"Interview with Ahmed Alsoudani." In *The World Belongs to You*. Venice, Italy: Palazzo Grassi Centre of Contemporary Art/Foundation François Pinault, 2011

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Electa

a quanto avveniva nella pittura tradizionale, dove il disegno era interamente coperto, le tue opere finite rimangono aperte a tutta la gamma dei processi della pittura, come dicevamo prima.—

LA COSA più importante per me è tenere vivi il tempo e il movimento. Quando scelgo una scena, vorrei dipingerla conferendole lo stesso potere di quel famoso filmato in cui si vede la caduta della statua di Saddam, vorrei farne una scena di caos orchestrato. Mentre lavoro a un certo punto comincio a muovermi, a girare intorno al quadro per catturare il tempo e il movimento.—

CREDO CHE anche da ragazzo il tuo legame con la letteratura fosse molto forte. Secondo te in che modo la letteratura ha influenzato te e la tua arte?—

IN IRAQ ci sono da sempre grandi librerie. Quasi tutti i classici e i libri che hanno vinto premi importanti sono stati tradotti in arabo. Probabilmente l'Iraq è sempre in subbuglio perché gli iracheni leggono talmente tanti libri di tutti i generi che finiscono per mettere in discussione il mondo che li circonda. Quando ci si rende conto che il mondo può riservare tante belle cose, non si può fare a meno di fare un confronto con le proprie condizioni di vita. Ricordo che ai tempi del liceo riuscivo a leggere anche per sei o sette ore di seguito. Dimenticavo dove mi trovavo, soprattutto se il libro descriveva paesi che il governo di Saddam aveva dichiarato "off limits". Ma nessuno poteva impedirmi di visitare quei luoghi durante le mie letture. Ricordo anche che mi dispiaceva finire certi libri perché non volevo allontanarmi dai mondi che descrivevano.—

CHI SONO i tuoi scrittori preferiti?—

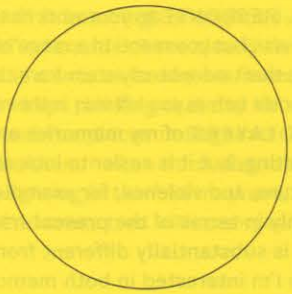
AMO MOLTO diversi scrittori, tra cui i premi Nobel già menzionati Pamuk e Saramago, il poeta irlandese Séamus Heaney, l'estone Czesław Miłosz e il colombiano Gabriel García Márquez. Ogni volta che leggo l'*Autunno del patriarca* lo trovo liberatorio perché mi ricorda che tutti i dittatori seguono essenzialmente la stessa parabola. Penso che il realismo magico di Márquez sia molto vicino alla mia pittura. A volte, durante le pause dal lavoro, leggo dieci o quindici pagine di quello straordinario libro, traendone sempre ispirazione.—

TI IDENTIFICHI anche con altri autori?—

SÌ, CON KAFKA. Sento la cupezza del suo stato d'animo in ogni frase che ha scritto. Mi fa sentire terribilmente depresso ma anche questa sensazione non mi dispiace. Non dubito mai della lotta di Kafka; è facile per me entrare nella pelle dei suoi personaggi, come, ad esempio, Gregorio, il protagonista della *Metamorfosi*. Quando leggo Kafka mi sento straordinariamente coinvolto, come se stessi leggendo le mie memorie.—

E PER QUANTO riguarda le tue letture di storia dell'arte o di critica d'arte?—

AMO CIÒ che ha scritto Rilke sulla pittura di Cézanne e in particolar modo l'intensità con cui ne descrive le forme. Per me i suoi scritti sull'arte sono poesia. Rilke tenta di colmare il divario tra poesia e pittura creando dipinti con le parole[4]. Anche *Sulla fotografia* di Susan Sontag[5] è importante per me perché descrive il modo in cui le immagini visive penetrano nel nostro cervello e, ciò che più importa per la mia pratica, analizza fotografie come quelle della guerra civile spagnola, elencando i fatti che le fanno da sfondo in modo da sottrarre un po' del loro potere emotivo. In quanto artista, trovo che questa presa di distanza sia molto utile perché mi indica la strada da seguire per affrontare i soggetti più duri e assicurare così ai miei dipinti la complessità e la sottigliezza di vere opere d'arte.—



AHMED ALSOUDANI

ROBERT HOBBS

The following interview took place on December 22, 2010 in the artist's New York City studio, located in the center of Chelsea. On the studio walls, there were paintings in different states of completion: some were slated for inclusion in the Palazzo Grassi exhibition "The World Belongs to You" and others for the Iraqi Pavilion at the Venice Biennale. Although Alsoudani is one of the four artists selected to represent Iraq, he has been an American citizen for the past five years.

LET'S BEGIN with your description of the large work before us.—

ALTHOUGH this piece will be "untitled," I'll refer to it as "the pit." Its space is intentionally closed; I used one-point perspective to define the locked-in corner on the right, which contributes to the dark chaos pervading this entire piece. The painting's action takes place in this inaccessible space. My figures are intentionally ambiguous—too much explicit violence would make them and the work itself inaccessible as art. In conceiving a work like "the pit," I first imagine a scene, then make it increasingly ambiguous while working on it. The pit on the right can be considered an escape: formally it breaks up the space, even though it makes this section of the painting much more threatening.

In this and in other works I've made in the past two years, I twist the figures together so that the arm of one person can serve as the limb of another. Rather than building characters out of fragments by placing one beside another, as I did

several years ago, I entwine figures in my work so they are forced to converse and interact. Sometimes this creates difficulties in seeing where one ends and the other begins, but it adds to the work's overall tension.
There are several unsettling details in this painting, such as the brain streaming out of one character's head. In a number of my paintings I place pieces of human flesh next to machines or wires to suggest disturbing and dangerous situations. However, I do not feel it is necessary to graphically delineate torture; just suggesting it is enough.
In this painting I associate my past memories with the black-and-white passages while defining present ones in terms of color.—

THE CRITICAL RESPONSE to your work has focused mainly on the Iraqi war, but you mention a range of memories and associations that undoubtedly stem from the first nineteen years of your life before you left Iraq in the mid-nineties.—

THE DEEPEST LAYERS of my memories are really important for my painting, but it is easier to look at the surface—to see war, torture, and violence, for example—and to consider my art only in terms of the present Iraqi war. But my own approach is substantially different from this first impression, since I'm interested in both memory and history and in those potent areas between the two that enable me to keep memories alive in the present.
It seems memories always start with small sensory details that we then connect with other impressions. This approach differs from Gestalt psychology and its emphasis on viewing parts in terms of overall patterns.—

SO CAN WE CONCLUDE that your art provides tellingly beautiful and even disturbing fragments, and then relies on viewers to cohere them into overall patterns?—

EXACTLY. But it is important to know that I myself am immersed in each work that I make; it is part of my life and my experiences. Viewers remain outside the work; in order to come to terms with one of my paintings they must walk back and forth, and in doing so, they move from seeing overall patterns to looking at discrete details.—

YOU SAY you are immersed in your work, and yet you always seem to keep an important critical distance. You seem very conscious of the fact that you are making art and not just exploiting your feelings about a given subject, even if that subject is the horror of war.—

IT MAY SOUND contradictory, but I count on my memories to make my paintings less emotionally involved. As an artist, it is important not to get too absorbed in my subject matter. The past events I have personally experienced, as well as the ones I have heard about from family and friends, get re-narrated in my head in such a way that I can see these remembered and imagined scenes from the outside. If I became too engaged in disturbing scenes, my work would be one-dimensional. Too much feeling takes circumstances out of the range of art. And I am convinced that my work must be art in order to survive. At present, I think a lot of the emotion that people find in my art comes from their own reading of it, a reading largely based on their knowledge of my Iraqi background and of the present war. —

IF I UNDERSTAND you, painting becomes much more subtly inflected than first feelings because such artistic media as the charcoal, pastel, and acrylic that you employ are capable of extending and thereby enhancing your initial emotional reactions with unforeseen beneficial surprises. Instead of resolving opposites into a simplified and ultimately simplistic point of view, then, your painting maintains the highly fecund and necessarily ambiguous area between such polarities as good and evil, right and wrong, past and present. Do you think this is so?—

YOUR QUESTION reminds me of an important passage appearing early in the Turkish novelist Orhan Pamuk's *Snow* when the character Ka, on his return to Turkey, becomes aware of the fact that snow, which has seemed from the time of his childhood to be associated with purity, no longer functions this way. Let me read the following section that describes this revelation: "Veiling as it did the dirt, the mud, and the darkness, the snow would continue to speak to Ka of purity, but after his first day in Kars it no longer promised innocence ... it no longer took him back to the white-covered streets of his childhood; no longer did he think ... that he was peering into a fairy tale; no longer was he returned to a place where he could enjoy the middle-class life he missed too much even to visit in his dreams. Instead, the snow spoke to him of hopelessness and misery".[1]—

AS YOU READ this, Ahmed, I kept thinking that Ka's new relationship with snow must resonate with your own connections to the primed white canvas on which you begin to work, as well as with your own feelings about Iraq in particular and the world in general. When I look at your completed paintings, with their often double reliance on drawing and painting, I'm reminded of the art of another Middle Eastern figure, the mid-20th-century American-Armenian artist Arshile Gorky, who was forced to leave Turkey because of the persecution of the Armenians. Yet his name has rarely been linked to your own. His art subjects his original pure-white and primed canvas to images of an ongoing process represented by both the generative phase of drawing and the executive one of painting. For me, the twinning of these techniques has definite affinities with your own work.—

AS AN UNDERGRADUATE I felt a deep connection with Gorky's art, with his complicated and violent life. He is an artist who cares about the surface of his work, and yet it looks as if it were made by two different personalities, both organized and disorganized.—

DO YOU EQUATE this difference with Gorky's penchant for combining drawing and painting?—

THIS COMBINATION requires working with different

moods. Nevertheless, my work is concerned with how to bridge the huge gap represented by drawing and painting. I associate drawing with the internalized activities of making art and looking inward; painting represents the final presentation of these thoughts and interests. Drawings are sketches that in traditional art are hidden most of the time; painting is art's public face. For me, both have a great deal to do with memory; both enable me to show the inner and the outer aspects of my memories. Drawing represents them more fluidly, while painting crystallizes them. Although I really love Gorky's art, I actually learned to apply paint by studying Ludwig Kirchner's work, not from looking at George Grosz's or Otto Dix's art, as many people think. To be perfectly frank, I've also learned far more about art from Max Beckmann's example than from any other painter's work.—

THE BECKMANN COMPARISON seems particularly apt in terms of the conflation of bodies and fragments in your work, but you go a step further with the sharp breaks between your monochromatic passages and the more colorful ones. Do you ascribe a symbolic meaning to this difference?—

FOR ME THE GRAYS and browns work well with the theme of chaos and with the type of reality found in black-and-white photographs. But I do not need to present all information the same way. As an artist looking at my own experiences, I prefer an unexpected color palette because the reality I present is already so heavy. Color allows me to attract viewers and guide them initially through my paintings. When one sees a section painted in purple, for example, one is attracted to it; then one might find on closer looking that the purple might be part of a hand that has been amputated. Similarly, orange and pink areas might appear to be the colors of flowers, but when one comes closer, they represent a piece of human flesh. It's important not to use color just as a decorative element. My approach to color is similar to the late Medieval and Renaissance painters depicting the dead Christ, which I saw at the Gemäldegalerie when living in Berlin. Although these historic works were painted in intense hues, when I came close to them and studied the figures' tortured faces, I would forget about the colors at that point, the works would become abstract.—

THERE IS A NOTABLE disparity between color and subject matter in your work similar to that found in Philip Guston's tortured late paintings, which are even more ironic and painful because of being conceived in jubilant and even sweet hues. Since you left the Middle East several years before the U.S.'s second war with Iraq, how do you reconcile making works that, on one level at least, focus on aspects of this and other wars when you yourself have not personally witnessed their effects?—

MY WORK is not only about Iraq, and it is not intended to be a first-person account of war. It's about the effects of war, which I can understand through contact with family and friends in Iraq as well as through the media. My personal investment in Iraq is huge, but it has also made me aware of how similar all wars are in terms of the ways they are waged and their ultimate devastation.
It's hard for people in the West to realize that every single day Arabic television shows new images of tortures taking place in such countries as Syria and Saudi Arabia. Abu Ghraib became such a big deal because the U.S. was involved in tortures that played a major role in propaganda campaigns against the U.S. Those Middle Eastern journalists, who only focused on the U.S. and not on similar practices throughout the Middle East, are just as bad as those American guards who tortured Iraqi prisoners. On a personal level, I am of course disappointed with the U.S. because I thought that it was better than the rest of the world. When I saw on TV the first bombings of Baghdad—the so-called "shock and awe"—I could not see clearly through my tears. TV shows what it wants us to see—a fireworks display, in this case—but I kept thinking that day about the people I could not see and the places in Baghdad that were being destroyed. Since then, I often think about the words of an American pilot fighting in the first Iraqi war, who described Baghdad as a Christmas tree with orange lights before he bombed it.—

WHAT EXACTLY are your tribal and familial affiliations? When I lived and worked in Iran in the seventies, people were very proud of their tribal connections. Is the same true of Iraq?—

MY FATHER'S FAMILY name is Alsoudani; the word means "the Soudani tribe," which everyone in Iraq knows is Shia. This tribe is found in the south and in Najaf, Shia Moslems' holy city. My mother comes from the Alsalem tribe in Baghdad. My father had a company for manufacturing paint cans, while my mother's uncles owned and operated paint companies.—

IN A PARTICULARLY insightful section of the interview with your gallerist Robert Goff, you relate a poignant story about the last time you saw your father. After you had defaced a Saddam Hussein mural as a teenage prank with a couple of friends, you were forced to escape the country to avoid reprisals. Although you and your father did not speak of your departure, you knew he was aware of your going. In the Goff interview you mention that, "his [my father's] eyes follow[ed] me everywhere I moved," and you note, "As I left the house I felt someone watching me and I turned around and saw my father watching me from behind the curtain of the second-floor window."[2] Since your father's look plays such an important role in your last memory of your home, and since eyes are an important element punctuating your work, I wonder if seeing itself also has special resonances for you, perhaps because of old superstitions about the evil eye or because of the eye's prominence in ancient Mesopotamian cultures.—

HAMMURABI, the priest-king and first ruler of the Babylonian Empire, is known through a famous sculpture of him that appears in many introductory art history books;

in this sculpture Hammurabi's eyes take up one third of the face. In Iraq we traditionally consider the eye to be a window to the soul. In Assyrian art, the eye also plays a major role. There is a belief that the eye can see within as well as without. The eye is a forceful and important element in past and present Iraqi culture, and people do fear it as a force of evil. When I grew up, children wore turquoise and ceramic amulets called *khudrmah* to ward off the evil eye, which was thought capable of attacking a child's head. I myself wore one. Mostly boys would wear these amulets centered on their forehead and bound in place by being tied to the hair. In recent years *khudrmah* have become women's jewelry.—

WHAT ROLE does the eye play in your own art?—

SO MANY UNCONSCIOUS things from one's culture force their way into you. I was born in Baghdad and spent time in museums as a child. I'm still haunted by a number of images, including a famous Babylonian relief of a wounded lioness. Perhaps because of my connections with ancient art, I do not subscribe to the idea of the evil eye. The eye is a positive window that allows me to see behind a scene. It is the statement and the affirmation, "I was there, I was watching." I expect viewers will make eye contact with the eyes in my work. When that occurs, I think that viewers feel the stirring of another life. The paintings function as other persons; they are not dead.

In addition to connecting eyes with seeing and with the viewers who look at my painting, as well as with the act of making the results of torture visible, I'm intrigued with blindness. A very important book for me is the Portuguese writer José Saramago's *Blindness*. In this book I find the following passage aligning blindness with prejudice very meaningful, because it connects sight with its dark side, and this also is an important theme in my work: "Say to a blind man, you're free, open the door that was separating him from the world. Go, you are free, we tell him once more, and he does not go, he has remained motionless there in the middle of the road, he and the others, they are terrified, they do not know where to go ..."[3]—

THE PASSAGE is certainly moving. I'm reminded of Robert Smithson's emphasis on seeing and non-seeing in his art. What about the tremendously vital energy in your art, which works in tandem with the images of eyes, with the concomitant contravening themes of sight and blindness, and with the surrogate selves found in your paintings?—

SUMERIAN AND BABYLONIAN reliefs are notable for their open communication. They are unlike Egyptian scenes that respect clearly defined borders and are consequently static. In both Sumerian and Babylonian art, there is a lot of movement and energy. These are important forces that encourage me to continue ancient scenes in my head as I move beyond their borders. In my work I continue this idea of accessibility since there is no one way to read a composition by looking at it from left to right or from right to left.—

DOES THIS Sumerian and Babylonian openness continue in your work in terms of its coupled reliance on both drawing and painting? Unlike traditional painting, which usually covers the initial drawing, your completed works remain open to the full range of processes involved in making paintings, as we discussed earlier.—

THE MOST IMPORTANT element in my work is keeping time and movement alive. When I select a scene, I want to paint works that will have the power of the famous televised scene of the toppling of Saddam's statue, a scene of orchestrated chaos. In my own work I hope to capture an extended moment of time moving and myself circling around it without stopping, a process of capturing both time and movement.—

I UNDERSTAND that when you were growing up, your connections with literature were extraordinarily strong; it was as important to you as it is now. What effect do you think this has had on you and your art?—

IN IRAQ we have traditionally had huge bookstores. Almost all the big prize winning books and classics have been translated into Arabic. The reason Iraq is always in trouble is no doubt because we Iraqis read so many different types of books that we start questioning the world around us. When one sees the world presented in beautiful ways, one can't help but make comparisons with one's own circumstances.

In high school I remember reading books for six or seven hours at a time. I would forget where I was, especially if the book described cities Saddam's government declared "off limits." No one could stop me from traveling to those places in my reading. I remember often feeling very sad when I finished some books because I did not want to leave the worlds they presented.—

WHO ARE some of your favorite writers?—

THERE ARE A NUMBER. They include Nobel Prize winners such as the aforementioned Pamuk and Saramago, the Irish poet Séamus Heaney, the Estonian Czesław Miłosz, and the Columbian Gabriel García Márquez. I continue to find Márquez's *Autumn of a Patriarch* liberating because it reminds me that all dictators follow the same essential rules. I think that Márquez's magical realism is very close to my painting. Sometimes, when I'm taking breaks from my work, I'll read just ten or fifteen pages of this incredible book, and it inspires me.—

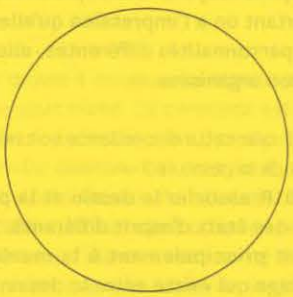
ARE THERE other authors with whom you identify?—

KAFKA. I feel the darkness of his mood in every single sentence he writes. It makes me feel really depressed, but I also love that feeling. I can never doubt Kafka's struggle; it's easy for me to wear the skin of his characters, such as Gregor in *The Metamorphosis*. When I read Kafka, I experience a particularly intense involvement, like I'm reading my own memories.—

WHAT ABOUT art historical or critical readings?—

I REALLY LOVE Rilke's writings about Cézanne's paintings,

especially the way Rilke is involved in describing shapes. For me his critical writing is poetry. Rilke tries to bridge the gap between poetry and painting by creating paintings with his words.[4] Also, Susan Sontag's *On Photography*[5] is important to me because it describes how visual images can slip into our brains. But it is even more significant to my practice because Sontag breaks down such images as photographs of the Spanish Civil War by enumerating the facts around them, so they lose some of their affective power. As an artist, I find this type of distancing helpful because it suggests a way for me to cope with the tough subjects in my work and to ensure that my finished paintings are indeed complex and subtle works of art.—



AHMED ALSOUDANI
ROBERT HOBBS

L'interview suivante a eu lieu le 22 décembre 2010 dans l'atelier new-yorkais de l'artiste, au cœur de Chelsea. Aux murs de l'atelier étaient accrochés des tableaux à des stades différents d'exécution, certains étant destinés à l'exposition « Le Monde vous appartient » de Palazzo Grassi, d'autres au pavillon irakien de la Biennale de Venise. Bien qu'il soit l'un des quatre artistes choisis pour représenter l'Irak, Alsoudani est citoyen américain depuis déjà cinq ans.

QUE DIRIEZ-VOUS de commencer par décrire le grand tableau qui se trouve devant nous?—

IL EST DESTINÉ à rester « sans titre », mais moi je l'appelle « le puits ». Dans ce tableau, l'espace est volontairement clos ; j'ai utilisé une perspective linéaire centrale pour définir l'angle fermé à droite, ce qui concourt à créer l'atmosphère de sombre chaos qui envahit l'œuvre. L'action se déroule dans cet espace inaccessible. Mes figures sont délibérément ambiguës – une violence trop explicite ne permettrait pas de considérer ces figures ni l'œuvre elle-même comme de l'art. Pour réaliser des œuvres comme celle-ci, dans un premier temps j'imagine une scène puis je la rends de plus en plus ambiguë au fur et à mesure que le travail avance. Le puits sur la droite peut être vu comme une voie de fuite ; d'un point de vue formel, il brise l'espace, même s'il rend beaucoup plus menaçante cette partie du tableau. Dans ce travail et dans d'autres réalisés au cours des deux dernières années, j'ai fait en sorte de croiser les figures pour que le bras de l'une puisse servir de membre à une autre. Plutôt que de construire des personnages à partir de fragments placés les uns à côté des autres, comme je le faisais dans le passé, j'ai entrelacé les figures pour les contraindre à dialoguer et à interagir ; parfois il n'est donc pas évident de comprendre où commence une figure et où se termine l'autre, mais de cette manière on renforce la tension d'ensemble de l'œuvre.
Certains détails de cette peinture sont horribles, comme par exemple la cervelle giclant de la tête de l'un des personnages. Dans certains tableaux, j'insère des lambeaux de chair humaine à côté de machines ou de câbles électriques pour suggérer des situations inquiétantes et dangereuses. Toutefois, il ne me semble pas nécessaire de décrire en détail des scènes de torture, il suffit de suggérer.
Dans cette peinture, j'ai associé mes souvenirs passés aux surfaces en noir et blanc et j'ai utilisé la couleur pour définir le présent.—

LES CRITIQUES se sont focalisés sur les références de votre travail à la guerre en Irak, mais il me semble que vous faites allusion à des souvenirs et à des associations qui remontent aux dix-neuf premières années de votre vie, avant que vous ne quittiez l'Irak vers le milieu des années quatre-vingt-dix.—

LES COUCHES LES plus profondes de ma mémoire sont très importantes pour mon travail, mais il est plus facile de se limiter à ce qui est en surface – la guerre, la torture et la violence par exemple – et d'interpréter mon art seulement en fonction de l'actuelle guerre en Irak. Mais mon approche est très différente de ce que peut suggérer cette première impression ; je m'intéresse aussi bien à l'histoire qu'à la mémoire et, entre les deux, à l'espace qui est tellement puissant qu'il me permet de garder les souvenirs vivants dans le présent.
On dirait que les souvenirs naissent toujours de la perception sensorielle de petits détails que nous mettons ensuite en relation avec d'autres impressions. C'est une approche très différente de celle de la *Gestaltpsychologie* qui tend à intégrer les détails dans des schémas plus vastes.—

ON PEUT DONC dire que votre art se contente de fournir des fragments évocateurs et même inquiétants que l'observateur doit lui-même assembler pour créer une vision d'ensemble, n'est-ce pas?—

C'EST TOUT À FAIT ça. Mais il est important de savoir que je m'immerge totalement dans chaque travail que je réalise ; chaque travail fait partie intégrante de ma vie et de mes expériences. L'observateur reste en dehors de l'œuvre ; pour établir un contact avec l'une de mes peintures, il doit s'éloigner puis se rapprocher ; de cette manière, il passera d'une vision d'ensemble à une vision centrée sur chaque détail.—

VOUS AVEZ DIT vous immerger dans vos travaux, il semble pourtant que vous gardiez toujours une grande distance critique. Vous paraissez bien conscient du fait de faire de l'art