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## A spectacle of Iraq's path toward hope



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BEIRUT: Shabby, despondent, murky. These are the words that come to mind upon arrival at Artspace Hamra these days. Iraqi artist Mahmood Shubbar's exhibition has transformed the white cube into an eerie reminder of a war that's far from over.

What at first appear to be the remnants of a long-neglected highway stings the eye and frustrates the senses with depictions of tragic aftermath of the 2003 Anglo-American Iraq invasion. Battered, stained with black soot and peppered with bullet holes, English- and Arabic-language signage hangs framed behind glass. The ambience is one of deterioration.

Shubbar didn't want to portray Iraq in these terms, but he feels events since 2003 demonstrate a complete and comprehensive system of destruction and corruption.

"Systematic killing was brought on by the U.S. invasion of Iraq," Shubbar told The Daily Star. "As a result ... artists and educated people have a duty to make our voices heard and document the experiences, those unacceptable and despicable practices."

It is the magnitude of political, cultural, and social devastation Iraqis have witnessed that prompted Shubbar to focus his passion on painting the country's painful reality.

The exhibition includes nine street signs, on which archaeological engraving was applied, and five paintings – most acrylics on canvas.

Blended throughout the opaque and melancholy images of roads leading to Baghdad's Firdos Square are sharp splashes of green or blue, emblems of forward direction.

The statue of ousted dictator Saddam Hussein is a motif of this exhibition, resonating the promise of the overthrow of dictatorship.

Sipping espresso in a Beirut café, Shubbar says that, after the dictator's overthrow, Iraqis hoped that their country would soon become a major regional power.

"This is what we were promised," he says. "These promises turned out to be lies. Everyone believed that Iraq's would be an exceptional experience, but the invasion only brought 1.5 million Iraqi deaths, \$1000 billion worth of stolen money and massive infrastructure [demolition]."

Tidy road signs are emblematic of developed cities.

The signage in Shubbar's work is shot through and burned, mirroring Iraq's forlorn state.

"American troops did not distinguish between the people of the cities and the dictator they were supposedly after. For them, we were one and the same. They destroyed our heritage, as though we should be ashamed of it. This was my intended message."

Placed meticulously in a glass box, Shubbar's documentation of a generation of Iraqis is reminiscent of Sumerian antiques of Babylon, so as to read Iraq's history through these representations.

The exhibition has two faces: on one hand Shubbar's intellectual, philosophical and aesthetic research; on the other the marketing of the contemporary artist. A showcase for the artist's oeuvre, this exhibition is presented as a spectacle of Iraq's past and, by extension, its present.

"We have a unified set of topics," Shubbar articulated. "I tried to bring Iraq's past and present together and appeal to the people. I wanted to tell them that those aren't simply road signs. They don't only specify a route. They also indicate how brutal and barbaric the invasion was."

Stained with mud and dirt as black as coal, signposts are rendered nearly unreadable, representing Iraq's tainted identity. No building escaped the destruction of the 2003 invasion and the conflicts that followed. No facility or cultural site survived undamaged. Fire ruled, a symbol of things to come. Shubbar recalls these images as clearly as if he were watching a film loop.

"The central bank and the Iraqi national museum were burned, the national library also. It was a systematic war, leaving endless traces of carbon [grey] in its wake. I paint, not with typical decorative colors, but with real expression and passion. I lived Baghdad. All my works revolve around Baghdad and no other city, except perhaps Babel," Shubbar's home town.

Black reaffirms the turbulence and unrest visited upon Baghdad.

A question mark hangs around the exhibition title "Fast Forward."

Reflecting upon events of the 12 years since the U.S. invasion, Shubbar notes that, like the rest of this region, Iraq has undergone massive changes – not least the so-called Arab Spring.

"It's as if we clicked a button to make time move at a quicker pace," he said. "Events in Iraq, Tunisia, Libya, Egypt, Syria – [they] still [have] not ended. I wanted the viewer to wait for the next thing, after Baghdad, after the destruction, to ask, 'What can we expect?'"

The longstanding ambition of changing the perception of Middle East, Shubbar feels, is now incomprehensible and inconsequential. Systematic destruction continues. The image of Iraq is, if anything, worse than it was.

"The U.S. promised it would take us to the middle ages, and they weren't joking," the artist says. "They took us back to ignorance, illiteracy. The pain is lived every day, as if the future of Iraq is frozen behind these glass windows. I pray for the day when [the] despair that controls my imagination will be eradicated.

"The sadness and blackness doesn't seem to want to die. There exists a story that

should be passed on, a record. Art should be a compass that guides us all.”

Mahmood Shubbar's "Fast Forward" is up at ArtSpace Hamra through Nov. 2. For more information, see <http://www.artspacehamra.com/exhibitions.html>

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