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Unfolding Narratives from Iraq: Rafa Nasiri's Book Art¹

"Unlike paintings, or sculptures, or films, books are created for *one-on-one interactions*. They are, by nature, *zones of privacy*. There is no way, short of censorship, for an outside observer to monitor or control the *intimate encounters* they offer."
(Holland Cotter, 2004. "Introduction," in Johanna Drucker *The Century of Artists' Books*. New York: Granary Books)

"Silent Reading allows unwitnessed communication between the book and the reader, and the singular 'refreshing of the mind' in Augustine's happy phrase."
(Alberto Manguel, 1996. *A History of Reading*. New York: Viking)

"What people used to call liberty and freedom, we now call privacy [...] when we lose privacy, we lose agency, we lose liberty itself because we no longer feel free to express what we think."
(Jacob Appelbaum, 2014. In Laura Poitras' film *Citizenfour*)

Introduction

When I first visited Rafa Nasiri's studio in Amman, Jordan, in September 2014, about a year after he passed away, I was overwhelmed by the artist's virtual presence like a warm, welcoming smile that filled his studio as the sunlight came in through the large windows. I could almost hear him talk and laugh. It was a wonderful and intimate encounter. As much as I regretted not having met the artist in his lifetime, I was grateful that I was able to meet him through his art, and especially his book art, after his death. Opening one book after another, ranging from limited edition portfolios to one-of-a-kind objects and note- and sketchbooks, in his studio, I was confronted with questions about art and life, and more precisely, art and politics, as many of his books document the violence and destruction that his country, Iraq, has gone through in recent years: from the Iran-Iraq War of the 1980s to the Gulf War of 1991, the long and devastating years of embargo and continued air strikes throughout the 1990s, to the Iraq War of 2003, occupation, and its aftermath of looting and sectarian violence. But I also came across love and passion despite everything, almost as a way of fighting back, a form of resistance, an affirmation of the artist's existence and celebration of life, a strategy of survival despite war.

Some of Nasiri's books incorporate Arabic literature, both classical and modern. They open a dialogue with the Arabic literary heritage, carrying it over into the present, a different temporal context, where it comes into a new prominence. Other books are more grounded in the here and now of everyday life, including diary-like entries about the devastating experience of war, destruction, and loss. Looking at the books and touching them as I took them into my hands and turned their pages, I contemplated the very nature of books: What form can a book take? Do books have lives of their own and what happens when they travel from one reader or public to another across time, place,

My Journey to China (Rihlati ila al-Sin),
2012, Beirut
Book cover

and language? Can books come to an end, disappear, and die? Why do we care about books? How do we read books? When and why do we resort to books? Do we learn from books, do we seek comfort in them? Where do books take us? The list of questions could go on. The history of the book goes hand in hand with innovations in media and technology, from mechanical to electronic reproduction, which have been perceived as threats to book production and culture, but the above questions come with heightened political urgency in times of war, when the very idea of the book is threatened by violence and destruction.

This study aims at situating Nasiri's book art in the larger context of contemporary art and book art in particular, both locally and globally. After outlining Nasiri's artistic trajectory, I give a brief survey of contemporary book art in Iraq, and then focus on a selection of Nasiri's books. Firmly grounded in Iraq, its rich cultural heritage as well as its troubled present, Nasiri's book art draws inspiration from different artistic traditions closely related to eastern and western paper-, book- and printmaking, from the Arab world but also from China and Europe. Drawing on Lydia H. Liu and Judith T. Zeitlin's definition of writing given in their introduction to *Writing and Materiality in China*, I understand the book and by extension book art "not as an artefact inert and complete unto itself but as something in a constant state of motion and flux" (2003: 1). Accordingly, the idea of travel, as explored by Edward Said in his seminal collection of essays *The World, the Text, and the Critic* (1983), figures prominently. Said foregrounds the worldliness of a text, its journey into the world as it travels beyond authorial control but also out of a given time, place, context, and situation into another. "The point is", he says, "that texts have ways of existing that even in their most rarefied form are always enmeshed in circumstance, time, place, and society – in short, they are in the world, hence worldly" (1983: 263). In *Routes: Travel and Translation in the Late Twentieth Century*, James Clifford conceives of travels and contacts as "crucial sites for an unfinished modernity" marked by "displacement, tangled cultural experiences, structures, and possibilities of an increasingly connected but not homogeneous world" (1997: 2). Nasiri's book art partakes in such travels and contacts in search of an Arab modernism in which Iraq was to take centre stage,² challenging monolithic notions of modernism that align this term with Western art only. As I argue, Nasiri's book art complicates the relation of word and image, content and form, what is inside the book, between book covers, and what lies outside it – the word and the world, bringing to mind Derrida's famous line that "*there is nothing outside the text* [there is no outside-text; *il n'y a pas de hors-texte*]" (1997: 158). Questioning the divide between inside and outside, the book does not only move out into the world; rather, it is the world. In drawing attention to the very materiality of the book, its thing-ness, Nasiri's book art gives voice to human concerns and expresses what Liu and Zeitlin describe as "cultural anxiety about the death of writing" (2003: 15), about the destruction of books and entire libraries, which ultimately is our death, the end of civilization as we conceive it. At the same time, it holds on to the dream of a better world, offering hope and solace in unfolding narratives from Iraq that take manifold and strikingly beautiful forms as they tell of loss and longing but also of survival and intimate encounters.

Rafa Nasiri's artistic trajectory

Born in Tikrit, about 140 km northwest of Baghdad on the Tigris River, in 1940, then a small town of probably no more than 3000 inhabitants,³ Nasiri spent his childhood years in the safe haven of a big and loving family of middle class background, his father serving as mayor in Tikrit. In his 2012 autobiographical account *Rihlati ila al-Sin (My Journey to China)*, he recalls the spacious house the family used to live in, the big wooden entry door and the balcony with its wooden columns and decorated ceiling. He also remembers the family's library, which included history books as well as religious texts and literary works in addition to Egyptian journals and Iraqi newspapers (20 and 25). The city of Tikrit, its landscape and colours but also the surrounding archaeological sites left a profound impact on Nasiri.

"During my childhood, and owing to repeated visits to an Islamic archaeological site called The Tomb of the Forty, I became in a way connected to Islamic artifacts. This was a mosque with a burial chamber for forty of the Prophet's Companions who were martyred on the outskirts of our city Tikrit. We used to climb the plaster dome and walls of the shrine and play ball in its yard. The fragrance of incense that transfused from its cellar still haunts me every now and then." (Quoted in Muzaffar 2010: 79; my translation)

Nasiri's fascination with Iraq's archaeological heritage increased, when in secondary school he started to get interested in art. He in particular recalls his art teacher, Sabir Rashid, who had studied with the great Iraqi artist Faiq Hassan (1914-92) at the Institute of Fine Arts in Baghdad. Hassan was one of the first artists in Iraq to receive a state-funded scholarship to study art abroad at the École Nationale Supérieure des Beaux-Arts in Paris. He was a founding member of the Société Primitive, later renamed the Pioneers (*al-ruwwad*), and played an important role as an artist and educator throughout the 1940s and 1950s in promoting art that expressed feelings of national belonging and pride.⁴ Nasiri himself enrolled at the Institute of Fine Arts in Baghdad, when his father's tenure in

Courtesy to Sonja Mejcher-Atassi and Mario Hawat



Tikrit ended and the family moved to Baghdad in 1956. At the institute, he also studied painting with Faiq Hassan. His other teachers were Atta Sabri (1913-87), trained in Rome and London, Ismail al-Shaikly (1924-2002), trained in Baghdad and Paris, and Faraj Abbo (1921-84), trained in Cairo, Baghdad, and Rome.⁵ He also attended classes in sculpture with Khalid al-Rahhal (1926-83), who had studied in Rome, and Jawad Salim (1919-61), who had studied in Paris, Rome, and London. Referred to as the pioneers of modern sculpture in Iraq, their art works gave new identities to public places in Baghdad. Al-Rahhal's sculpture *Motherhood (al-umuma)* came to mark the entrance to the Garden of the Nation (hadiqat al-umma), which before the 1958 revolution was called the Garden of King Ghazi (hadiqat al-malik Ghazi), the largest park in Baghdad. Jawad Salim's *Monument of Freedom (nasb al-huriyya)*, consisting of fourteen bronze sculptures inserted onto a travertine wall that was lifted six meters above the ground, conceived together with the architect Rifat al-Jadirji (b. 1926), turned the adjacent newly built Tahrir Square into a symbol of liberty and self-rule, as Jala Makhzoumi points out:

“Following the 1958 revolution, Tahrir Square came to be seen as a symbol of the Iraqi people's struggle for liberty and self-rule; the theme of Jawad Salim's bronze statues of the Hurriya Monument. The post-revolution euphoria infected all, intellectuals and artists, teachers and lawyers. Tahrir Square came to personify the dream come true, a place of celebrations, but also for mob killings and, two decades later, public hangings.”(2016)

In *My Journey to China*, Nasiri remembers his professors at the Institute of Fine Arts as role models in art and life alike. Especially Salim stood out for his strong personality, modesty, and sincere interest in his students (2012: 50). Nasiri does not say much about the turbulent political events in Iraq in the 1950s but he does mention the political tension and violence, as profound social and political change took root (2012: 54).

The 14 July 1958 revolution replaced the British backed Hashemite monarchy with a republic under the leadership of the Free Officers and Brigadier Abd al-Karim Qasim. Nuri al-Said, who had served as Prime Minister under the monarchy, was killed together with King Faisal II and other members of the royal family. Qasim assumed office as Prime Minister and remained in office until he was killed, when the Ba'ath Party seized power in 1963. Whereas Iraq was closely tied to Western policies with the Baghdad Pact of 1955, new alliances were now in the making, especially with the Soviet Union but also with the People's Republic of China, communism figuring as a major movement in Iraq throughout the 1940s and 1950s (Batatu 1978). While books and journals from the United Arab Republic were banned, Qasim seeking a path different from Gamal Abd al-Nasser in Egypt and his pan-Arab ideology, “Marxist classics, Soviet novels, Mao's writings and poems, Zhdanov's treaties on literature, Stalin's tracts, and even his pictures, were displayed prominently in bookshops” in Baghdad in the late 1950s (Yousif 1991: 187).

Nasiri graduated from the Institute of Fine Arts with a BA in painting in 1959, only one year after the revolution. He did not witness much of the new developments as he left the country in 1959 on one of the scholarships from the Iraqi Ministry of Education made available by China, the Soviet Union, and East European countries. He was one of four Iraqi students to go to China: his friend Tariq Ibrahim (b. 1938), who like him had graduated from the Institute of Fine Arts in Baghdad, studied ceramics and he studied printmaking at the

Central Academy of Fine Arts in Beijing. Nasiri explains his choice to go to China in artistic terms, having visited a major exhibition of Chinese art in Baghdad organized by the Chinese embassy in spring 1959, which included drawings, printwork, and traditional porcelain and impressed him deeply. As he says, he wanted to specialize in a new art form, which did not exist in Iraq at the time, namely graphic art, engraving, and printmaking (2012: 54-56) – an art form that remains much understudied in the Arab world, as he points out in his book *Fann al-ghrafik al-mu'asir (Contemporary Graphic Art in Iraq)*: “It is possible to say that painting is the only field within contemporary Arab art to be dealt with by writers, historians, critics, and translators. There are studies, books, and albums published either locally or globally, which take up this subject. Yet sculpture and graphic art never became as popular; and most specifically graphic art did not receive the attention it deserves. Thirty years have passed since its inception (professional beginnings) in the Arab world, and it is surprising that libraries in the Arab world are almost void (except rarely) of any information, be that in Arabic or in translation, that deals with the definition of this art or provides the Arab reader with resources that could develop his artistic literacy in this vital and important field of visual art.” (1997: 5; my translation.)

His decision was and continues to be an exceptional one for artists in Iraq, and indeed the Arab world, as most of his teachers had continued their studies in Europe, be it in Rome, Paris, or London, as pointed out above. His move to China was made possible by the new geopolitical developments since the Bandung conference of 1955, an important step towards the Non-Alignment Movement, which Iraq joined as a member state in 1961 and which promoted Afro-Asian economic and cultural relations to resist colonial and neo-colonial domination. Not much has been written about cultural relations between the Arab world and China in modern times.⁶ China is known for its long history of the book (Edgren 2013). The book, in diverse materials and forms, from bamboo and silk scroll books to paper, was highly valued as an aesthetic object and “believed by many to have a certain sacred quality or power,” as Cynthia J. Brokaw points out (2005: 3). China is also known for its old printmaking techniques, in particular woodblock print, which was used on textile and paper, long before Gutenberg's invention of mechanical moveable type printing in Europe, which was to play a key role in the scientific revolution and greatly impacted book culture not only in Europe but worldwide. It was from China, through Central Asia, that paper was introduced into the Arab world in the ninth century, where due to its inexpensiveness, portability, and durability it led to “an explosion of book production and the transmission of knowledge in medieval Muslim societies from the 10th century onwards” (Roper 2013: 528). China opened a new world to Nasiri, yet one that not only shared with Iraq a rich tradition of writing and of the book but also, in his eyes, a sensibility and spirituality close to Islamic philosophy (2013: 25).

After a year of language training, Nasiri studied printmaking. He received a BA in 1963, taking the Chinese saying that a journey of a thousand miles begins with a single step attributed to the Chinese philosopher Laozi (c. 604-531 BC) as his guideline (2012: 76). His teacher Li Hua (1907-94), who headed the Department of Printmaking, was a renown communist and woodcut artist deeply inspired by the German expressionist artist Käthe Kollwitz (1867-1945) and committed to the idea of popular art as a means to fight



Drawing, 1962, Beijing
70 x 50 cm

foreign domination and poverty, often with sharp realism.⁷ Another of his teachers was Huang Yongyu (b. 1924), today in his nineties and known internationally for his woodblock prints but also his watercolour and ink paintings in the tradition of Qi Baishi (1864-1957). Nasiri refers to Qi Baishi as the spiritual father of modern Chinese art. He was especially influential in his exploration of calligraphic forms, the use of Arabic letters in his art (2012: 64). Some of the woodcuts Nasiri did as a student clearly show his teachers' influence and are set in a Chinese context, showing people, houses, and landscapes in China, but he also applied the newly acquired techniques to an Iraqi context, as his deeply moving portrait of his mother and a more abstract depiction of a young Iraqi woman show. The latter is set against the background of the Tigris-Euphrates marchlands in southern Iraq, whose inhabitants are believed to be the descendants of ancient Sumerians. The crescent shaped lines of the woman's eyes are repeated in the arched reed boats and houses in the background as an abstract element of the composition – reminiscent of the use of the crescent in Jawad Salim's famous series of paintings entitled *Baghdadiyat* (1954-56), after the so-called Baghdad school of painting of the famous thirteenth century calligrapher and manuscript painter Yahya al-Wasiti. The form of the crescent was a recurring image in Salim's art work, linking it to modern abstract art and the local Iraqi context at the same time. China left a lasting impact on Nasiri's life and art. At the Central Academy of Fine Arts, he was given a Chinese name, as he recalls in *My Journey to China*: Luna, consisting of "lu", a common Chinese name, and "na" taken from the first two letters of his last name. As regards his book art, the Chinese sketchbook, used for the design of the book cover of his *My Journey to China*, came to play a major role, as it unfolds accordion-like into a scroll of at times more than two meters, comparable to the surface of a large canvas yet foldable into the portable size of a book.

Having travelled throughout China and back and forth between Beijing and Baghdad by train, Nasiri returned to Baghdad only to embark on a new journey. Together with his two brothers, he travelled throughout the Arab world and Europe, visiting the world's most famous art museums in Rome, Madrid, Paris, Amsterdam, and London. In 1967, just a week after the *hazima*, the Arab defeat in the June War, he left on a scholarship from the Gulbenkian Foundation to continue his studies in printmaking at the Gravura in Lisbon, Portugal. He also gained experience in printmaking at Stanley William Hayter's Atelier 17, known later as Atelier Contrepoint, in Paris. It was in the late 1960s that Nasiri turned his attention to the use of the Arabic letter in painting, discovering the Arabic letter and acrylics as his new means of expression, as in a number of his paintings since the 1960s but also in his book art, that allowed him to further explore abstract art and affirm his Iraqi and Arab identity at the same time (2012: 102).

"During my stay in Portugal in 1968, I was for the first time dedicated to painting apart from printmaking. This came after getting acquainted with acrylic paint, a substance that I found had the amazing ability of allowing the artist to paint with both ease and transparency. I can therefore say that my true experience as a professional artist started at the time of this discovery. At the same time, *the correlation between my work with painting and engraving started here: the relationship of colour and line, mass and void, shadow and light.*" (Quoted in Muzaffar 2010: 75; my translation and emphasis)

Chinese Girls, 1961, Beijing
Woodcut, 15 x 20 cm



Summer Palace, 1960, Beijing
Woodcut, 15 x 20 cm



Back in Baghdad, Nasiri soon emerged as a leading artist of the sixties generation. The expression “sixties generation” has been used by the Iraqi writer Abdul Kader El Janabi to refer to “a lost generation [...] A generation that was to disappoint a good many families by giving up everything for the publication of a poem, a novella or an article. A generation that deserted the cities of Iraq to fill the cafés of the capital, in the heart of Baghdad, and that was called by the name of ‘the generation of the sixties’.” (1998: 19) It was a generation that had hoped through its writing and art to make a difference and to contribute to the development of its country and society. Together with Dia Azzawi (b. 1939), Ismail Fattah (1934-2004), Hashim Samarchi (b. 1939), Mohammad Muhr al-Din (b. 1938), and Saleh

My Mother, 1963, Beijing
Woodcut, 35 x 25 cm



A Girl from Al Ahwar (marshes), 1965,
Baghdad
Woodcut, 60 x 40 cm



al-Jumaie (b. 1939), Nasiri founded the New Vision Group (*al-ru'iyā al-jadida*) in 1969. What distinguished it from previous groups, such as the Baghdad Group for Modern Art (*ġama'at Baghdad lil-fann al-hadith*), founded in 1951 by Jawad Salim, Shakir Hassan Al Said (1925-2004), and Jabra Ibrahim Jabra (1919-94), who had found exile in Baghdad after the *nakba* of 1948,⁸ was the use of new media and techniques, such as printmaking and graphic art, especially the artistic poster. The New Vision Group did not call for common stylistic trends; rather its members came together around intellectual and political ideas. The 1967 *hazima* fresh in their minds, they aimed at a closer relation of art and politics, foregrounding notions of revolution, freedom, anti-imperialism, social justice, and political change. In the group's manifesto, Azzawi writes: "We reject the artist of partitions and boundaries. We advance. We fall. But we will not retreat. Meanwhile, we present the world with our new vision [...] We reject social relations resulting from false masks and we reject what is given to us out of charity. We are the ones to achieve justification of our existence through our journey of change ..." (Quoted in Shabout 2007a: 126)⁹

Revisiting the relation of heritage to modernity, the New Vision Group placed emphasis on change, favouring a free and playful use of tradition. Taking the present as its starting point, tradition was not perceived as a value in and of itself; rather, it was approached through the lived experience of the time. Nasiri opened the Graphic Arts Department at the Institute of Fine Arts in 1974, remaining its director until 1988, having opened his private studio, Rafa Nasiri Graphic Studio, one year before his retirement in 1987. However, the hopes and dreams of his generation of artists for a better future – in liberty, self rule, prosperity, and peace, as depicted in Jawad Salim's *Monument of Freedom* – were utterly shattered by the rise of the Ba'ath party as Iraq's only political player, especially after the coup d'état of 1968, and the rise to power of Saddam Hussein, his de facto presidency since the mid-1970s, de jure since 1979.¹⁰ While the sixties generation did not achieve its political goals, it did excel artistically. Documenting Iraq's modern history marked by political crisis and dictatorship, then war and destruction, in its artistic practices, it has managed to make a unique contribution to the field of modern art, pushing Arab modernism to new horizons. This said, many intellectuals, artists, and writers paid a heavy price, some were imprisoned or executed for their political views, others left the country. Whereas Azzawi, who has contributed significantly to modern Iraqi art and book art in particular as an artist and a collector, left for London in 1976,¹¹ Nasiri stayed in Baghdad. He found some solace in visiting Beirut, where he had exhibited his work since the late 1960s, first at Gallery One founded by the Lebanese-Syrian poet Yusuf al-Khal (1917-97), then at Contact Art Gallery opened by the Iraqi art collector and gallerist Waddah Faris (b. 1940). Both galleries played key roles in promoting modern art in the region and were important outlets for Iraqi artists. In Beirut, Nasiri met with other artists and writers around the literary journal *Shi'r*, among them al-Khal, the Iraqi poet Sargon Boulos (1944-2007), and the Syrian novelist Ghada al-Samman (b. 1942). Despite Saddam Hussein's dictatorial rule and the Iran-Iraq War, cultural zeal persisted, with art academies, museums, and festivals receiving significant funding. The situation deteriorated significantly with the Gulf War of 1991 and the long and devastating years of the UNSC imposed sanctions and continuous US and British military strikes throughout the 1990s, which led the country into a hitherto unknown isolation.

After the Gulf War, Nasiri left for Amman, Jordan, which has figured as a place between the homeland and exile. Nasiri taught at Yarmouk University and founded the Graphic Studio at Darat al-Funun of the Khalid Shoman Foundation, an important platform for visual art in the Arab world located in Amman. From 1997 to 2003, he taught at Bahrain University. On his return to Amman, he again opened a studio of his own, al-Muhtaraf. Nasiri moved a significant part of his art work from Baghdad to Amman to hold a major retrospective at the National Gallery for Fine Arts in Amman in November 2013, *Rafa Nasiri: 50 Years of Printmaking*, only a month before he passed away after a long battle with cancer. His widow, the Iraqi poet and art critic May Muzaffar (b. 1940), has since turned his studio into a private museum.

Nasiri participated in group-exhibitions and international festivals, including the International Triennials in New Delhi, the International Poster Biennials in Warsaw, the International Graphic Biennials in Fredrikstad, and Intergrafik Berlin. He held his first individual exhibitions in Baghdad in the mid 1960s, exhibitions in Kuwait, Beirut, Casablanca, and Amman, later also in Paris, London, Dubai, and Manama followed. In the United States, the only exhibitions he participated in were organized after the Gulf War of 1991 and the Iraq War of 2003, which triggered interest in art from Iraq not so much for aesthetic reasons but as a source of information or diplomatic tool to show another face of war-torn Iraq. Nasiri's artistic trajectory speaks of modes of circulation often forgotten or overshadowed by notions of world literature or global art that define the entry of books or art works into the world by their arrival into Western markets.

Book art in Iraq

The beginnings of book art are usually associated with a specific European context, namely the illustrated book, the *livre d'artiste*, which emerged as a publishing enterprise initiated by art dealers, such as Ambroise Vollard and Daniel-Henry Kahnweiler, in *fin-de-siècle* France as a reaction to the mass-produced book.¹² The definition of the book and book art has aroused much scrutiny, first with the historical avant-garde of the early twentieth century, then in the 1960s and 1970s, when new forms of book art started to proliferate worldwide in the context of socio-political activism coupled to technological advancement, reproducible media, such as print and in particular offset print. Especially the artistic poster became "a privileged site for the elaboration of a new self-identified Third World aesthetics" (Davies 2015). Whereas the artistic poster is meant for public display and mass communication, book art is more closely tied to the private sphere and difficult to exhibit publicly since it demands engagement, often one-to-one interaction between the book and the reader. This said, books have always had a political character, constituting one of the oldest forms of documenting history and, at the same time, providing "zones of privacy, making possible intimate encounters," as Holland Cotter says in his introduction to Johanna Drucker's *A Century of Artists' Books* (2004: xv). They promote a reading practice – silent reading – that finds ways around state control and censorship, as described by Alberto Manguel in *A History of Reading* as "unwitnessed communication between the book and the reader" (1996: 51). Book art has come a long way from the traditional *livre d'artiste*. It today includes inexpensive multiples as well as valuable one-of-a-kind objects.¹³

Not much has been written about book art in the Arab world. Iraq has found its way into Drucker's *The Century of Artists' Books*. However, not with Iraqi artists – as insightful as Drucker's book is, it remains Eurocentric in scope and vision, the century of artists' books is restricted to Europe and the United States. Iraq comes in as subject matter only, namely with Brad Freeman's *Sim War* (1991). A printed multiple, *Sim War* juxtaposes images of video war games and the 1991 Gulf War as they were regularly broadcasted on CNN and other satellite television channels with an autobiographical narrative dating back to the 1960s, when the artist stayed as a teenager in a military hospital that was treating American soldiers wounded in Vietnam. The Gulf War also features in Wu Hung and Peggy Wang's exhibition catalogue *Shu: Reinventing Books in Contemporary Chinese Art* (2006) namely in Wei Guangqing's *Black Covered Book: Desert Storm* (1990-91), which remains highly relevant today as war is waged in ever new ways and the foot soldiers occupying the open page of Guangqing's book are replaced by drones. But what would a history of artists' books look like that also included book art from the Arab world, and in particular Iraq? As Edward Said says in "Permission to Narrate" (1984), more has been written about the Arab world, in particular Palestine, than ever before; however, the Palestinian – here, the Iraqi – perspective has been neglected, and at times forcefully erased, wiped out, and silenced.

Book art in the Arab world is usually placed in the context of *al-hurufiyya*, a movement that is defined by the use of the Arabic letter (in Arabic *harf*, plural: *huruf*) in modern art and that advanced in Iraq since the mid-1940s as part of abstract art with artists, such as Jamil Hamoudi (1924-2003) and Madiha Omar (1908-2005).¹⁴ In 1971, Shakir Hassan Al Said¹⁵ founded the One Dimension Group (*tajammu' al-bu'd al-wahid*). It followed the Baghdad Group for Modern Art in its aim to produce art rooted in local traditions but focused on the use of writing. As Shakir Hassan points out, emphasis was on the art of writing (*fann al-kitaba*) not on calligraphy (*al-khatt*); the word "al-khatt" used to designate the "line" only. The One Dimension Group did not aim at reinvigorating the glorious past of Islamic calligraphy. Rather, it was part and parcel of contemporary artistic practices, namely Abstract art, which was given a more local character by means of quoting the Arabic-Islamic heritage, often referring to Sufism, Islamic mysticism, which ascribes special meaning to Arabic letters and numbers. Shakir Hassan in particular was interested in contemporary popular culture, namely graffiti, similar to the Catalan artist Antonio Tàpies (1923-2012). But book art differs significantly from *al-hurufiyya*. Challenging the very condition of the book, it foregrounds its materiality and objectness with at times little or no significance accorded to the written word, the object itself taking on narrative quality.¹⁶

Book art in the Arab world can count on a long and very elaborate tradition in Arabic-Islamic culture, from the *Qur'an* to literary and scientific manuscripts, with the latter, scientific more than literary texts, copied along illustrations of magnificent miniature paintings.¹⁷ The Arabic-Islamic heritage is a source of inspiration for many contemporary artists, but to speak of modern or contemporary Islamic art is misleading.¹⁸ Not only because, as Nasiri's book art nicely shows, it leaves out other influences, in his case his journey to China, but because it is first and foremost grounded in the political context and urgency of its own time. As such it has to be seen as a response to the commodification

of books, the mass produced book, which has threatened local arts and crafts, such as hand-printing and hand-binding, as it advanced in Third World countries entering the global market economy. The Arabic term used most commonly for book art is *daftar* (pl. *dafatir*), which translates into note- or sketchbook. In its capacity of connecting with other times and cultures, book art has become a powerful means of expression for a growing number of artists in the region, especially since the *hazima*, the Arab defeat in the 1967 June War, which triggered a profound identity crisis and a reorientation of cultural production. Even before 1967, artists had begun to challenge dominant Western models. In 1951, the Baghdad Group for Modern Art attempted to bridge heritage (*turath*) and modernity (*hadatha*) by producing art that stemmed from its local context and through its local character would be able to achieve relevance and be part of contemporary artistic practices worldwide, as is stated in the group's art manifesto.¹⁹ But in the 1960s and 1970s, issues of identity became more pressing, as hopes for a better future were utterly shattered by the reality of politics on the ground. It was in the 1960s that artists, such as Etel Adnan (b. 1925) and Dia Azzawi, started to work in book art. Whereas for Adnan book art has offered a very personal way to re-inscribe herself into the Arab world as an author writing in French and English,²⁰ for Azzawi book art has closely been linked to politics, in particular the Palestinian cause, as especially his multiples produced in the 1970s and 1980s show. For both, as for artists working in book art more generally, literature, books, paper, and reading played a major role. The relations between literature and visual art and the intellectual and symbolic exchange between artists and writers in the Arab world remain much understudied.²¹ As pointed out above, book art foregrounds the book's very materiality, its thing-ness, with at times little or no reference to a literary text; yet, given its character as a book, it requires the reader's engagement and tactile experience, from holding the book in the reader's hands to touching its paper and turning its pages, to carrying it from one place and time to another, at times from homeland to exile or from one exile to another exile. The book itself turns into a visual narrative that unfolds in time and space across the sequence of its pages. In the case of Iraq, book art has gained momentum and taken on a documentary character with the 1990s generation, leaving a personal testimony of Iraq's modern history marred by war and destruction. Nasiri writes about this younger generation of artists, some of them being his students, in his essay "Survival through Art and the Art of Survival" (2009), among them Hana Malallah, Kareem Risan, Nazar Yahya, Ghasan Gha'ib, Nadim Muhsin Kufi, and Himat Muhammad Ali.²²

Iraq has a rich tradition of the book, from the beginnings of writing to the height of Abbasid manuscript culture and modern times, in which "Cairo writes, Beirut publishes, and Baghdad reads," as a popular saying goes. Celebrated as the cradle of civilization, since the first material documents of writing, in the form of clay tablets, come out of Mesopotamia. *The Epic of Gilgamesh* has come to exemplify the worldly character of texts, as its circulation history out of Mesopotamia and into the heart of the British Empire, the British Museum, and Western anthologies of world literature shows.²³ However, Iraq's modern and contemporary culture is left out. The world seems to forget that the "cradle of civilization" is the land of a contemporary country with a thriving culture, says Shabout (2006: 281). Nasiri's book art belongs to that forgotten contemporary country – a country

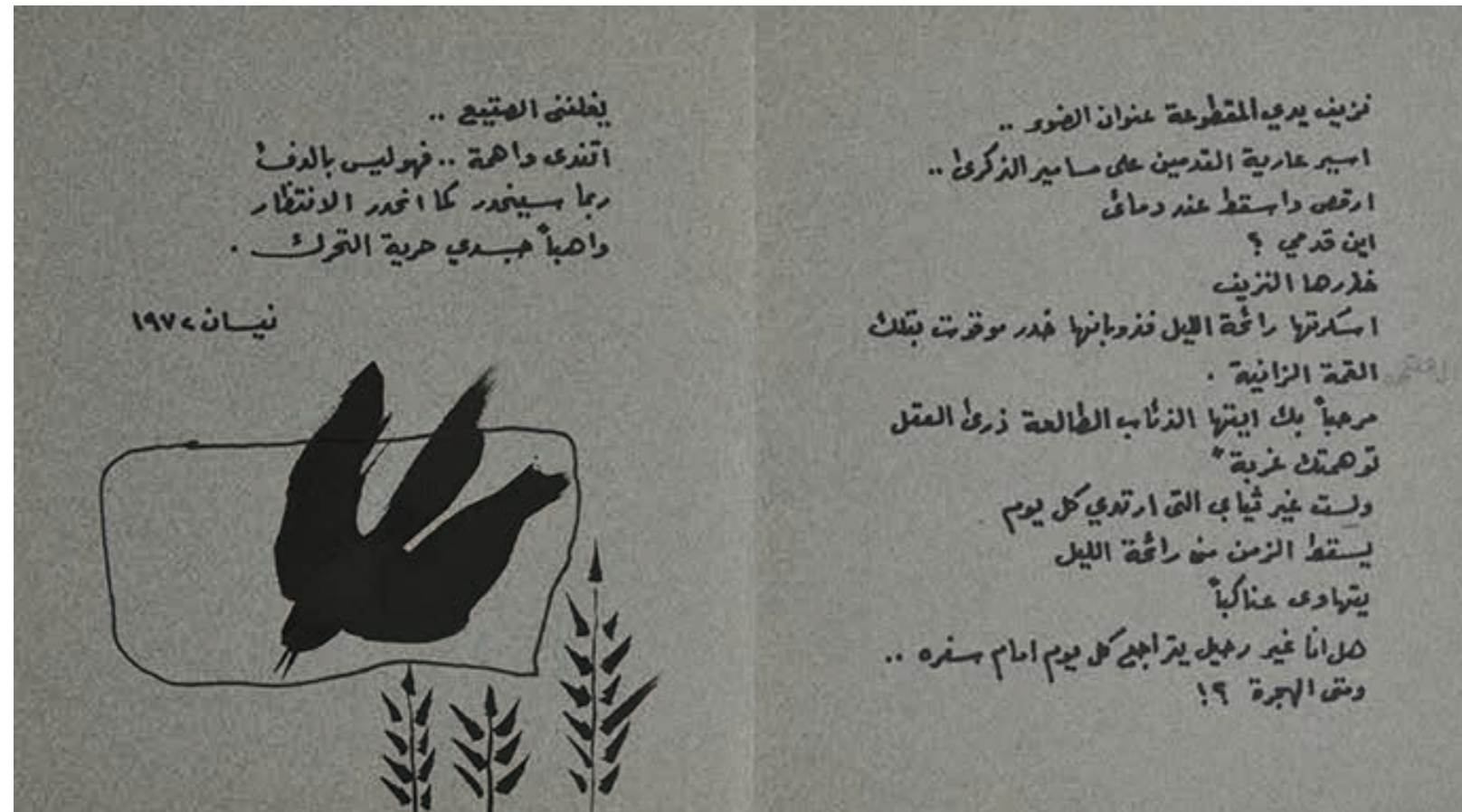


P. 19. *Is There a Break Between Movement and Stillness* (May Muzaffar), 1973, Baghdad
Handmade book by the artist, front cover, collage and inks on paper, 18 x 16 cm

P. 5. *Is There a Break Between Movement and Stillness* (May Muzaffar), 1973, Baghdad
Handmade book by the artist, front cover, inks on paper, 18 x 32 cm

whose narratives have been forcefully erased, wiped out, and silenced by war. At the same time, it draws inspiration from Iraq's rich cultural past from Sumerian and Babylonian to Abbasid times and partakes in global art practices from a wide range of different traditions, spanning East and West.

In *Writing and Materiality in China*, Liu and Zeitlin explore "the production and circulation of writing as a dynamic process – something that can be collected and exchanged, bought and sold, bestowed as a gift or entered in a contest, something that can be cut up, pieced together and recycled, borrowed, copied, or appropriated; something that can be *stolen, ruined, lost, and destroyed.*" (2003: 1; my emphasis) Iraq's modern history has seen a lot of the latter, writing, here books, "*stolen, ruined, lost, and destroyed,*" as libraries and archives were looted and burnt in the wake of the 2003 Iraq War, among them the National Library, the Baghdad University Library, and the library of the Institute of Fine Arts. It was in this political context that book art gained momentum and urgency and that Nasiri sought refuge in Arabic poetry, expressing "anxiety about the death of writing" (Liu and Zeitlin 2003: 15) while hoping for liberation and salvation: "Over the past seven years, and specifically after my Homeland, Iraq, was occupied in 2003, I started searching for new visual resources to enable me to express my psychological state and the extreme pain and agony of witnessing the torture of the people of my country, wishing and hoping for liberation and salvation from the deterioration and disappearance of their country, once the cradle of the world's most elegant civilizations, many centuries ago. In response, I sought shelter with poetry." (2013: 27)

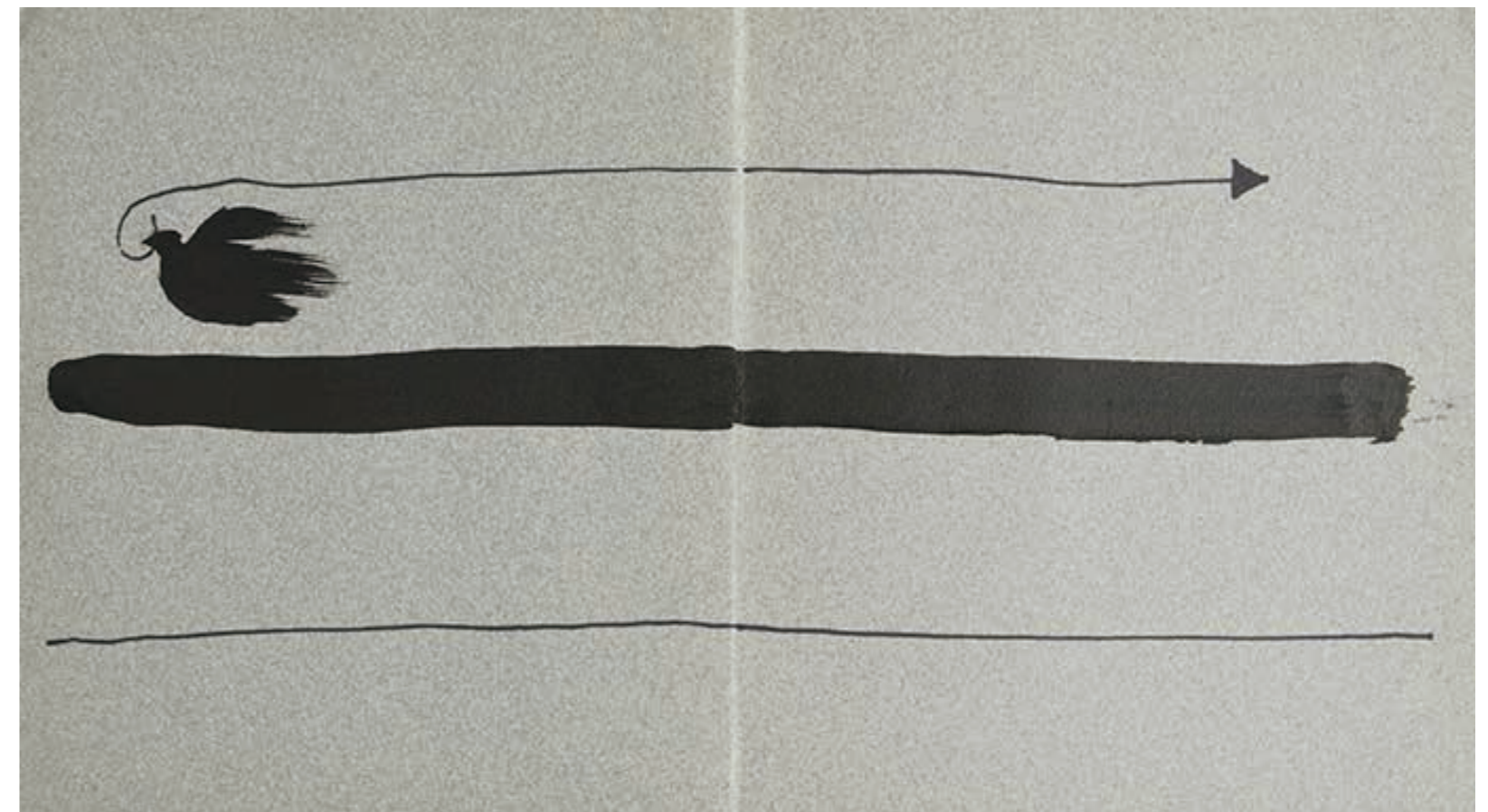


P. 19. *Is There a Break Between Movement and Stillness* (May Muzaffar), 1973, Baghdad
Handmade book by the artist, front cover, inks on paper, 18 x 32 cm

Unfolding narratives of survival and intimate encounters between East and West: Rafa Nasiri's book art

Etel Adnan has described Nasiri as an artist with a poetic vision (2013: 13). An avid reader of Arabic literature, his book art refers to both classical and modern Arabic literature, from the tenth century Abbasid poet al-Mutanabi (915-965) the Andalusian poet Ibn Zaidoun (1003-1071), and the *Maqamat* of al-Hariri of Basra (1054-1122) as rendered prominent by al-Wasiti, the thirteenth century calligrapher and miniature painter who had already served as a source of inspiration to Jawad Salim, to the Iraqi poet Muhammad Mahdi al-Jawahiri (1899-1997), the great Palestinian poet Mahmoud Darwish (1941-2008), the Arab-American writer Etel Adnan (b. 1925), and his wife, the poet and art critic May Muzaffar (b. 1940). These literary references further connect Nasiri's book art to the Arabic literary heritage, as they reimagine and revive this heritage from the perspective of contemporary art, carrying it across time and space. They also speak of and to the close relations between Arabic literature and visual art and the intellectual and symbolic exchange between artists and writers in the Arab world.

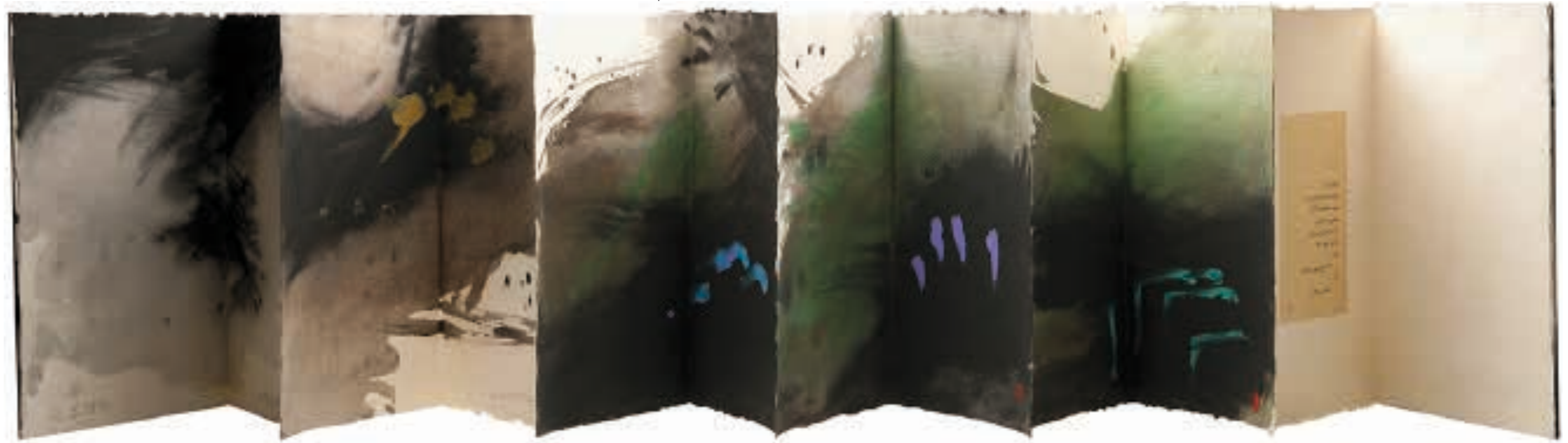
Drawing inspiration from the rich legacy of the book in Islamic art as well as in Chinese and European book culture, yet grounded in modern and contemporary Iraqi cultural production, Nasiri's book art comes in different media and form. It includes limited edition portfolios with numbered and signed prints, one-of-a-kind objects, and visual diaries, with the second and third group of books showing a significant overlap, differing mainly in whether or not they were meant for public display as an art object or private



Untitled, 1991, Baghdad
Handmade book by the artist, front cover,
acrylic and inks on rice paper glued
on wood board, 32 x 22.5 cm



Untitled, 1991, Baghdad
Handmade book by the artist, poem by
May Muzaffar, inks and acrylic on arch
paper, 32 x 264 cm



communication. Nasiri did his first handmade book, featuring drawings and writing in ink on paper, in 1973 as a present to his wife, May Muzaffar. It was her first book of poetry entitled *Is There a Break between Movement and Stillness*, published in Beirut in 1985 as *Fire Bird* with Nasiri's drawings. Nasiri's one-of-a-kind objects and visual diaries consist of handmade books, in wood, cardboard, cloth, or paper, as well as of readymade books, such as the Chinese sketchbook that unfolds accordion-like into scrolls of paper more than two to three meters long. Some books are big in size, close to room partitions, others smaller than the palm of a hand and almost of talismanic character.

Close to the traditional *livre d'artiste*, the limited edition portfolios, printed in al-Muhtaraf between 2007 and 2009, most clearly relate to literary texts. They usually come in sets of ten to twenty copies, signed and numbered, consisting of up to six unbound etchings or silkscreen prints in a bookcase. *Homage to al-Mutanabi* (2007) comes in two different sets, each issued in ten copies only. One includes four etchings in square shape, the other three etchings in circle shape, the circle and the square constituting two key geometrical shapes in Chinese culture going back to the perception of heaven as a circle, representing oneness and perfection, and of earth as a square, pertaining to man-made regulations and imperfection. *Salute to al-Mutanabi* (2002) is a one-of-a-kind volume. Here, Nasiri makes use of a Chinese sketchbook, applying inks and acrylics across its pages as it unfolds accordion-like into a scroll of more than two meters. Both books feature al-Mutanabi's poetry, be it as fragments of printed pages from a copy of his Diwan or as written text, against a background of earthen colours, the warm, golden tones that Iraqi artists have set out to capture and preserve in their art, ranging from brown to ochre and different hues of red and yellow. The printed pages of al-Mutanabi's Diwan are at times

Untitled, 1995, Amman
Acrylic, inks and mixed media on Chinese
paper glued on wood screen (4 panels),
160 x 80 cm
By courtesy of The Khalid Shoman
Collection, Amman





Untitled, 1991
Handmade book by the artist, wooden binding, front cover, stamped in acrylic, 10.5 x 4.2 cm



Untitled, 1995-1996, Amman
Handmade book by the artist, inks and acrylic on rice paper, wooden binding, 10.5 x 32.5 cm



overwritten with black brushstrokes, singling out a word or a letter. These figure not as added decorative elements but as graphic elements in the overall abstract composition. As pointed out above, Nasiri employed the Arabic letter as a graphic element in his paintings already in the late 1960s, when studying in Portugal. However, it was not until the late 1990s, while in Bahrain, that he started to assemble fragments of printed texts and texts written by contemporary calligraphers in *thuluth*, one of the four main scripts in Arabic calligraphy.

“The Arabic letter has never left my work: but it is often manifested in subliminal and metaphorical form. For it is a sign, a code, part of a cluster or a movement, at times appearing complete, and it could be condensed into a mere point. In the collection ‘Salute to al-Mutanabi,’ I used printed pages of al-Mutanabi’s poetry taken from an old copy of the poet’s Diwan. I made use of the graphic element of the Arabic script in these texts and employed it to enhance the painting. This has tempted me into another experiment and that is using parts of texts written in *thuluth* by contemporary calligraphers. I make use of the words of these texts, or parts of a word, as graphic elements within a composition, and also as a symbolic representation regardless of its linguistic meaning. I would like to point out that my use of the letter has always derived from this concept. For the letter in all my paintings is not an element added to the composition, nor is it an ornamental value; it is instead a linear element coming out



Homage to al-Mutanabi 1, 2007, Amman
Portfolio of four etchings



Homage to al-Mutanabi 2, 2007, Amman
Portfolio of three etchings

of the body of the composition, and a centre around which the subject revolves.”
(Quoted in Muzaffar 2010: 79; my translation)

Nasiri’s reference to al-Mutanabi is not limited to form, the inclusion of manuscript fragments and Arabic letters into the composition, but also to content, the intertextual borrowing of al-Mutanabi’s poetry. He in particular makes use of the opening verse of al-Mutanabi’s poem quoted in A.J. Arberry’s translation as *On hearing in Egypt that his death had been reported to Saif al-Da’ula in Aleppo*: “With what shall I console myself, being without my people and home, having neither boon-fellow, nor cup, nor any to comfort me?” (1967: 102)

Finding no consolation and no one to comfort him, left without his “people and home[land],” al-Mutanabi voices not only his personal sorrow but speaks across centuries to and for the contemporary exile – be he “the Palestinian exile as writer,” as reads the title of an influential essay by Jabra, in which he argues as later Said in “Reflections on Exile” that no matter how rich one’s journey, the loss of exile cannot be overcome, or the Iraqi exile as artist. Paying tribute to al-Mutanabi, the Arab poet *par excellence*, Nasiri asserts his artistic identity and grounding in Arab cultural production at a time, when this identity was under severe threat, after the 1991 Gulf War and the Iraq War of 2003. He comes back to al-Mutanabi in his paintings as well as his book art over and over again, as in his portfolio on Etel Adnan’s *A Library Set on Fire* (2008). Adnan is an internationally acclaimed writer and herself a book artist who in recent years, at the age of over ninety, has received renewed attention in the art world.²⁴ Adnan wrote her poem “A Library Set on Fire” in the aftermath of the 2003 Iraq War and the burning of the Iraqi National Library and Archives, Nasiri’s portfolio was produced after the bombing of al-Mutanabi Street, which was at the hub of Baghdad’s cultural life known for its printing presses and book shops, on 5 March 2007, when a car bomb killed more than thirty people and burnt many of the presses and book shops.²⁵ The portfolio includes six silkscreen prints in addition to two prints of Adnan’s text, one in the original English version, the other translated into Arabic by May Muzaffar. Evoking Iraq’s rich cultural legacy from the beginnings of writing to the ninth/tenth century Sufi poet al-Hallaj, Adnan’s text reads:

“A Library Set on Fire



Homage to al-Mutanabi, Book 3, 2002,
Bahrain
Collage and inks on Chinese rice paper
book, 16.5 x 306.5 cm



Homage to al-Mutanabi, Book 3, 2002,
Bahrain
Collage and inks on Chinese rice paper
book, 16.5 x 306.5 cm





A Library Set on Fire, 6 silk screens (text by Etel Adnan), 2008, Amman. Each image 21 x 29 cm, paper 47 x 55 cm

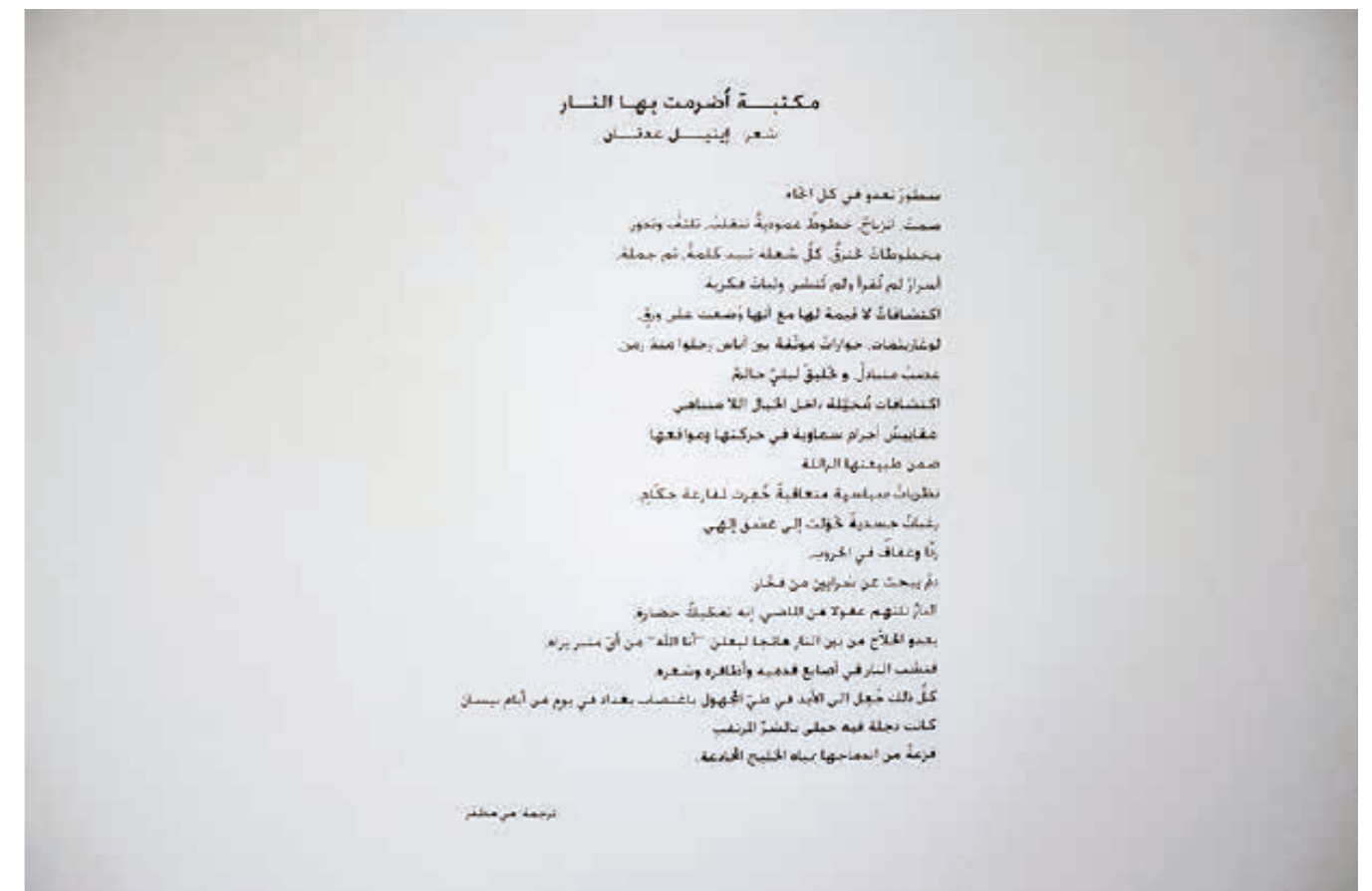
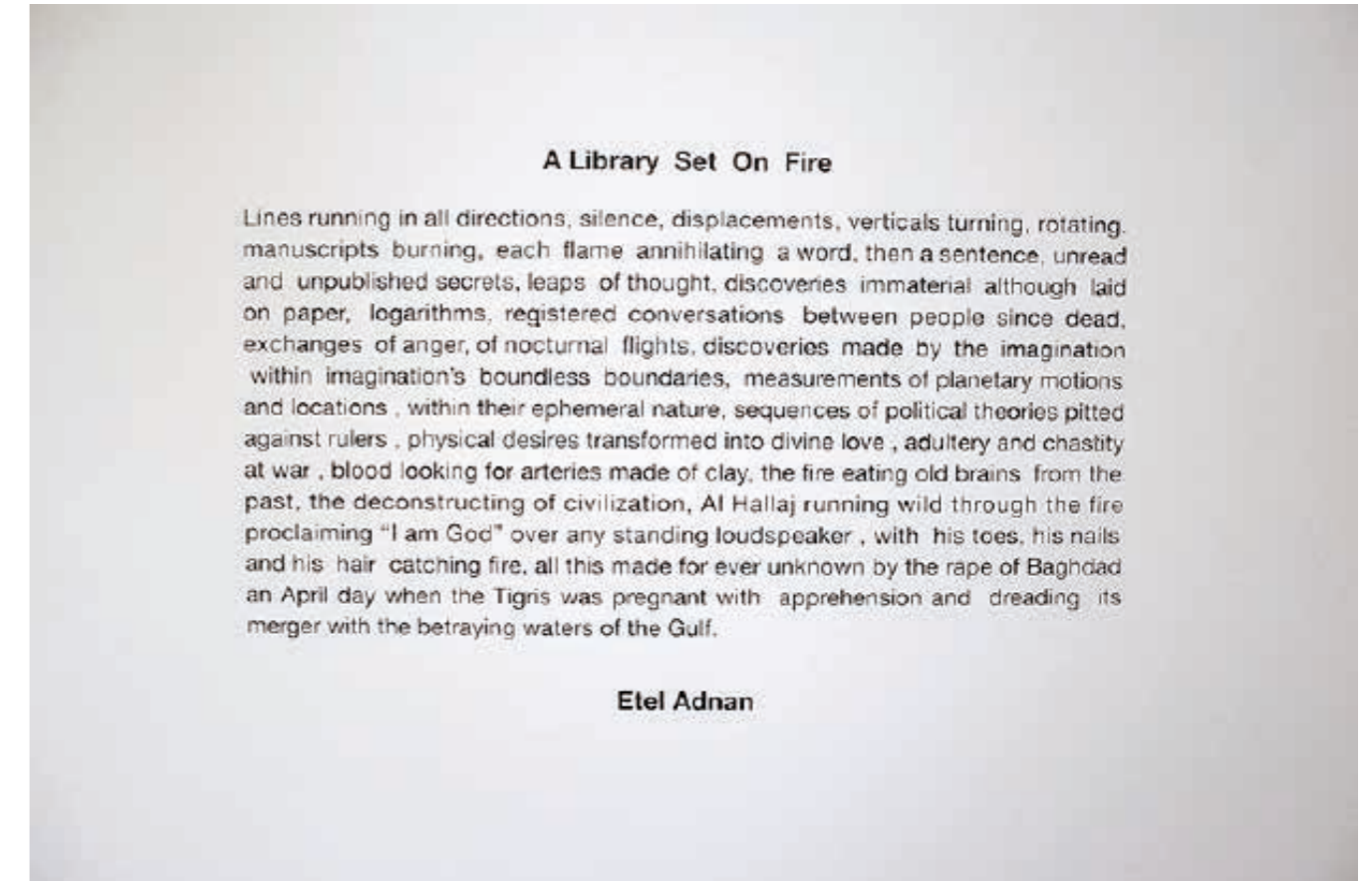
“Lines running in all directions, silence, displacements, verticals turning, rotating, manuscripts burning, *each flame annihilating a word, then a sentence*, unread and unpublished secrets, leaps of thought, discoveries immaterial although laid on paper, logarithms, registered conversations between people since dead, exchanges of anger, of nocturnal flights, discoveries made by the imagination within imagination’s boundless boundaries, measurements of planetary motions and locations, within their ephemeral nature, sequences of political theories pitted against rulers, physical desires transformed into divine love, adultery and chastity at war, blood looking for arteries made of clay, the fire eating old brains from the past, the deconstructing of civilization, Al Hallaj running wild through the fire proclaiming ‘I am God’ over any standing loudspeaker, with his toes, his nails, and his hair catching fire, all this made for ever unknown by the rape of Baghdad an April day when the Tigris was pregnant with apprehension and dreading its merger with the betraying waters of the Gulf.” (my emphasis)

Having proclaimed, “I am the Truth,” which was read by some as a blasphemous “I am God,” al-Hallaj was accused of blasphemy and executed, his body set on fire, the ashes dispersed into the Tigris River. In Adnan’s text, the burning of books and manuscripts is paralleled with the burning of al-Hallaj, a human body, and announces not only the death of the book as a social thing/being but also the end of civilization and humanity. The writing incorporated into Nasiri’s silk screen prints, however, is not taken from Adnan’s text but from al-Mutanabi’s verses quoted above, visually displaying “*each flame annihilating a word, then a sentence*” of precious manuscripts, books, and other papers and, at the same time, of his “people and home[land].” Books, “people and home[land]” share in the same fate, life or death, as they can be “stolen, ruined, lost, and destroyed.” In Nasiri’s prints, Mutanabi’s verses are caught in hues of red and yellow, blackness taking centre stage. Notwithstanding this violence, the book shows beauty as an artistic practice, highlighting its materiality, fragility, and what Liu and Zeitlin describe as “physical vulnerability to the ravages of time and human destruction” (2003:15).

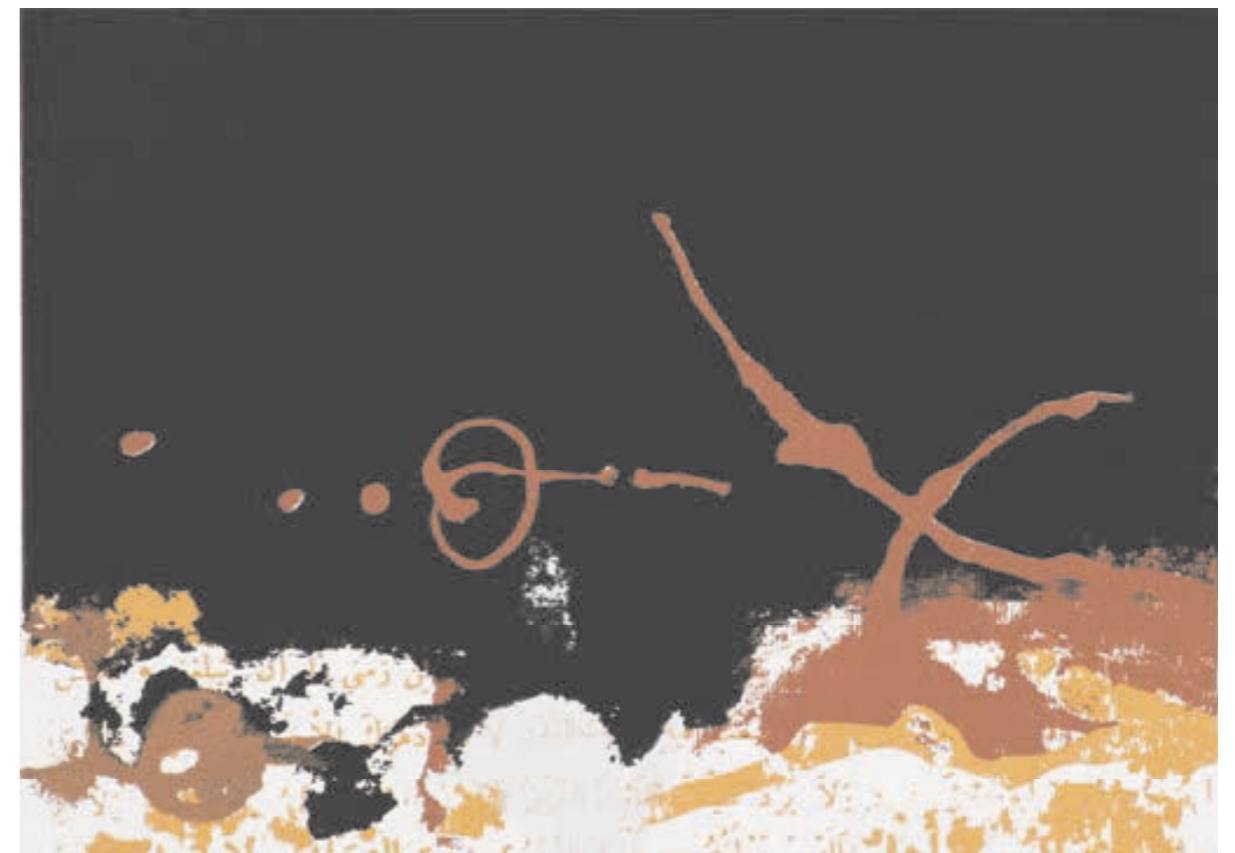
Themes of loss and longing also figure prominently in Nasiri’s portfolio on the Andalusian poet Ibn Zaidoun entitled *Homage to Ibn Zaidoun* (2009). In his love poem *Inni dhakartuki bi-zahara* (I remember you at Al Zahra), Ibn Zaidoun remembers Princess Wallada bint al-Mustakfi, herself a refined poet and the daughter of the Umayyad Caliph Muhammad III of Cordoba:

“I remember you at Al Zahra’ with longing
Where the horizon is cheerful and the land’s surface clear.” (Quoted in Nasiri 2013: 27)

Ibn Zaidoun lost his love, Princess Wallada, and the city of Cordoba, as he sought refuge in Seville for political reasons. In Nasiri’s portfolio, the imagined portrait of Princess Wallada as a young woman holding a musical instrument merges with the text against a background of what Nasiri describes as quoted above as “*the correlation between my work with painting and engraving [...] the relationship of colour and line, mass and void, shadow and light.*” Both the beloved woman and the city of birth are rendered present in praise of a harmonious



A Library Set on Fire, 6 silk screens
(text by Etel Adnan), 2008, Amman
Each image 21 x 29 cm, paper 47 x 55 cm





A Library Set on Fire, 6 silk screens
(text by Etel Adnan), 2008, Amman
Each image 21 x 29 cm, paper 47 x 55 cm



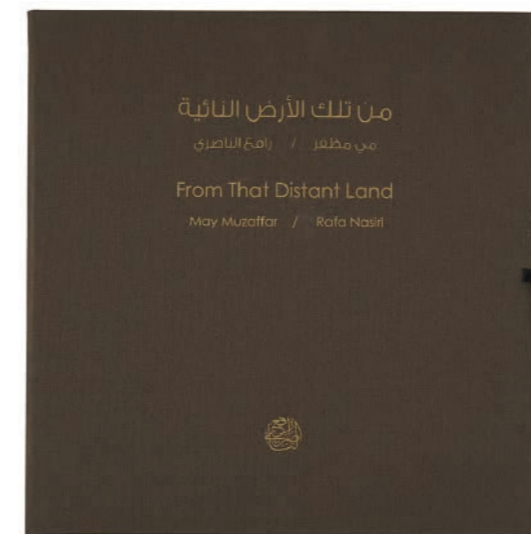


Homage to Ibn Zaidoun I remember you in Al Zahra', 2009, Amman
 Portfolio of text and three paintings
 Text: silk screen. Paintings: collage acrylic, inks, gold leaf & mixed media on arch paper

balance between nature and cultural achievements, such as music and poetry. With *Homage to Ibn Zaidoun*, Nasiri partakes in the nostalgic celebration of al-Andalus in Arabic literature and art.²⁶ In his portfolio *From That Distant Land* (2007), on a poem by his wife May Muzaffar, he directly links the themes of loss and longing to his “people and home[land],” Iraq. Defeat, loss, and exile figure prominently in the poem’s lines:

“Our land has been defeated
 The heavens have not left us a breath of life
 My abaya has flown in all directions
 Woven by threads of fire ...
 Carried on the feathers of wings that resist
 A people who sleep on paper” (my translation)

Nasiri ties these lines to the colours of Iraq, earthen hues of brown, ochre, and red. The Arabic script of the poem’s lines is taken up again in the abstract brushstrokes of Arabic letters and writing, highlighting Iraq’s rich cultural heritage, from the beginnings of writing in Mesopotamian times until today, threatened, if not destroyed and dispersed like its people.



From That Distant Land (pottery by May Muzaffar), 6 etchings, 2007
 Each image 19 x 29 cm, paper 40 x 38 cm



Closely connected to the theme of exile and further linking the Iraqi experience of exile to the Palestinian one is his book on Mahmoud Darwish' poem *To Describe an Almond Blossom* (2009). Different in form, it was printed on silkscreen in a bound copy. The colours differ from the earthen tones, recalling Iraq, in most of Nasiri's books. It features bright yellow and red set against a white background, "the whiteness in the description of the almond blossom," interrupted only by the black lines of writing. First published in Arabic in 2005, the poem is part of Darwish' late writing and was published together with his exile cycle, which includes the poem "Counterpoint (For Edward Said)," a poetic conversation with Said who had passed away a year prior to the poem's publication. It gives expression to the shortcomings of language face to the fragility of life and the beauty of nature.

"To describe an almond blossom no encyclopaedia of flowers
 is any help to me, no dictionary.
 Words carry me off to the snares of rhetoric
 that wound the sense, and praise the wound they've made.
 Like a man telling a woman his own feeling.
 How can the almond blossom shine in my own language,
 when I am but an echo?
 It is translucent, like liquid laughter that has sprouted
 on boughs out of the shy dew ...
 light as a white musical phrase ...
 weak as a glance of a thought that peaks out from our fingers
 as in vain we write it ...
 dense as a line of verse not arranged alphabetically.
 To describe an almond blossom, I need to make visits to the unconscious,
 which guides me to affectionate names hanging on trees.
 What is its name?
 What is the name of this thing in the poetics of nothing?
 I must break out of gravity and words,
 in order to feel their lightness when they turn
 into whispering ghosts, and I make them as they make me,
 a white translucent.
 Neither *homeland* nor *exile* are words,
 but passions of whiteness in a
 description of the almond blossom.
 Neither snow nor cotton.
 One wonders how it rises above things and names.
 If a writer were to compose a successful piece
 describing an almond blossom, the fog would rise
 from the hills, and people, all the people, would say:
 This is it.
 These are the words of our national anthem." (Quoted in Darwish 2009: 20)

P. 1. *To Describe an Almond Blossom*
 (Mahmoud Darwish), 2009
 Handmade book by the artist, acrylic,
 inks, silk screen & collage on arch paper,
 56 x 37 cm
 This book was reproduced by the artist
 in silk screen, limited edition, 2009





P. 5. *To Describe an Almond Blossom*
(Mahmoud Darwish), 2009
Handmade book by the artist, acrylic,
inks, silk screen & collage on arch paper,
56 x 37 cm

P. 6. *To Describe an Almond Blossom*
(Mahmoud Darwish), 2009
Handmade book by the artist, acrylic,
inks, silk screen & collage on arch paper,
56 x 37 cm



P. 7. *To Describe an Almond Blossom*
(Mahmoud Darwish), 2009
Handmade book by the artist, acrylic,
inks, silk screen & collage on arch paper,
56 x 37 cm



After al-Wasiti, 2005
Handmade book by the artist, collage,
gold leaf, inks and acrylic on arch paper,
58 x 40 cm
Private collection, London

Nasiri and Darwish first met in Asilah in 1979, a town in Morocco that has become known for its art residencies and festivals, bringing together Arab and international artists. They became friends and met again, first in France, then in Iraq, when Darwish participated in al-Marbad poetic festival, and in Jordan. It was after the Iraq War of 2003 that Darwish saw examples of Nasiri's book art at an exhibition in Amman and was deeply impressed by them. Nasiri promised to do a book for him and the limited edition of *To Describe and Almond Blossom*, published in homage to Darwish one year after the poet's death, is the outcome of that promise.²⁷

With his books on al-Wasiti, who was leading the Baghdad school of manuscript illustration in the thirteenth century and known in particular for his illustrations of the *Maqamat* of al-Hariri, Nasiri refers more directly to Iraq's cultural heritage in visual terms. Here, not the literary text of the *Maqamat* but al-Wasiti's paintings are at the foreground, carried over into modern times by a contemporary artist from Baghdad and given new prominence in a different political and cultural context. Nasiri like other Iraqi artists of his generation embraced the Arabic-Islamic tradition of miniature painting, as exemplified in al-Wasiti. In his famous book *Jawad Salim wa-nasb al-huriyya* (Jawad Salim and the Monument of Freedom, Baghdad), Jabra says about Salim in a metaphorical way that he belonged to "al-Wasiti's tribe" (1974: 18). These words hold true for Nasiri as well and were part of a re-orientation of cultural production that foregrounded the local in order to achieve global relevance, as described above. No matter how far Nasiri travelled and sought inspiration East and West of the Arab world, his art is deeply grounded in Iraq, and in the media of paper and water in particular, as he points out:

"I have worked continuously to generate the work of art from an understanding of the other, from testing different materials in order to present appropriate influences. But I always have had an affection towards paper and water, perhaps because I am a graphic artist first and foremost, or maybe because my artistic heritage is of paper and watercolour, as in the works of al-Wasiti and other original Arab painters." (Quoted in Shabout 2007b: 69)

With his books on al-Wasiti, Nasiri situates himself in a line of Arab painters from the height of Abbasid culture to Iraq today. As if insisting on this local artistic heritage, continuation, and survival despite war and destruction, he referred to al-Wasiti in a number of books, among them the one-of-a-kind handmade volumes *After al-Wasiti* (2005) and *Al-Wasiti* (2007). The latter stands out in strikingly beautiful ways as, similar to a sculpture, it operates in three dimensions. It consists of four hinged wooden panels, incorporating manuscript fragments of the *Maqamat*, which feature paintings by al-Wasiti, on both sides. Each panel measuring 32 x 23 cm, the book can be closed like a box, ready to be handed from one reader/collector/owner to the other, or opened into a partition almost one meter long to be viewed from both sides. Iraq's golden earthen tones figure dominantly in both books.

The same golden earthen colours also show in his books on Baghdad, a city known for its palm-tree orchards, and Tikrit, the city of his childhood. In a one-of-a-kind handmade volume entitled *Homage to Baghdad* (2006), he draws on al-Jawahiri's famous poem "Blessed Tigris" (Dijlat al-khair). The rather small size of 18,5x18,5 cm speaks to the precious and intimate character of the book, as Nasiri recalls Baghdad before his eyes





Ya Dijlat al-khair (Blessed Tigris), details,
2006, Amman
Handmade book by the artist, collage,
inks, gold leaf and pens on arch paper,
18.5 x 124 cm



P. 6, 3, 1. Ya Dijlat al-khair (Blessed Tigris),
2006, Amman
Handmade book by the artist, collage,
inks, gold leaf and pens on arch paper,
17.5 x 17,5 cm





After *al-Wasiti*, Book 7, 2007, Amman
Handmade panel book (screen), inside,
gold leaf, inks, acrylic & mixed media
on board, 32 x 93 cm

from his exile in Amman, so close and yet so far. Al-Jawahiri's poem celebrates Baghdad and the Tigris River as "river of gardens green," calling to mind Iraq's description as "ard al-sawad," which translates into land of plenty and, more literally, land of blackness, referring to its vast forests of former times – a richness that has been replaced in modern times by the blackness of military tanks and boots.

"I greet you from afar, O greet me back,
O blessed Tigris, river of gardens green." (Quoted in Nasiri 2013: 27)

As Reuven Snir outlines in *Baghdad: The City in Verse* (2013) Baghdad has been described in Arabic literature as the cultural and political capital of the Islamic empire, which was left to decline after its destruction by the Mongols in 1258 but again met with hope in modern times, hope utterly shattered by political unrest, dictatorship, war, occupation, and sectarian violence. Nasiri devotes another one-of-a-kind volume, making use of a Chinese sketchbook, to his city of birth, Tikrit. It contains no reference to a literary text, no words, apart from the journal-like entry on the last page "Tikrit ... the poem of childhood and youth / Drawn on the fifth of July 1990 / Thirty-five years after leaving the city." Here again, earthen colours dominate the composition with a hint of turquoise coming through, moving away the darkness of the night at dawn, linking the earth and the sky, light and darkness, spirit and matter. The hybrid character of this book, linking Nasiri's childhood in Tikrit with his years spent as a student in China through its very form, a Chinese sketchbook, yet tied to Iraq's landscape and colour is exemplary of Nasiri's book art. Unfolded, the book measures 168,5 cm, providing a vivid and magnificent picture, or rather sequence of pictures of the colours engulfing Tikrit at dawn.



Diary book, 1956
8.6 x 5.3 cm



After *al-Wasiti*, Book 7, 2007, Amman
Handmade panel book (screen), outside,
gold leaf, inks, acrylic & mixed media
on board, 32 x 93 cm

These rather nostalgic depictions of Baghdad and Tikrit, comparable to Nasiri's allusion to the golden age of al-Andalus in his portfolio *Homage to Ibn Zaidoun*, are contrasted by books which clearly bear the marks of war and include no reference to literary texts but Nasiri's own diary-like writing. As such they are more closely tied to the here and now of everyday life and survival in contemporary culture. In a Chinese sketchbook dated Baghdad 16.1.1991, all we see is the black marks of hands with splatters of a saturated red and the words "No... it's a dirty war" written over the opening page. As Muzaffar recalls, at the outbreak of the Gulf War of 1991, Nasiri went into his studio located in their house, closed the door, dipped his hands into black paint and started hitting them onto the paper of the book.²⁸ The book stands out, as it expresses the artist's anger and helplessness in simple yet strikingly powerful and beautiful ways. Nasiri came back to it in 2007, when the sectarian violence, triggered by the Iraq War of 2003, reached its peak, with two new handmade books entitled *Ya Iraq* and *Seven Days*, the latter including collage-like elements, such as the picture of an old Iraqi woman raising her arms in despair and a torn page of a newspaper. Dated 12.9.2007, the book cries out in protest against the war, occupation, and continued violence committed by US soldiers and security guards against Iraqi citizens, such as the shooting of civilians, including women and children, at Nisour Square the same month.

Next to valuable limited edition portfolios and precious one-of-a-kind volumes, Nasiri kept many personal note- and sketchbooks, some artistic sketchbooks, other travel books, and diaries. The diary he kept as a youth dated 1956 gives an idea of his early attachment to document every day life as well as his interest in the form of the book, no matter how small its size. As an art student and artist he kept many sketchbooks, such as his sketchbook dating back to his time as a student in Beijing in 1961, which includes



War Diary 2 (No... it's a dirty war), 1991,
Baghdad
Front cover, inks and acrylic on Chinese
rice paper book (26 pages), 32 x 23 cm



P. 1. *War Diary 2 (No... it's a dirty war)*, 1991, Baghdad
Inks and acrylic on Chinese rice paper book, 32 x 637.5 cm

P. 5. *War Diary 2 (No... it's a dirty war)*, 1991, Baghdad
Handmade book by the artist, inks and acrylic on Chinese rice paper book, 32 x 637.5 cm



Ya Iraq, 2006, Amman
Handmade book by the artist, ink and collage on paper (6 folded pages), 16.5 x 95 cm
Private collection, London

Seven Days, 2007
Handmade book by the artist, collage, inks and acrylic on arch paper (7 folded pages), each 33 x 70 cm
Private collection, London



P. 19. *Untitled*, 1991
Handmade book by the artist, inks, acrylic
and pens on arch paper (50 pages),
each open page 19.5 x 29 cm

numerous drawings in charcoal of people and street scenes. As pointed out above, the main difference between his note- and sketchbooks and his one-of-a-kind volumes has to do with the foregrounding of the book's materiality and thing-ness, and linked to this, its public or private character – keeping in mind that books in general demand engagement and are meant for one-to-one interaction, that by definition they counter the public character of monuments in the service of political power. In a little notebook with a black cover that he kept from 1988-91, he documents the end of the Iran-Iraq War and the horror of yet another war, the Gulf War of 1991. On 9 February 1991, he writes the following lines in Arabic in black ink on the lower right side of an open page that is filled by dark lines and splashes of colour coming out of a mass of black colour, as if in an explosion:

“Baghdad is moaning of her wounds ... / who will relieve her of her pain!”²⁹

On 14 February 1991, a day after the Amiriyah shelter in Baghdad was hit by laser-guided smart bombs killing more than three hundred civilians, with the US claiming that the shelter was used for military purposes, he writes across the open page, below lines traced by fingers, this time in red and black colour:

“At dawn yesterday they killed hundreds of men, women, and children in a shelter in Al-A'amiriya, Baghdad. / What a despicable war this is... Who is the killer!”

On 18 February 1991, he writes on the upper right page, the remaining open page filled with purple colour as in the toxic clouds caused by depleted uranium, heavily used by the US military in the Gulf War and described in contemporary Iraqi literature and art alike, black lines crossing through:



P. 21. *Untitled*, 1991
Handmade book by the artist, inks, acrylic
and pens on arch paper (50 pages),
each open page, 19.5 x 29 cm

P. 22. *Untitled*, 1991
Handmade book by the artist, inks, acrylic
and pens on arch paper (50 pages), each
open page, 19.5 x 29 cm



“Baghdad lives in terror, horror, dread, fear, anger, and hatred ... / Starting eleven at night until four in the morning: / Five hours of shelling, steel, and gunpowder amidst terrifying sounds of planes and missiles.”

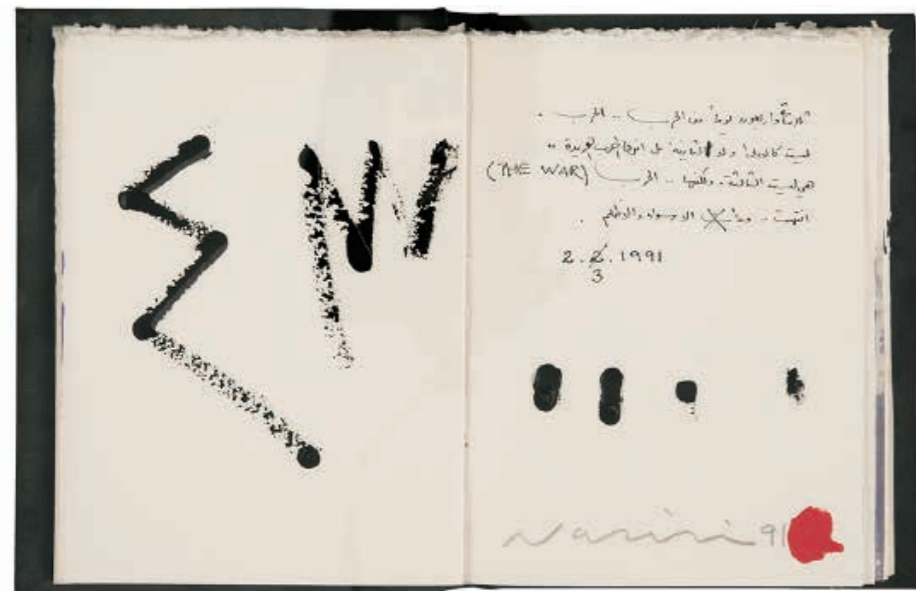
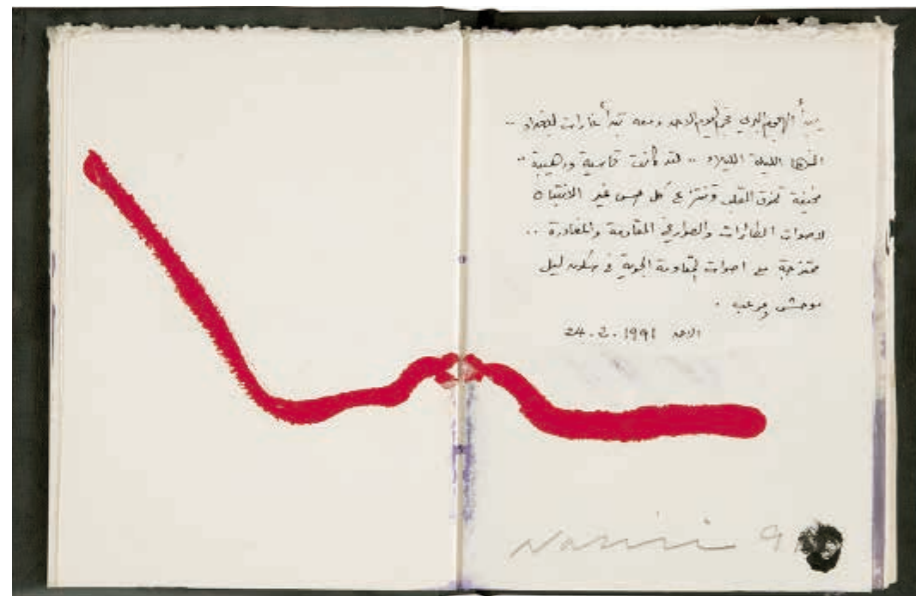
On 24 February 1991, he continues with the following lines, linking the right and the left page with a single red brushstroke:



“The ground attack began at the break of dawn this Sunday, and with it began the raids on Baghdad ... / it was the night of nights [the ultimate dark night]! Harsh and terrible ... / scary and heart wrenching, it dulled every sense other than the alertness to / the sound of planes and that of crushing missiles that would then depart ... / mingled with the sound of anti-aircraft in the stillness of a night both / lonesome and terrifying.”

On 2 March 1991, he concludes with these lines, black dots filling the empty space left on the lower right page and black lines, reminiscent of writing but illegible, occupying the left page:

“Forty-three days of war ... the war. / It's not like the first, nor like the second. It is a unique war ... /It's not the third war; it is ... THE WAR. / It has ended ... and the worst and darkest has begun.”



P. 23. *Untitled*, 1991
Handmade book by the artist, inks, acrylic and pens on arch paper (50 pages), each open page, 19.5 x 29 cm

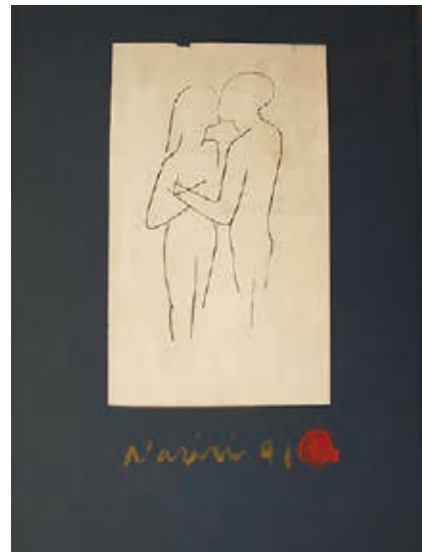
P. 25. *Untitled*, 1991
Handmade book by the artist, inks, acrylic and pens on arch paper (50 pages), each open page, 19.5 x 29 cm

Tikrit (Poem of Childhood and Youth), 1990, Baghdad
Inks and acrylic on Chinese rice paper book (20 pages), 29 x 415 cm

Nasiri's diary entries give a personal, almost poetic testimony of war and destruction. Verbal expression, at times crossed out and written over, intersects closely with visual expression. Each open page of the notebook shows Nasiri's seal and signature in the bottom right corner, making each open page look like a work of art in its own right, albeit part of an ensemble of works kept between book covers, hidden from the world in a private notebook that acquires worldly character as it is taken into the reader's hands after Nasiri's death, opened, and read in the intimate encounter between the book and its reader.

War, destruction, and violence clearly left their traces in Nasiri's book art. At the same time, Nasiri tried to find consolation and comfort by turning his attention to nature, Iraq's landscape and changing colours, as he remembered them at times thirty-five years later, as in his book on Tikrit discussed earlier. As Muzaffar recalls, "nature to him was and remains to be an infinite source of inspiration. He is in constant search of the particulates that his eyes lay sight of; whether these were free floating, engraved on walls,





Homage to Desert Storm, 14.4.1991, Baghdad
Sketchbook, pencil drawings & clipped images on paper, book cover, 28.5 x 22.5 x 3.5 cm

or hidden within landform.” (2010: 39) Given the overall abstract character of Nasiri’s art, it is surprising at first sight that Nasiri was also interested in human form, namely the female nude. Nasiri has a few one-of-a-kind volumes dedicated to the female nude. In a handmade volume in wooden binding dated 1995, he traces the outlines of a female torso on the left side of the open page, the right side left almost blank except for one line crossing over into the lower edge of the right page, which also features Nasiri’s seal and signature. The rather minimalistic lines of these drawings recur in Nasiri’s drawings of pomegranates, a symbol of love and fertility across cultures from ancient Egypt and Greece to the Arab world, India, and China and the fruit from which the Andalusian city of Granada takes its name. While documenting war and destruction in many of his books, Nasiri kept a sketchbook, dated 14 April 1991, in which he collected clippings from a book on paintings and archaeological artefacts, vases, and bas-relief, depicting erotic images, men and women in the act of love, to which he added his own drawings, opening the book with the following, defying words:

“Homage to Desert Storm?
“Don’t curse darkness
Light a candle,
Sketch an image of man and woman
in the act of love
Life would be restored.”

The recourse to the human body, in particular the female nude, comes as a way to combat and resist war, an affirmation and celebration of life and a strategy for survival. In addition, Nasiri kept detailed notebooks of his travels, outlining his visits to museums and art galleries with drawings dedicated to various artists, from the Arab legendary singer Um Kulthum to the Spanish painter and printmaker Francisco Goya and the Japanese artist Hokusai, documenting his travels East and West.



Book No. A.P., 1995, Amman-Irbid
Handmade book by the artist (22 pages), front cover, charcoal on wood board, 18 x 14 cm



Book No. A.P., 1995, Amman-Irbid
Handmade book by the artist (page 1), charcoal, pencil, inks and acrylic on arch paper, 18 x 28 cm

Book No. A.P., 1995, Amman-Irbid
Handmade book by the artist (page 6), charcoal, pencil, inks and acrylic on arch paper, 18 x 28 cm

Untitled, 1993, Baghdad
Handmade book by the artist, acrylic
and inks on arch paper (6 pages),
38 x 167.5 cm

In lieu of a conclusion

Nasiri's book art is manifold as it comes in different media and form and draws inspiration from diverse backgrounds: the beginnings of writing in ancient Mesopotamia, Chinese, Arabic-Islamic, and European traditions of the book. At the same time, it is deeply grounded in Iraq and at the forefront of an Arab modernism, in which Iraqi cultural production has played a key role. As such it makes a unique contribution to modern and contemporary art in Iraq and beyond. Leaving a document of Iraq's recent history marked by war and destruction, it shows beauty as an artistic practice, as it playfully and thoughtfully questions the dialectics of opening and enclosure, darkness and light, matter and spirit, presence and absence, pushing the very understanding of the book and of book art to new horizons in unfolding visual narratives of survival and intimate encounters between, or rather beyond East and West as it cuts across time, place, society, and circumstance.

In offering counter-narratives to the dominant Western coverage of war in Iraq, highlighting instead themes of loss and longing, holding on to something to remain – even if traces of life and cultural production only, caught in fire and blackness “*each flame annihilating a word, then a sentence,*” as in his portfolio of Etel Adnan's *A Library Set on Fire* – Nasiri's book art speaks of the political urgency out of which it was produced.

It powerfully shows that the Gulf War of 1991 and the Iraq War of 2003 with their bloody aftermaths are not political and human tragedies in the Arab world “only” that Western media have presented to its audiences as life spectacle. Rather, it suggests that the destruction of Baghdad *is* the death of the book and the end of civilization.

The loss of “people and home[land],” as reads the line by al-Mutanabi quoted in Nasiri's prints, goes hand in hand with the death of the book. Foregrounding the thing-ness of the book, the book as object, book art responds to the death of the book, setting out to carry the book – and by extension “people and home[land]” – across into a better, free, and dignified life, where it is neither confined by new technologies of digital reproduction, which come with new modes of surveillance, nor threatened by war and destruction. Maybe this is the *raison d'être* of Nasiri's book art, as it brings to the fore unfolding narratives of survival and “intimate encounters” (Cotter 2004: vii) in strikingly beautiful ways, making possible “unwitnessed communication” (Manguel 1996: 50) and opening up to “zones of privacy” (Cotter 2004: vii) – privacy defined as “what people used to call liberty and freedom” (Appelbaum 2014), as reads one of the preliminary quotes to this article – and thereby envisioning and outlining possibilities of agency and political change in utopian gesture.





Sketch Book, 1961, Beijing
Pencil and pen on paper,
each 25 x 17.5 cm



Sketch Book, 1961, Beijing
Charcoal on paper,
each 25 x 17.5 cm



Sketch Book, 1961, Beijing
Charcoal on paper (28 pages),
each 25 x 17.5 cm



拉菲阿 (Rafa), 2001, Bahrain
Ink on Chinese rice paper book
(24 folded pages), 16.5 x 291 cm

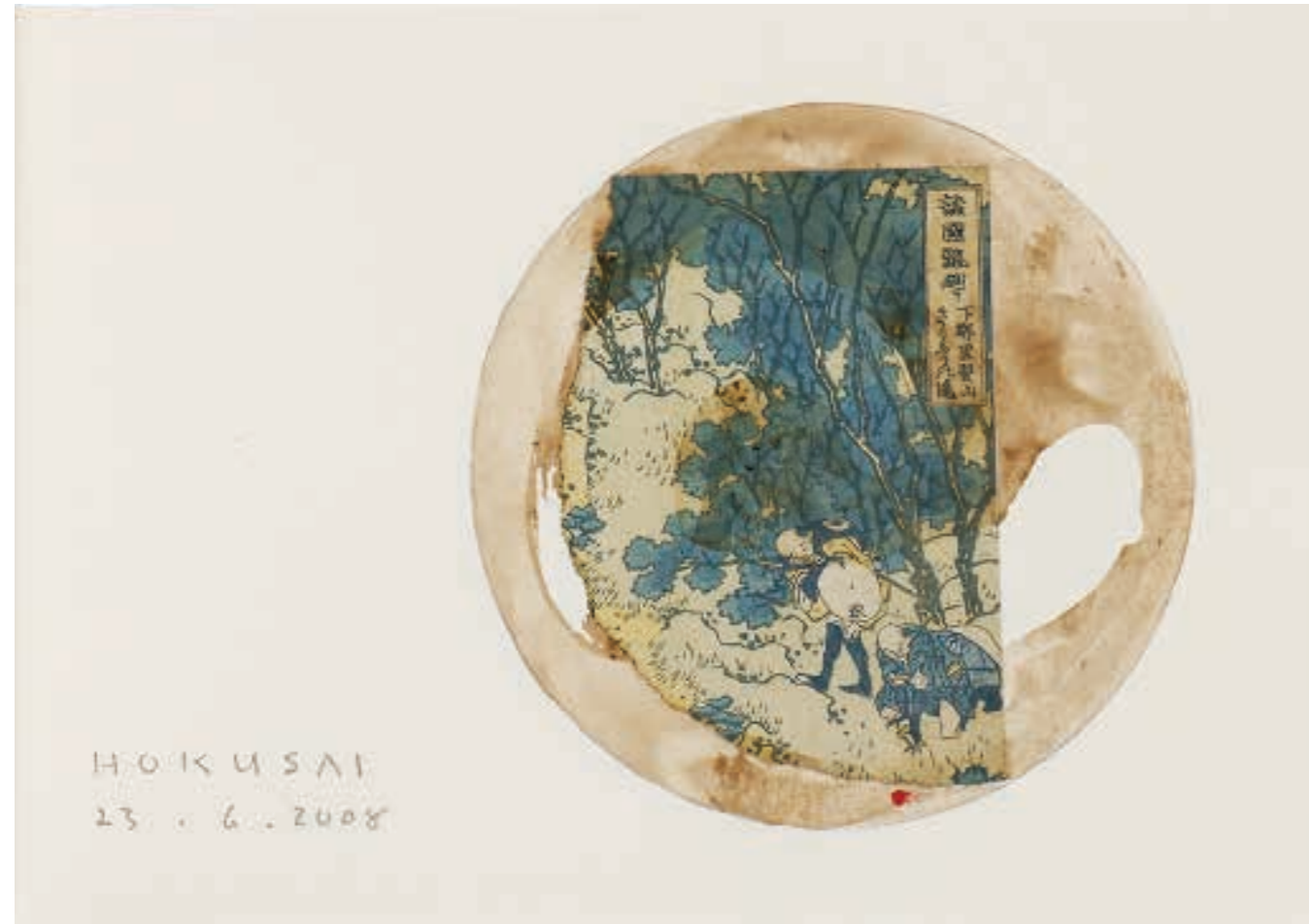


Rafa Nasiri, 26.10.1989, Chinese rice
paper book, Beijing
Ink on paper, open book, 22 x 33 cm
Chinese characters written by Nasiri



What is Paris, 2008, Paris
Diary book, 27 pages

What is Paris (Hokusai), p. 13, 2008, Paris
Inks and collage on paper, 15 x 20.5 cm



What is Paris (Babil), p. 11, 2008, Paris
Inks, collage, and gold leaf on paper,
15 x 20.5 cm

What is Paris (Oum Kalsoum), p. 6, 2008,
Paris
Inks, collage, and colored pens on paper,
15 x 20.5 cm



What is Paris (Goya), p. 14, 2008, Paris
Inks, collage, and gold leaf on paper,
15 x 20.5 cm



¹ I would like to thank Etel Adnan and Dia Azzawi, both internationally acclaimed artists working in book art, for drawing my attention to Rafa Nasiri's book art. I thank May Muzaffar for generously giving me access to Nasiri's collection, helping with the visual material, and providing invaluable personal information. I presented research in progress at talks and conferences in Amman, Washington D.C., Beirut, and Oslo. I am indebted to my colleagues, friends, and family whose insightful questions and suggestions at different stages of my research were most helpful, among them Mohammad Ali Atassi, Hala Auji, Rula Baalbaki, Helen Frederick, Beatrice Gruendler, Zeina G. Halabi, Lydia H. Liu, Helmut Mejcher, Deema Nasser, Bilal Orfalli, Marianne Schmidt-Dumont, and Nada Shabout. Last but not least I thank Skira editor Giuseppina Leone for kindly overseeing the publication of this book.

² On the quest for an Arab modernism, see especially Silvia Naef (1996) *À la recherche d'une modernité arabe: L'évolution des arts plastiques en Egypte, au Liban et en Iraq*. Geneva: Slatkine; Zainab Bahrani and Nada Shabout (2009) *Modernism and Iraq*. New York: Miriam and Ira D. Wallach Art Gallery, Columbia University.

³ In 1947, Baghdad counted an estimate of 515,459 inhabitants, compared to 2,600,000 in 1977, as listed in Hanna Batatu (1978) *The Old Social Classes and the Revolutionary Movements of Iraq: A Study of Iraq's Old Landed and Commercial Classes and of its Communists, Ba'thists, and the Free Officers*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 35. The *Guides Bleues, Moyen-Orient* gives an estimate of 3000-4000 inhabitants for Tikrit in its first edition of 1966, Paris: Hachette.

⁴ On Faiq Hassan, see <http://www.encyclopedia.mathaf.org/en/bios/Pages/Faiq-Hassan-Alawi-al-Janabi.aspx>.

⁵ On Atta Sabri and Ismail al-Shaikhly, see <http://www.encyclopedia.mathaf.org/en/bios/Pages/Atta-Sabri.aspx> and <http://www.encyclopedia.mathaf.org/en/bios/Pages/Ismail-al-Shaikhly>; Modern Art Iraq Archive at <http://artiraq.org/maia/>.

⁶ Some research has been carried out on Arab-Chinese cultural relations by Zvi Ben-DorBenite, albeit focusing on an earlier period, see especially his (2014) "Taking Abduh to China: Chinese-Egyptian Intellectual Contact in the Early Twentieth Century." In James L. Gelvin and Nile Green (eds.) *Global Muslims in the Age of Steam and Print*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 249-67.

⁷ On Li Hua and woodcuts' relation to politics and communism in China, see Chang-Tai Hung (1997) "Two Images of Socialism: Woodcuts in Chinese Communist Politics." In *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, 39.1: 34-60.

⁸ The creation of the state of Israel is referred to in Arabic as *nakba*, which translates into catastrophe, as it went hand in hand with the first Arab-Israeli war and a first wave of Palestinian refugees.

⁹ Translated from Shakir Hassan Al Said (1973) *al-Bayanat al-fanniyya fi al-Iraq* (Art Manifestoes in Iraq). Baghdad: Ministry of Culture and Information. On the New Vision Group, see also Silvia Naef (1996: 265-71).

¹⁰ On the impact of Ba'thist politics on cultural production, see Muhsin J. al-Musawi (2006) *Reading Iraq: Culture and Power in Conflict*. London: I.B. Tauris. See also Amatzia Baram (1991) *Culture, History and Ideology in the Formation of Ba'thist Iraq, 1968-89*. London: Palgrave Macmillan; Samir al-Khalil (1991) *The Monument: Art, Vulgarity and Responsibility in Iraq*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.

¹¹ On DiaAzzawi, see <http://www.encyclopedia.mathaf.org/en/bios/Pages/Dia-Azzawi.aspx>. On his book art, see also Sonja Mejcher-Atassi (2012) "Contemporary Book Art in the Middle East: The Book as Document in Iraq." In *Art History* 35.4: 816-39.

¹² See W.J. Strachan (1969) *The Artist and the Book in France. The 20th Century Livre d'Artiste*. London: Peter Owen; Johanna Drucker (2004) *The Century of Artist's Books*. New York: Granary, 21-44.

¹³ See Renée Riese Hubert and Judd D. Hubert (1999) *The Cutting Edge of Reading: Artists' Books*. New York: Granary.

¹⁴ See Sharbil Daghir (1990) *al-hurufiyya al-'arabiyya: al-fann wal-huwiyya* (Arabic Letterism: Art and Identity). Beirut: Sharikat al-matbu'at; Sylvia Naef (1992) *L'art de l'écriture arabe: Passé et présent*. Geneva: Slatkine.

¹⁵ On Shakir Hassan Al Said, see <http://www.encyclopedia.mathaf.org/en/bios/Pages/Shakir-Hassan-Al-Said.aspx>; Modern Art Iraq Archive at <http://artiraq.org/maia/>.

¹⁶ Like other leading museums, the British Museum has expanded its collection of modern and contemporary art from the Middle East. Its collection focuses on works on paper, which include book art. Its exhibition *Word into Art: Artists of the Modern Middle East* (2006 in London and 2008 in Dubai), curated by Venetia Porter, included valuable examples. Another notable publication is *Dafatir: Contemporary Iraqi Book Art* (2007), a catalogue accompanying an exhibition curated by Nada Shabout that travelled to different venues in the United States in 2006-2007. *L'art du livre arabe* (2002) edited by Marie-Geneviève Guesdon and Annie Vernay-Nouri, also includes some examples of contemporary book art.

¹⁷ See especially Geoffrey Roper (2013) "The Muslim World." In *The Book: A Global History*. Ed. Michael F. Suarez, S.J. and H. R. Woudhuysen. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 524-52; Oleg Grabar (2009) *Masterpieces of Islamic Art: The Decorated Page from the 8th to the 17th Century*. Munich: Prestel; Marie-Geneviève Guesdon and Annie Vernay-Nouri (eds.) (2002) *L'art du livre arabe: Du manuscrit au livre d'artiste*. Paris: Bibliothèque nationale; George Atiyeh (ed.) (1995) *The Book in the Islamic World: The Written Word and Communication in the Middle East*. Albany: State University of New York Press.

¹⁸ The term modern Islamic art is used by some, namely by the Jordanian artist and critic Wijdan Ali in (1997) *Modern Islamic Art: Development and Continuity*. Gainesville: University of Florida Press. Ali argues that Islamic art continues to thrive in what she describes as a calligraphic school.

¹⁹ See Shakir Hassan Al Said (1973) and Sylvia Naef (1996).

²⁰ On Etel Adnan, see <http://www.encyclopedia.mathaf.org/>; Sonja Mejcher-Atassi (2010) "The Forbidden Paradise: How Etel Adnan Learned to Paint in Arabic." In Angelika Neuwirth, Andreas Pfiltzsch and Barbara Winckler (eds.) *Arabic Literature: Postmodern Perspectives*. London: Saqi Books, 311-20.

²¹ *Islamic Art and Literature*, edited by Oleg Grabar and Cynthia Robinson, Princeton: Markus Wiener Publishers, 2001, is a major exception. See also Sonja Mejcher-Atassi (2012) *Reading across Modern Arabic Literature and Art*. Wiesbaden: Reichert.

²² See also Sonja Mejcher-Atassi (2012) "Contemporary Book Art in the Middle East: The Book as Document in Iraq." In *Art History* 35.4: 816-39.

²³ David Damrosch opens his 2003 book *What is World*

Literature?, Princeton: Princeton University Press, with a chapter on the Gilgamesh epic and, in 2007, devotes a book on the topic entitled *The Buried Book: The Loss and Rediscovery of the Great Epic of Gilgamesh*. New York: Henry Holt and Company.

²⁴Especially with her participation in the Documenta 13 in Kassel, Germany, in 2012 and the Whitney Biennial in New York in 2013.

²⁵The bombing has triggered a solidarity movement in the US, Al Mutanabi Street Starts Here, with a call to book artists to “re-assemble” [...] some of the “inventory” lost. See <http://www.al-Mutanabistreetstartshere-boston.com>.

²⁶On the literature of al-Andalus and reference to it in modern Arabic literature, see Salma Khadra Jayyusi (ed.) *The Legacy of Muslim Spain*. 2 vols, Leiden: Brill.

²⁷See the short video produced about the book at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SGBKYc_b8Yc.

²⁸In a conversation in Amman, 17.10.2014.

²⁹This and the following translations from Nasiri's diaries are my own.

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