

Mahmoud Obaidi

by G.H. Rabbath



Fair Skies 2010

GH RABBATH How does it feel to be a hyphenated artist?

MAHMOUD OBAIDI I feel as much Iraqi as I feel Canadian. There's no doubt about that. That being said, there's so much to do for Iraqi art and Iraqi artists that I have a certain feeling of responsibility towards my country of origin. There's a complete lack of funding or support of any kind. We basically help each other out.

GHR: You mean to say that there's a kind of an Iraqi artists' network?

MO: There is what you can call a network of Iraqi artists. You know, one thing that differentiates us from artists from other neighbouring countries is the

complete lack of funding or support for any kind of art projects. Dia Azawi, and I, for one, have been very active in that area.

GHR: Is there something being planned?

MO: We're working on a cartographic project with Dia where we would show a map of Iraqi artists scattered around the world, but it's still too early to talk about. To set the record straight about Dia, I have to mention that his activities go beyond the Iraqi artist issue. He's now setting-up a show in Jordan for Syrian artists. It's not like we're some kind of closed community, there's no place for that in the art world. It's just that Iraqi artists need more financial help these days for obvious reasons.

GHR: Let's talk about your work. Is there a break between past and present work, and do you see yourself as a conceptual artist?

MO: Yes and no. I think we have to make something clear about the «conceptual» label: there has been a lot of confusion about the word on the one hand, and the word itself doesn't really describe what artists do and what I do, for that matter. In any case, I don't think you can put labels on art despite what people believe and mostly despite of what is being done nowadays. I think of myself as a conceptual artist, but I'm not doing concepts for a purpose or some clear cut meaning, I'm just «doing» things, that's all. The concepts are there but there are other things at play as well; there are things out there, if you know what I mean.

Going back to the first part of your question, there are shared points between past and present work, but there is a clear break, in fact. I'm glad you asked that question, by the way. Something happened in 2005. My first show was at the Museum of Modern Art of Iraq in 1989. Since that time, until seven years ago, you could talk of continuity. But something happened five years ago that changed everything. I used to do a lot of digital photography when the first digital cameras came out. I stocked up on hundreds of thousands of photos, cramming them onto an ever-growing number of flash disks. The flash disks became data DVDs and then high capacity external hard drives. And then one day, I erased everything. It wasn't just a symbolic gesture; something happened in my mind as well as in my life, and maybe the world, and the action itself could be regarded as art in itself, but it is also something more. Everything I did up to that point, I was doing right, but I was doing it all for the wrong reasons.

GHR: When did that happen?

MO: It happened in Canada. I was doing a Masters degree there at Guelph University and I met Tony Sherman. He's a well known artist and writer. One day I was showcasing my project. He asked me very simply: «What are you doing?» I was a little bit stuck-up at that time, having done quite a few shows in Europe and having had prizes and all. We were in my studio and I remember distinctly his words:



Advanced Search Engine machine for missing Iraqis

«It's all bullshit». It's like somebody stops you from going over the edge and asks you: «Where are you going?», and right after that pushes you himself over the top. So, up until 2002, I collected photos, just as I collected techniques and know-how, and then there was Canada, and just after that, New York. I was hearing everything but I wasn't really listening. In fact, I think you do what you have to do, waiting for something, and most of the time you don't even know what you're waiting for. But when you do know, and eventually find it, well that changes your life. That changes everything. In 2004, I let go of everything I thought I knew. I unlearned everything, and this was the most important decision in my life. I understood later on that erasing that hard drive was more than a symbolic gesture.

GHR: Do you consider it as an artistic performance?

MO: The erasing is a work of art in and of itself. And it's even more so because nobody knew about it, until now of course.

GHR: That's what makes it authentic, I think. That's what makes it more than just art.

MO: As a matter of fact, just before erasing the hard drive, I did a project that I called «My Mind is 200 GB». It was a wooden box trapped in a glass container into which I put paper documents and



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flash disks. A project like that doesn't have the same meaning when it's done by a twenty year-old. One has to make a life full of memories and closets full of things before mustering the courage or the sanity to do away with it all and begin from the ground up. Some day soon I'll have to show that empty 500 GB drive.

GHR: Coming back to the present and the success of your show in Art Dubai this year, as I understand it has generated a lot of interest in the US, and a show in New York last April.

MO: I tell you, it's a good thing I have a Canadian passport; I wouldn't have made it to US soil if it weren't for that. The other Iraqi artists weren't that lucky.

GHR: Did you get to use one of your kits?

MO: I didn't, no, but I wish I had at Kuwait Airport.

GHR: Why, what happened in Kuwait?

MO: Just before my show in New York I had another one in Kuwait, but I got stopped at the Kuwait airport on the charge that my Canadian passport was

a forgery, and I had to return whence I came.

GHR: It is ironic, isn't it?

MO: Life is full of ironies; the vending machines didn't make it to the New York show. The agents in Doha wouldn't let us ship them; they said the machines weren't art. Apart from that the show at LTMH gallery was great. I did a piece for The Observer newspaper of April 14.

GHR: How did it come about?

MO: The original idea was that Gayle Mandle would curate a show where she would show her work and mine. But I suggested a group show with other Iraqi artists.

GHR: There are a lot of similarities between her style and yours.

MO: Gayle is like a soulmate. I want to go back to the Fair Skies show I did in Dubai this year and put the record straight about how it all started. One can never repeat it enough, but Saleh Barakat had a big hand in it. Saleh and I go back a long way. I have known him for 16 years now. Two years ago we were

at an opening at Art Dubai - for the life of me I can't remember which one it was. Anyway, we were sitting somewhere, the music was loud, it was night. I told him that I had an idea for a new project. When he heard about it he just said: «The project is mine, I want it». We drew away from the crowd and the rest, as you might say, is history, and maybe even art history someday, although if one has to go by your book about Fair Skies, one might hope it never gets to that, I mean for the project's sake.

GHR: Yes, of course. So what did happen, "historywise"?

MO: Six months later the project ran into a speed bump. You see, my original idea didn't call for a vending machine, it was more of a concept than a real object, but Saleh insisted that there should be a «product» to show, and sell of course. I have to say that, at the moment, on hearing the «P» word I really wanted to hang up on the guy. But I came around, and two weeks later the idea of the vending machines was born. The whole story is that Jessica Morgan told him that the machines shouldn't just

be for show, but really work, and so I was off to China. \$50,000 later, in the weeks leading to the Art Dubai Fair, I felt Saleh had some doubts, as if he was taking a big risk showing the Fair Skies alone on his stand instead of a collection of more conservative artworks like paintings and sculptures as he usually does. That's where you came in, I think, and you did a hell of a job.

GHR: Thank you my friend.

MO: It's the truth. Anyway, Saleh saw soon enough that the gamble paid off tenfold. It was a great show, a very good critical reception and lots of public interest.

GHR: So, what are your plans for the future?

MO: Well, for one thing, the Arab MoMA here in Doha is acquiring a great amount of my work, and I have two projects up north, but I've been asked to keep it under wraps for now.

GHR: I guess we'll know soon enough.

MO: Definitely.



Mohamed Obaidi in his Studio