

Interview with Hanaa Malallah, Artist 2016

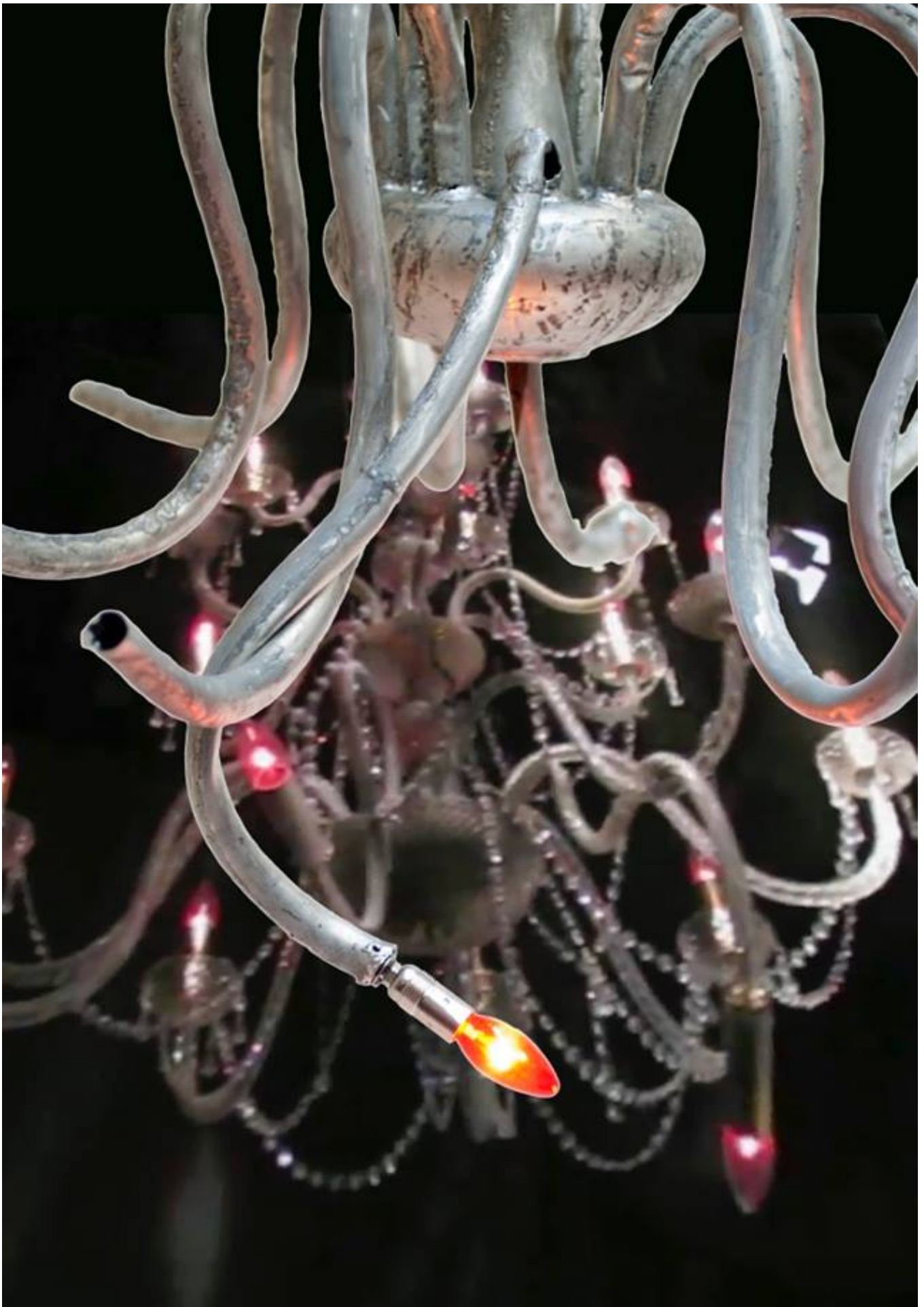
Interview with Hanaa Malallah, Artist

Hanaa Malallah, you are an Iraqi artist of the generation of war. Your art shows the wounds of your homeland. It doesn't show your own wounds, as if you are a spectator. I mean your work is objective, in the sense that one sees the pain and the sorrow in your work, but doesn't see drama. Can you elaborate?

I have a problem with categories and I don't really self-identify as an Iraqi artist, a Middle Eastern artist or, for that matter, a Woman artist. These categories smell of colonialism, racism, gender discrimination and as such, of subordination. You used the word spectator, which I like: a spectator without identity perhaps. Certainly, my professional practice was built in Iraq under catastrophic circumstances. That was fate not choice.

Regarding your question of a lack of drama in my work, you are right. There is no drama because I seek to reflect artistically what is there, in cold blood. It is not my specific pain, it is universal agony, but as a human being I am not immune to suffering. So, even though I am not an expressionist artist – all about me, me, me - my work has its source in personal memory, in real events and experiences. But I am an artist who filters, analyses and builds concepts which are then tested materially and usually include an act of destruction. I have named this “ruins technique”. A successful artwork has playfulness, a dance between concept and technique, no matter what the medium.





It is amazing how versatile your work is. Anything that falls into your hands is an excuse to use as a medium to create a work of art. How and why did you leave the trodden ways?

My professional practice began in 1991 with an exhibition called “Documents of Visiting the Archaeological Museum/Baghdad”. It was executed with ruins technique, incorporated various media and was the departure point for a long journey of theoretical inquiry. I made this exhibition because I was ready. Prior to that, I had spent almost 20 years studying academic arts. Painting, printmaking, etc.; in other words, I learned skills. But skill alone does not make an artist. Actually, I believe that a sign of a good artist is the capacity to forget your skills, forget what you’ve been taught, a courageous act tantamount to suppressing your ego. It allows you to cross the red line, push the boundaries. And the very definition of a professional art practice is the relentless challenging of boundaries.



Birds - Set 2, 2012-2013

How do you define your art?

Why do I have to define my art work? That's not my job! Perhaps it is yours?

Yes, perhaps you are right. You said you have a problem with categories.

In the metaphor of the hoopoe which is a recurrent theme in your work (especially the works on paper), are you sending a philosophical message, or are you expressing your own longing for the miraculous (for the Simurg)?

I have been producing images of the hoopoe for over 20 years, in the course of which it has become a rich and many-layered symbol for me. Of course my interest started with reading Attar* but was deepened during long conversations with my teacher Shaker Hassan al Said; a metaphor for the journey of self-discovery, as a person and an artist. A spiritual journey and a creative journey have much in common; they are perilous and many are left behind.

The Hoopoe, leader of the 30 in Attar's fable, is the quintessential survivor.

He is I.

Over the years the hudhud has morphed from a religious to a secular symbol somewhat like the dove and olive branch which has changed in peoples' imagination from an image related to Noah and the flood to an icon of peace. In recent years, I've been increasingly incorporating taxidermy hoopoe birds into my work, where the material itself embodies the concept. They also appear as drawings, embroidery, paintings, installations; it is an image which gives me great latitude to explore both suffering and survival.

*(Farid –Ud-Din Attar is a 12 century Persian soufi poet. He wrote the fable Conference of the birds.)



Birds - Set 4, 2012-2013

Based in London for years now, and having a global view of contemporary art in the Middle East, where do you place this art now?

I think one has to first understand what contemporary art is – aside from art made by living artists – and how intimately it is tied to the evolution of western art and western art history, where there is a sense of continuity, a dialogue with history, with media and theory.

Many of us, and by us I mean artists from the Arab world, myself included, grew up studying western art. We got in on the conversation with Impressionism, Modernism and so on. We copied; our learning to paint and print and sculpt was acts of mimicry. As a result there is no fundamentally Middle Eastern or Arab art, even if we incorporated native idioms, nor is there a sense of evolution. Most of us never had a course in

Islamic art. We were parodying modernist artists and then we opened our eyes and there was post-modernism and the tail end of the contemporary. There is a list of common content, however, often with a nod towards Orientalism (calligraphy, geometry, flying carpets, veiled women, repression, politics, activism, etc.) often pleasing to the western gaze propagated by western institutions, curators and collectors.

But exactly because of this development we are part of global art, western art even and we have to answer to this and allow ourselves to be judged by global art rules where it is about the maturity of concept and a real understanding of media. And there are many mediocre works hanging on the walls of big collections simply because someone with money said they should.

Of course we have many bright examples. Good artists. What we do not have are serious critics, bilingual critics with the scope and the guts necessary to hold us accountable.

What are your plans for 2016, do you have plans for an upcoming exhibition in Lebanon?

I haven't had a solo exhibition in the Middle East since I left Iraq at the end of 2006, mainly because my refugee status made travel outside the UK very difficult. This is resolved now. I recently visited Beirut and was amazed at its vibrant art scene and I would love to start a project there. I have a busy year ahead but, as a rule, I don't speak about my plans until they have taken on material form.



Three Sisters (Roses)

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