

## DIA AZZAWI: BALLADS TO BILAD AL-SAWAD<sup>(1)</sup>

By: Nada Shabout

*"A painting is seen by the simple [man] through his eyes, and by the cultured through his level of intellect" - Jewad Selim*

*"A painting is seen by the simple [man] through his eyes, and by the cultured through his level of intellect" argued the renowned Iraqi artist Jewad Selim<sup>(2)</sup>. To appreciate a work by Dia Azzawi, however, one must surrender both vision and intellect.*

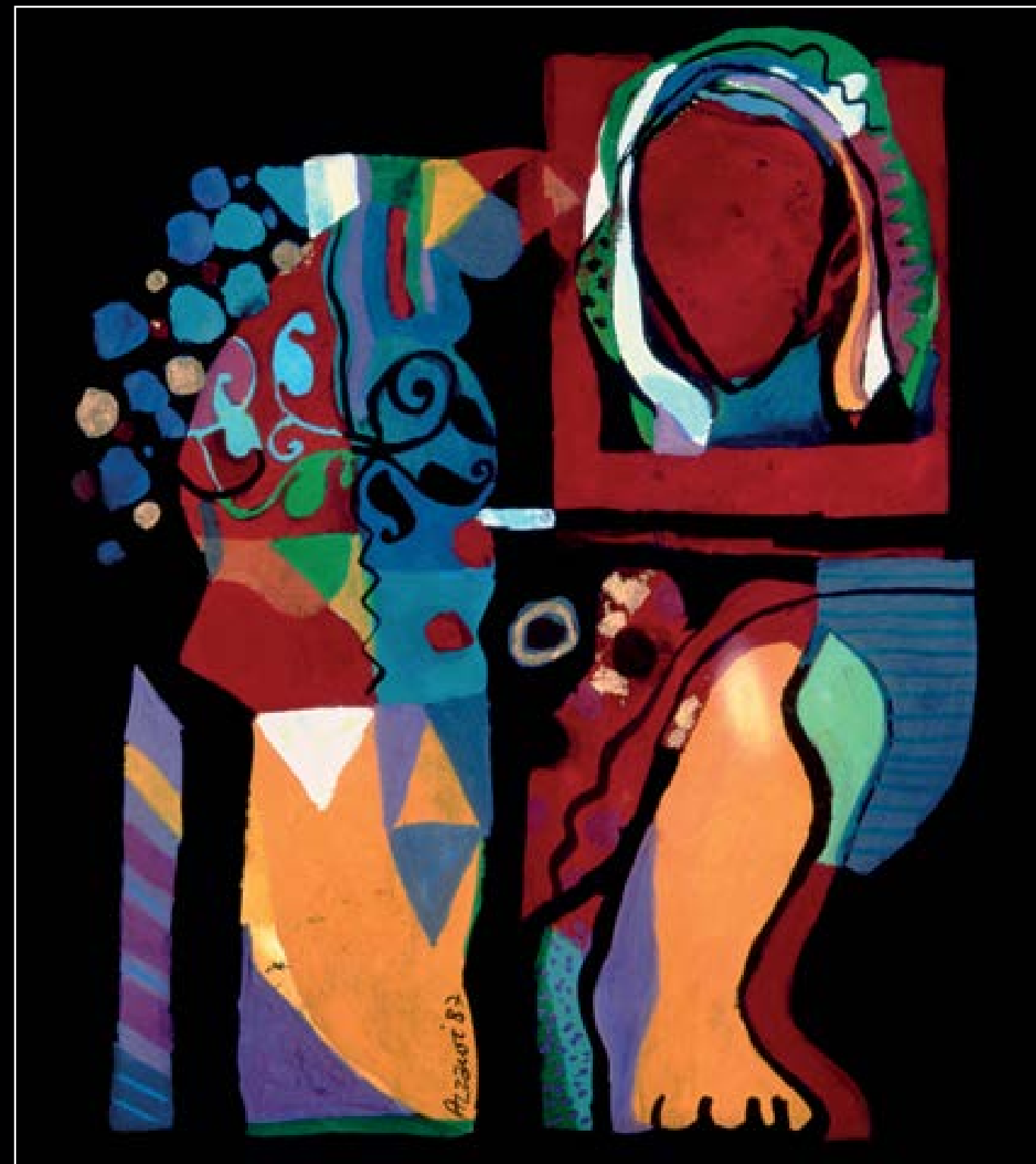
Dia Azzawi is an Iraqi artist based in London. His journey through art intimates a story of his country of origin through mergers and intersections of various moments of its past and present. Moreover, his work provides an interesting understanding of the evolving relationship between the local and the international, modernity and tradition, within the context of the global today. His work and the progress of his style address personal changes as well as cultural and socio-political transformations, both in Iraq, the Arab world and later as a diasporic artist. From Azzawi's early work a consolation that did not anticipate contradictions between modernity and tradition is apparent. Azzawi understood himself as part of a modern world, and assumed his role in negotiating and contributing to modernity within Iraq and on a wider international level. Today, Azzawi is a contemporary artist who is never afraid of experimenting with new technology or techniques. Despite dramatic and heartbreaking changes in Iraq, Azzawi maintains his allegiance to the imagined image of Iraq he had created through his work and appreciated through his love of poetry and literature.

Azzawi was born in the oldest traditional Baghdadi neighborhood, al-Fadhil, in 1939. It was in this amalgamation of tactile and sensory surroundings during his childhood that his intense relationship with the city was formed. From a young age he was absorbed in her colors and smells and developed a passion for her history. He would later reaffirm this passion through studying archaeology at the Faculty of the Humanities at Baghdad University. After graduating in 1962, Azzawi pursued and obtained a BA from the Baghdad Institute of Fine Arts in 1964.

At the Faculty of the Humanities, Azzawi joined the Impressionist Group, previously known as the extremely active Free Atelier until 1953 and directed by the artist Hafidh al-Droubi (1914-1991). While Azzawi never favored Impressionism as a style, the group provided him with the intellectual context to develop his love for visual art and poetry<sup>(3)</sup>. The group's focus on Iraqi subjects allowed for a variety of styles and experimentations.

Later at the Institute of Fine Arts, Azzawi was exposed to the work of the Iraqi pioneers, like Faiq Hassan, who taught his generation of artists, as well European art history. Exploring both ancient Iraqi mythology and European academic art styles in his studies, provided him with the dynamics he would later negotiate into a unique and intimate understanding of the different layers of Iraqi history, while simultaneously decoding modern art movements. More importantly, it made him grasp the affinities between ancient and modern forms. Consistently Azzawi's negotiations observed no territorial or temporal limitations. His often utopian and imagined realities embraced different moments in the history of his country and the region that he perceived necessary to explore and understand, or for him to also register a stand<sup>(4)</sup>.

Azzawi was one of the inheritors of the philosophy of Istiham al-Turath (seeking inspiration and motivation from tradition) and its promotion of an innovative engagement with heritage. This notion was initiated by Jamaat Baghdad Lil Fan al-Hadith (the Baghdad Group of Modern Art), which was started by artists Jewad Selim and Shakir Hassan Al Said in 1951. Azzawi, however, would widen the scope of tradition based on his own perception of the concept, which is always inclusive rather than restrictive<sup>(5)</sup>. Thus while he mined the history of Iraq without discrimination, he would go beyond the immediate borders of the country. Heritage and cultural histories of the Arab world as a whole were to be absorbed by him and explored in his work.



Arabian Nights, 1987. Gouache & Crayon on paper, 71 x 53 cm. Private collection.



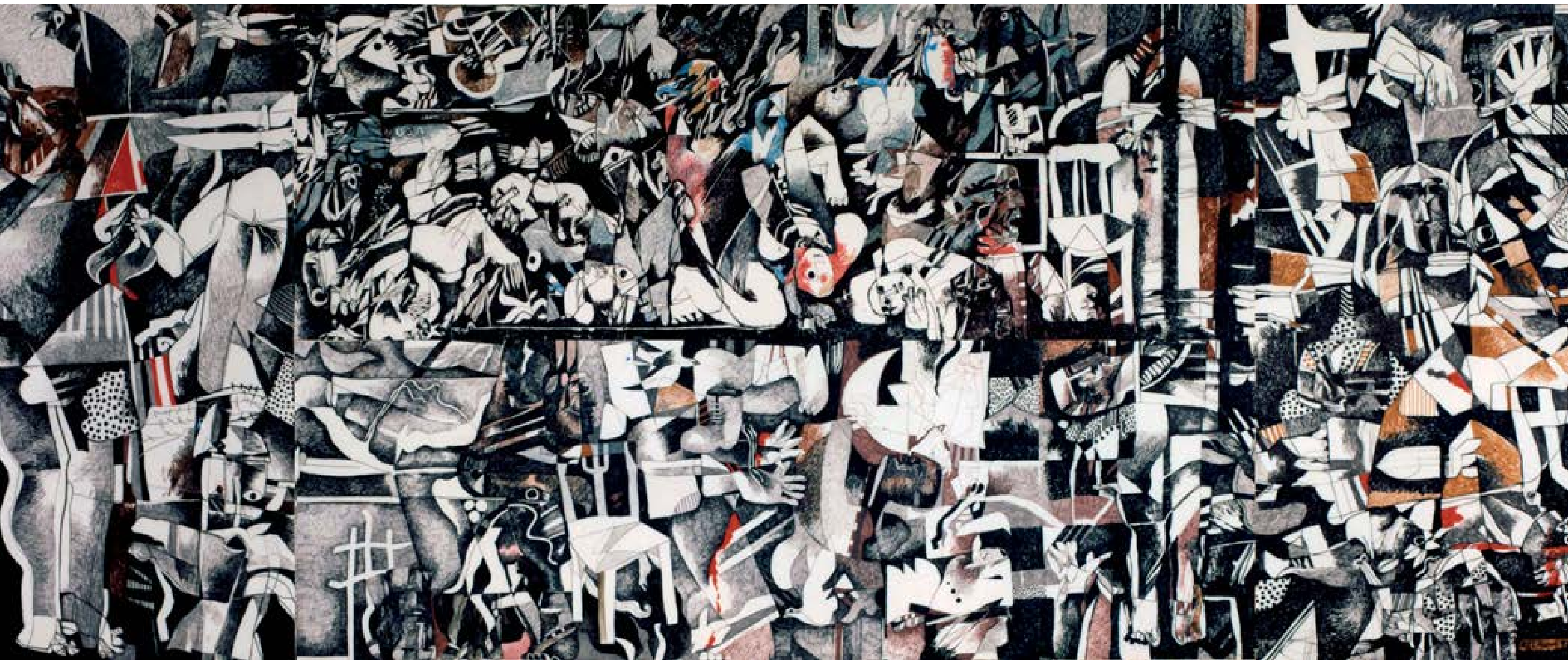
Wounded Soul, 2010. Acrylic on canvas 240 x480 cm.

More importantly, Azzawi's hermeneutical disparity with the Baghdad Group of Modern Art became the crux of his artistic experience. The group had tried to synthesize their appropriation of ancient, Islamic and modern art stylistically through deconstructing form while exploring their contemporary moment in search for continuity. For them, Baghdad's contemporary urban popular culture with its preservation of tradition and folklore were an important tool of resistance. Consequently, the group was very successful in coining a collective contemporary Iraqi iconography that remains prevalent today and with which the following generations were profoundly engaged. Azzawi on the other hand, realized the continuity of his heritage in folk production which itself is a contemporary decontextualizing of ancient history. Thus, his often perceived as decorative motifs in Azzawi's work rather represent his temporal negotiations of the history of Iraq. The early appearances of the kilim, referencing the southern peasant kilim al-Samawa or al-busut, signals his understanding of the region's Sumerian past and its forms as manifested in his contemporary moment. These spaces of form and color not only carry a rich collective history but also offer an instinctive tool that is at once capable of defiance and preservation.

Thus for Azzawi the crescent, the martyrdom of Husayn and popular religious sites do not denote religiosity any more than the Epic of Gilgamesh and stories from One Thousand and One Nights do. In Azzawi's spaces, all narratives and forms are deconstructed and decontextualized as free iconic elements that are capable of constructing new realities. Mythology stories that have been transformed into folkloric stories came back in his work to express new and current political happenings. Thus, Azzawi would always have his foot firmly in the contemporary moment while intellectually and sensually roaming through history. This discursive understanding of history gave him intuitive insights into both intellectual and popular life in Iraq. Consequently, both concept and form pervade time and place in Azzawi's painting, where old symbols create an array of new cultural signatures.

Moreover, Azzawi's understanding of heritage necessarily included the various political upheavals and humanitarian sufferings of the region that would continue to trouble him as a contemporary of his times artist. The 1963 political repressions following the first Baath coup were of particular importance to Azzawi who believes it marked a paradigm shift for Iraqi culture. Many of the artists and poets were imprisoned for their political opinions and dissent, including Azzawi who was imprisoned for three months. The decade also ushered the trend of one-artist show, thus, allowing for individualism and individual styles to be developed in contrast to the earlier dominant collective experiments like the ones by the Baghdad Group of Modern Art.

Contemporary conflicts, wars, mythology, history, gender relationships, poetry and literature are all topics that converge in Azzawi's work through what he termed "epical contemporaneity" where ideas are articulated and deconstructed and the contemporary mundane is negotiated on an epic scale. The construct of an epic provided Azzawi with a space where a moral stance is argued and the contemporary is negotiated through traces of the past. Throughout his career, Azzawi remains occupied with human suffering and the preservation of humanity. Equally, his work negotiates an



Sabra & Shatila, 1982-83, mixed media on paper mounted on canvas, 300 x 750 cm. Tate Modern, London.



Wounded Soul, 2010, Bronze, Mathaf: Arab Museum of modern art, Doha.

existentialist quest for understanding the modern self and the archeology of being, which was manifested at times through a search of cultural identity and need to preserve cultural distinctiveness, without ever sacrificing personal aesthetic and stylistic growth.

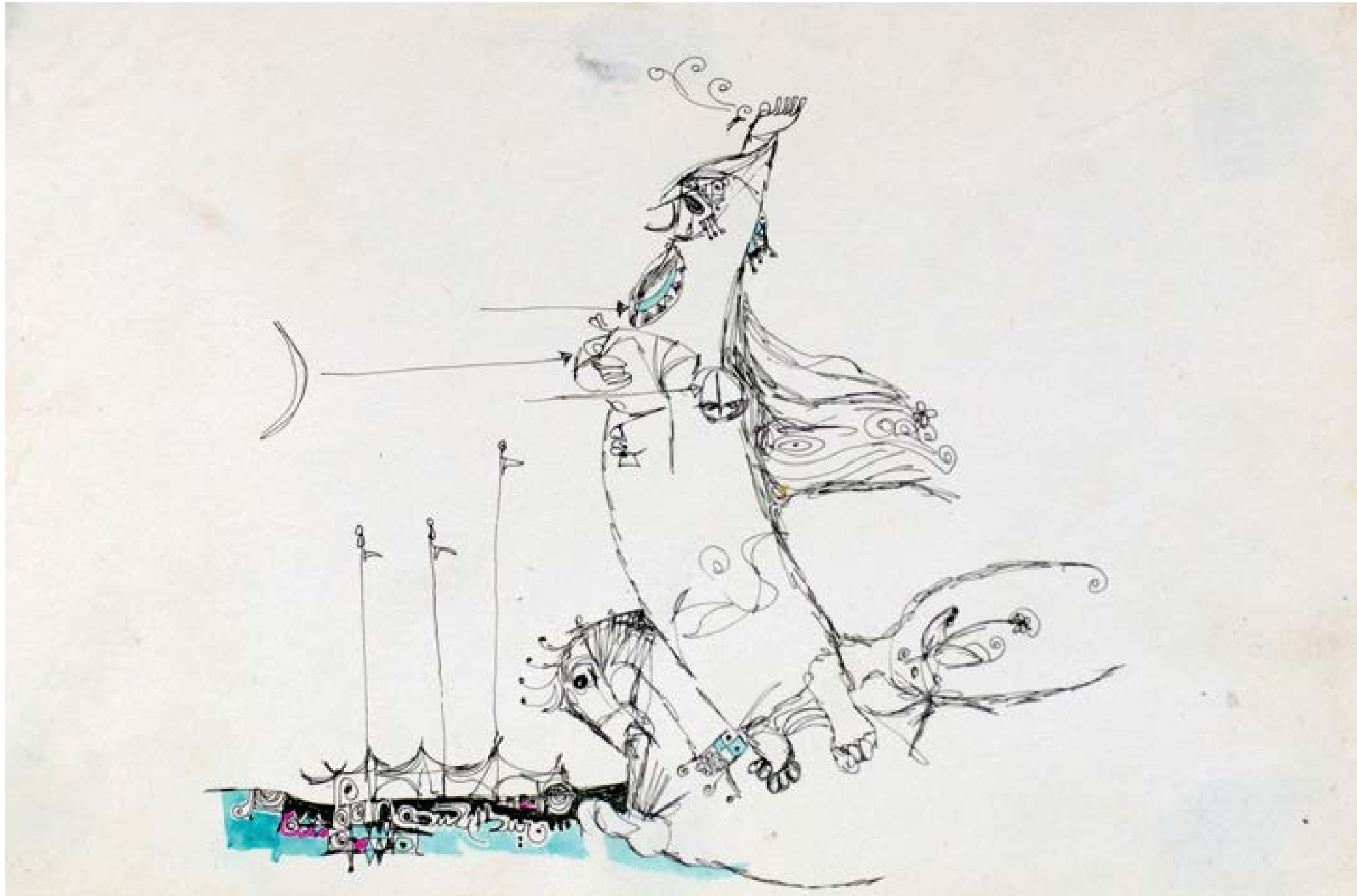
Azzawi's concern with human suffering is found from the beginning in his engagements with ancient and Islamic mythology, as seen in his series of work that decontextualized the theme of the Epic of Gilgamesh, One Thousand and One Nights and the Karbala and the martyrdom of Husayn. However, in response to the defeat of 1967, the general regional sentiments of denial and defiance, as well as the fever of pan-Arabism and desire for Arab unity, Azzawi's attention went beyond the historical and mythical to his contemporary realities. He thus instigated and consequently formed the Jama'at al-Ru'yya al-Jadidah (New Vision Group) in Baghdad in 1969. Initially Azzawi wrote a letter titled Towards a New Vision in an attempt to have the voices of his generation included in a meeting organized by the Iraqi government about Arab art that was to take place in Cairo in 1970. Thus when the meeting was canceled, Azzawi circulated the letter to artists Rafa al Nasiri, Mohammed Muhriddin, Ismail Fattah, Hachem al-Samarchi, and Saleh al-Jumaie, who signed it in agreement to its principles.

The manifesto, later published in a Baghdad newspaper, was in itself a defiance of the status quo, but more importantly registered the disappointment of the younger generation of artists and opened a new space for them to take agency.

Azzawi's generation of artists was part of a transitional generation from an age of optimism and possibilities to one increasingly darkened by the regional politics. Azzawi, therefore, felt a continuous need to reevaluate and question conventional absolutes. Art, he declared, 'submits to the human existence its autonomous world by means of line, color, and mass, and thus, rejection and rebellion become two existences inseparable from the continuous act of creativity<sup>64</sup>. Through the New Vision group, Azzawi drew parallels between art and revolution. He charted a specifically active role for artists in society and aimed at further questioning the notion of tradition. Azzawi's perception of tradition was never dictatorial. If the New Vision manifesto, however, it became intently deconstructivist, but nevertheless, always finding points of continuities. Humanity and human suffering grew increasingly central and was manifested in a series of works that confronted Arab's tragedies, particularly that of Palestinians. The Fida'i (freedom fighter) persona emerged strongly loaded with anger in Azzawi's work of that period. Distinguished by its expansive size, his intuitive drawing of the Sabra and Shatila Massacre of 1982-3, exhibited at the Tate Modern in 2012, marked his continuous solidarity with Palestine and Palestinian grief<sup>65</sup>. While this specific work reacted against the 1982 massacre of Palestinian refugees in Beirut, Azzawi produces multiple works that negotiates the loss of humanity caused by the different calamities in the region<sup>66</sup>.

Azzawi's oeuvre includes paintings, sculptures, prints, drawings and books. Distinctive in Azzawi's work has been the passion and intensity of his intuitive and vibrant colors while equally disclosing his mastery of line and form. Stylistically his work of the early 1960s remained more figurative





Tragedy of Karbbela, 1966. China ink on paper, 20 x 30 cm. Private collection.

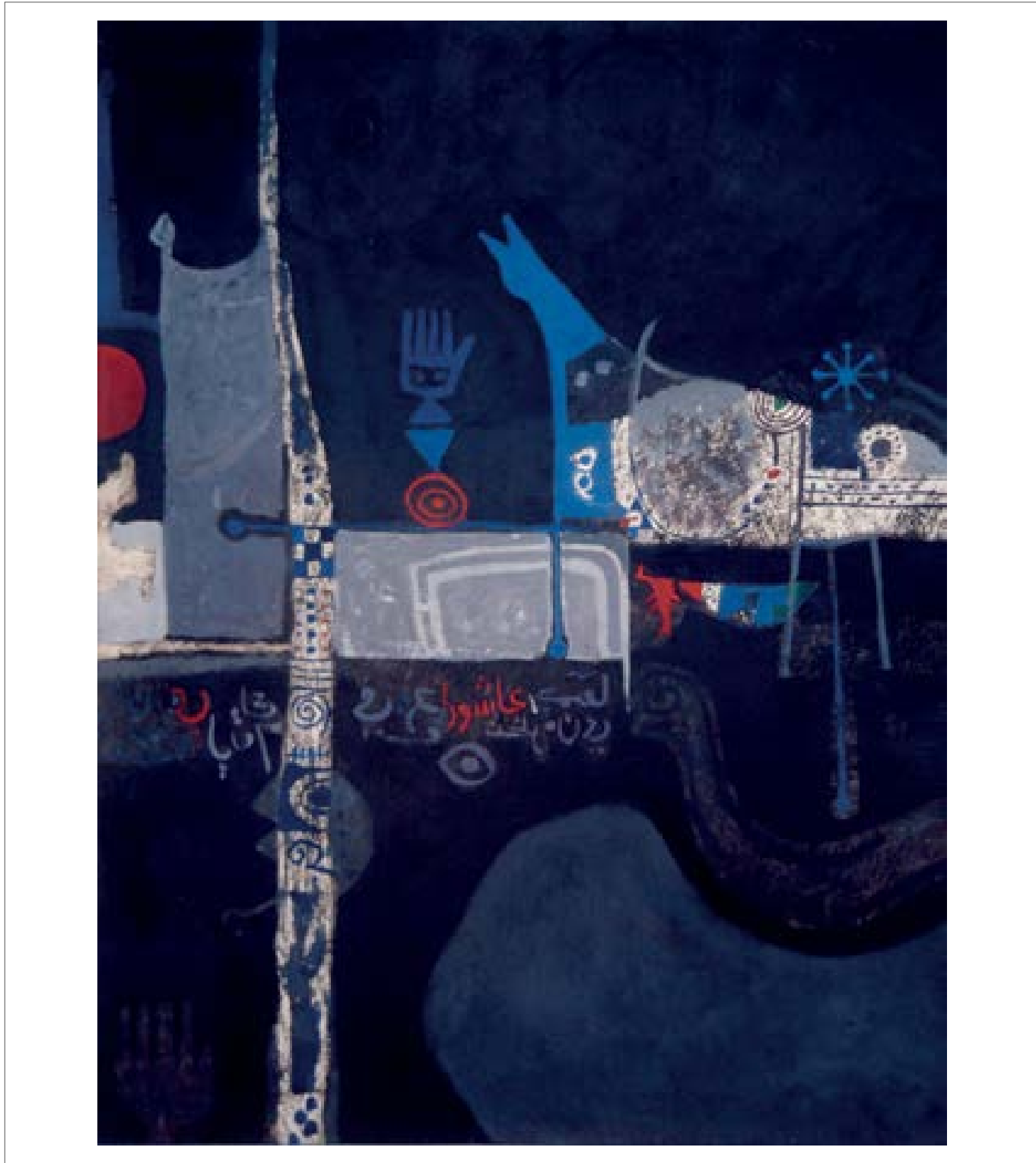
with stronger ties to mythology and history. The figure as part of humanity, however, remained central in his work equally through his presence and absence. Azzawi's epistemologically holistic awareness of heritage but necessarily understanding the political ramifications of the second half of the 20th century, particularly with the obsession with identity, led him to an important experiment with the Arabic letter. His interest in the relationship between text and image was always present in his despite its various transformations through various experiments. In his continuous search for surrogate signs capable of transference and new significance.

Azzawi used the Arabic letter primarily a plastic form with cultural and political significance. In his paintings, it occupied various status and positions. The letter, however, was never the subject of the work. Intertwined with his abstracted and figurative elements in the work, it was another decontextualized component of expression.

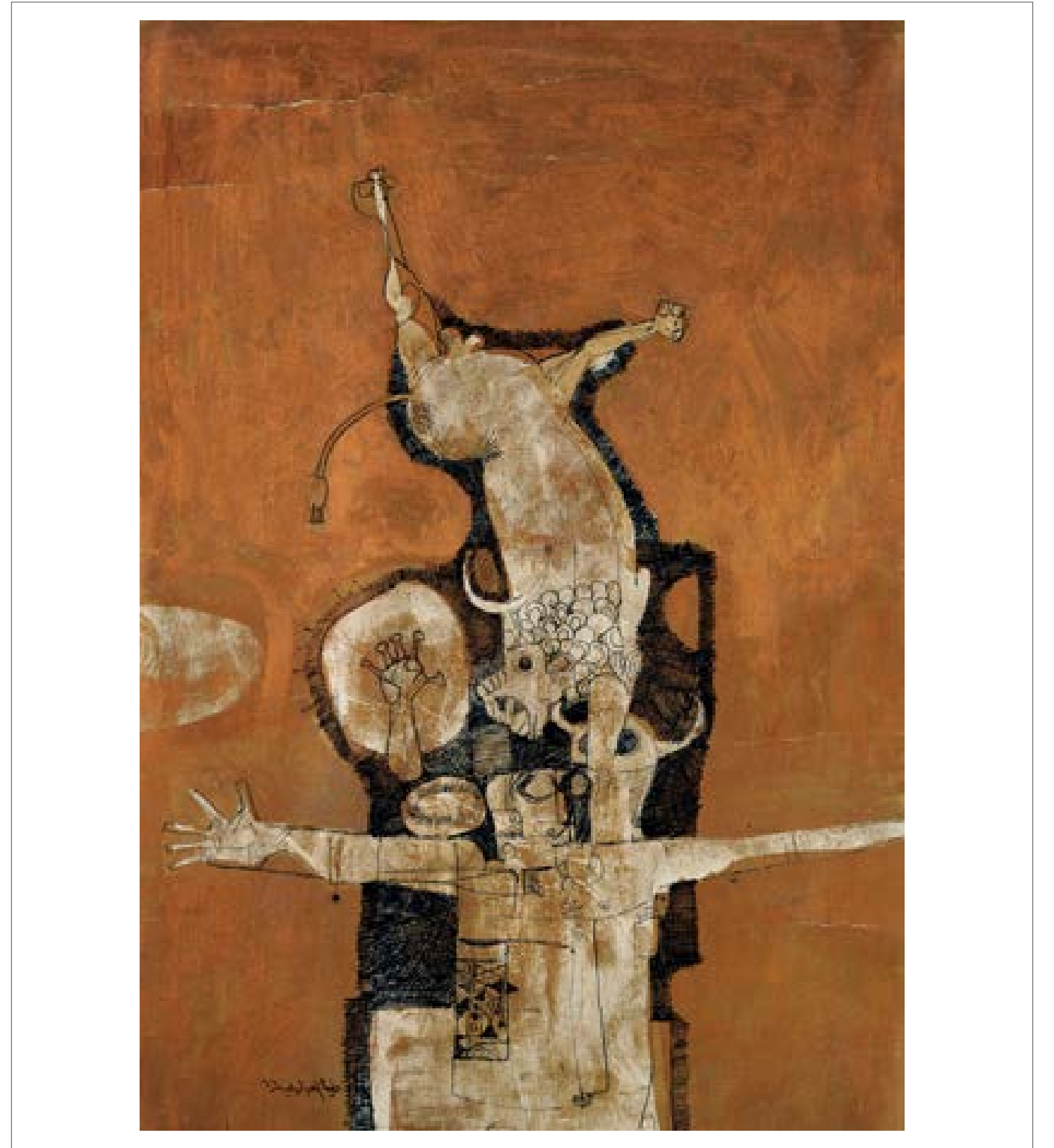
With time, particularly as his move to London in 1976 opened new directions for him, the letter gave way to the dominance of the concept of the book, and in turn to another layer of history that preceded the prominence of Arab nationalism, although without denying it. Carrying a contemporaneous evaluation of the Islamic concept of the book with its symbolic and literal unity of the arts, Azzawi's daftar (Arabic for notebook) harmonizes a new dialectical coexistence between text and image. The centrality of the book (the manuscript) in Islamic history was thus transformed to a contemporary daftar that negotiated current events and concerns. Sensitivity to and the musicality of his color remained a strong psychological aura, invoking memories throughout his object transformations.

Azzawi's daftar as a sculptural form dominated both text and image and offered dynamic and interchangeable structures that allow both reading and viewing. Azzawi produced a number of original, hand-painted, one-copy daftar (pl. daftar) engaging the work of contemporary Arab poets. The text of the poem was no longer intrinsic to the book. To Azzawi, these 'visual poetic constructions' are not "boxes containing words and few illustrations"<sup>91</sup>. Instead they embody a dialogue between "text-memory and painting-vision" evoked by the spirit of the poem.

While Azzawi's work remained spiritually always connected to Iraq, after the invasion of 2003, the tone of his already tragic ballads became sharper. In a series of work titled Bilad al-Sawad initiated in the 1990s and followed by numerous Elegy to Bilad al-Sawad, Azzawi registered and lamented the horrific occurrences in light of the destruction of life and heritage in his beloved Iraq. Vowing to never return to Iraq after the 2003 invasion lest he loses his utopian and displaced visions and memories, Azzawi persisted in his confrontations. In Wounded Soul, a Journey of Destruction, a large installation of various components, and arguably uncharacteristic of Azzawi's style, Azzawi highlighted and expanded his stance against the destruction in and of Iraq as nation and people in the post 2003 era. The two larger than life horses in bronze, materially and three-dimensionally rise from his earliest paintings on the topic of tragedy and suffering. His 1960s stylized articulations of the martyrdom of Husayn, carrying multiple symbolisms of suffering and betrayal, are decontextualized to universal and historical



Ashura Day, 1969. Oil on canvas. 100 x 82 cm. Mathaf: Arab Museum of modern art, Doha.



Gilgamish, III, 1966. Gouache & China ink on paper. 52 x 32 cm. Private collection.



Bilad al-Sawad, 1993. Charcoal on paper, 9 drawings each 65 x 50 cm. Private collection.

dimensions. The standing horse on the tracks equally invokes the deceit and duplicity of another mythical horse, Virgil's Trojan horse. The second animated and injured horse visually and metaphorically recalls the Neo-Assyrian wounded lioness from Nineveh. The installation specifically pays tribute to the fallen academics and intellectuals of Iraq, without whom Iraq is unable to ascend again. The number of the resin roses states the increasing number of killed academics as recorded by the Brussels' Tribune<sup>101</sup>.

In the introduction to Azzawi's 1971 solo exhibition at the Baghdad National Museum of Modern Art, the critic Mo'aid Shukri al-Rawi wrote, 'If I may propose ending a progressive period of Iraqi art with [the artist Jewad] Selim as someone who developed a fundamental vision for Iraqi art, then I can also point to Azzawi as someone who continued, intensified and advanced that vision from a more conscious, inclusive and informed private world<sup>102</sup>'. Azzawi is a highly prolific, versatile and most generous artist. His current diaspora status, forced on him by political developments and instability in Iraq, transformed him into a spiritual and material teacher and a leader for Iraqi art. His role as the Creative Director of the Iraqi Cultural Center in London during the late 1970s allowed him to witness the absence of Iraqi art from the contemporary international scene and instigated a long-term enterprise of promoting Iraqi art and artists. Azzawi has served the art world in various capacities, as an educator, an administrator, a patron and curator. He was the Creative Director of the Iraqi Antiquities Department in Baghdad between 1968 and 1976 and an art adviser to the Iraqi Cultural Center in London from 1977 until 1980. He was editor-in-chief of UR Magazine, London, between 1978 and 1984 and Funoun Arabbiya, London, in 1981-82, and a member of the editorial board of Jusour Magazine, Washington, DC, in 1992. He has been an advisor to Mathaf: Arab Museum of Modern Art from the time of its planning. Widely exhibited around the world, Azzawi is a pivotal figure in the history of Iraqi and Arab art. Azzawi has participated in numerous group exhibitions in Beirut, Rome, Vienna, Baghdad, Paris, and London. His work also has been included in a number of international expositions, including the 1976 Venice Biennale, the 1979 Sao Paolo Biennale, and the 1992 International Cairo Biennial, in which he was awarded a jury prize. Solo presentations of his paintings and graphic and book works have been held in Baghdad, Paris, Geneva, Kuwait City, Tripoli, Abu Dhabi, Toronto, Amman,

Stockholm, and Washington D.C. among other centers. Institutions that have collected his work include Mathaf: Arab Museum of Modern Art in Qatar, the Institut du Monde Arabe in Paris, the British Museum and the Victoria and Albert Museum in London, and national museums of modern art in Syria, Tunisia, and Jordan.

#### About the Writer

Nada Shabout is a Professor of Art History and the Director of the Contemporary Arab and Muslim Cultural Studies Initiative (CAMCSI) at the University of North Texas. She is the founding president of the Association for Modern and Contemporary Art from the Arab World, Iran and Turkey (AMCAI). She was the Consulting Director of Research at Mathaf: Arab Museum of Modern Art, Doha, and is the editor-in-chief of the Mathaf Encyclopedia of Modern Art and the Arab World. In 2010, she led Mathaf's curatorial team of the inaugural exhibition Sajjil: A Century of Modern Art, and curated one of the two accompanying opening exhibitions, Interventions: A dialogue between the Modern and the Contemporary. She has co-curated with Zainab Bahrani Modernism and Iraq at the Wallach Art Gallery, Columbia University, 2009, and curated the traveling exhibition, Dafatir: Contemporary Iraqi Book Art, 2005-2009. She has published numerous articles on modern and contemporary Arab and Iraqi art and the relationship of identity and visual representations in Iraq. She is the author of *Modern Arab Art: Formation of Arab Aesthetics*, University of Florida Press, 2007; co-editor with Salwa Mikdadi of *New Vision: Arab Art in the 21st Century*, Thames & Hudson, 2009; and currently co-editing with Aneka Lenssen and Sarah Rogers the forthcoming volume *Modern Art of the Arab World: Primary Documents*, part of the International Program at the Museum of Modern Art, New York, 2017. She is the founder and project director of the Modern ArtIraq Archive (MAIA); a member of the editorial committee of the Middle East Research and Information Project (MERIP) and member of the International Editorial Advisory Board and subject editor for the Routledge Encyclopedia of Modernism (REM). Her awards include: The American Academic Research Institute in Iraq (TAARII) fellow 2006, 2007; MIT visiting Assistant Professor, spring 2008, and Fulbright Senior Scholar Program, 2008 Lecture/Research fellowship to Jordan.

#### End Notes

<sup>101</sup> Bilad al-Sawad (the Lands of Black) is the name given to the part of Mesopotamia that corresponds to the modern state of Iraq by the Muslim armies due to its rich and dark soil. Azzawi also uses the term to reference the abundance of the color black in his contemporary Iraq as the number of dead increases the numbers of mourning women wearing black.

<sup>102</sup> As quoted in Abbas al-Sarraf, Jewad Selim (Baghdad: Ministry of Information), 104.

<sup>103</sup> Among the poets Azzawi met is Muzaffar al-Nawab (b. 1934), whose work Azzawi will engage often. Al-Nawab is a leading revolutionary and a highly controversial Iraqi poet. His poetry contains Arab, Islamic and leftist symbolism. His work championed using local and Southern Iraqi dialect in modern poetry. His poetry addressed various poignant political and social contemporary issues with an impact that resonates till today.

<sup>104</sup> See Shabout, 'Utopian Reality: Dia Azzawi, 1964-1974' in Dia Azzawi: Selected Works 1964-1974, Meem Edition, in conjunction with the Frieze Masters Exhibition in London, October 15-19, 2014, 14-27.

<sup>105</sup> Considered as Iraq's most significant art group, Selim perceived Jamaat Baghdad Lil Fan al-Hadith (the Baghdad Group of Modern Art) as a necessary step beyond what al-Ruwad (the pioneers) had accomplished in their efforts to introduce modern art in Iraq. The group's aim was to initiate a new way of thinking about making art and to fulfill the notion of negotiating both the past and the present. It was the first group that constituted a movement/school of thought and style instead of a gathering of artists who shared a philosophy.

<sup>106</sup> Al-Azzawi, 'Manifesto: Towards a New Vision,' in Shakir Hassan Al Said, al-Bayanat al-Faniya fi al-Iraq (Art Manifestos in Iraq) (Baghdad: Ministry of Information, 1973), 31-35.

<sup>107</sup> See <http://www.late.org.uk/context-comment/video/latshots-dia-al-azzawi>.

<sup>108</sup> The killings of the refugees by Christian Lebanese Phalangists took place over several days while the Israeli Defence Force kept the camps under guard.

<sup>109</sup> See Shabout, *Modern Arab Art: Formation of an Arab Aesthetic* (Gainesville: University of Florida Press, 2007), 236-237.

<sup>110</sup> At the time of Azzawi's execution of the work, the Tribunal's partial list named 448 killed and 76 threatened. List of Killed, Threatened or Kidnapped Iraqi Academics. <http://www.brusseltribunal.org/>.

<sup>111</sup> Mu'ayyad Shukri al-Rawi, Dia Azzawi, Exhibition catalogue (National Museum of Modern Art, Baghdad, February 1971), 1.