly limiting and damaging.

ES: Would you say that artistic investigation has the capacity today to challenge such concepts and successfully produce a disruption in areas affected by war and entrenched in tradition and fundamentalism?

SJ: I think art doesn't have the capacity to make any change in Iraq now. Wars and occupation left the country in the hands of extremist religion, political gangs, corrupt parties, and politicised and apostolic education. Social disintegration and the absence of law make the environment infertile; it's not ready for art and its purpose. Among ignorance and extremism, art can't find a voice. This is why we fight, away from home, to show the world the crisis in our country, a place where art is forbidden, unknown and ineffective.



Oxygen, 90x90 cm, acrylic on canvas.

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“S The national pavilion of Iraq at this year’s Venice Biennale is led by artist Serwan Baran, under the title ‘Fatherland,’ and investigates the way the ideal of the ‘fatherland’ has been used in the country to justify war and conflict. What is your own (personal or artistic) relationship with this notion? Do you feel a calling back to Iraq?”

SJ: I certainly have similar concerns, influenced by the same country, culture, and the same difficulties, and we both refer to the notion of the lost homeland. Our style is very different, and we point at the same problems in different ways. Baran makes art by directly confronting notions, in detail; I would rather suspend the topic in a philosophical arena, in a more generalised manner, which shocks and provokes. I would love to return to Iraq, go back home. It’s not our home now; it’s in our dreams and constantly on our minds, and we hope it will still be home someday.

Words: Elena Stanciu

Artworks: [Saddam Jumaily](#)

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