

## Sami Alkarim: Subversive Practices

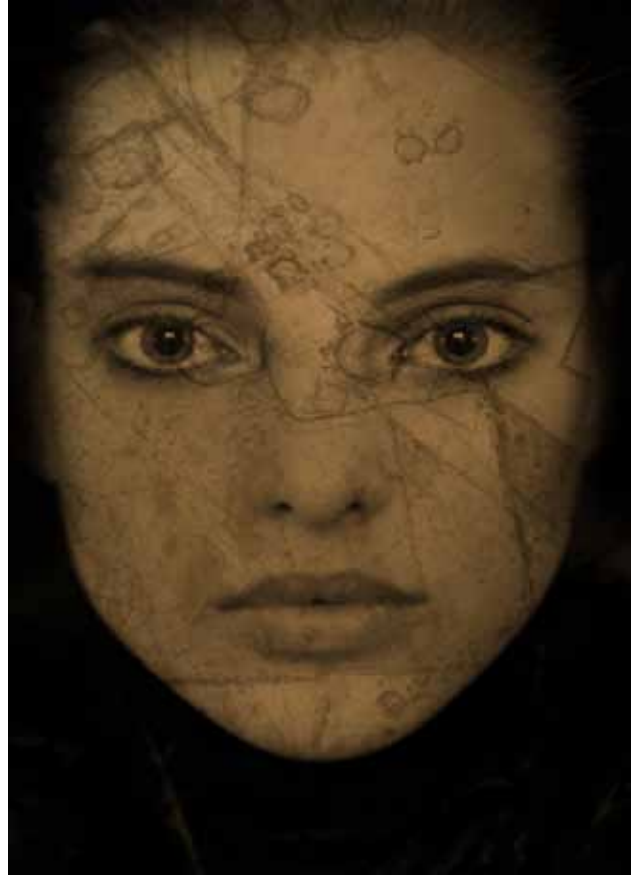
*By Madeline Yale*



**Rebirth 10, 2011, C Print, diasec face, 140x100cm, Edition of 3 + 1 AP -** Courtesy of the artist and XVA gallery.

For thirty years, Sami Alkarim felt like a prisoner. Born in Beirut and raised in Iraq. In 1982 he experienced entrapment when Saddam Hussein closed the border. Each of the subsequent three decades marks a different local juncture with its own complex story: Iraq, Beirut, and Colorado. On January 26th 2011, Sami obtained American citizenship, earning himself his first ever passport and the opportunity to legally travel and establish a sense of home.

In 1973 at the age of 7, Sami began making art from a variety of materials, including dirt and clay. Upon viewing some of Sami's experiments, his father's colleagues related his work to Abstract Expressionism. Exploring books on the subject from the Central



**Rebirth 6. 2011, C Print, diasec face, 140x100cm, Edition of 3 + 1 AP -** Courtesy of the artist and XVA gallery.

Library of Modern Art in Baghdad, Sami discovered Willem deKooning, an artist from whom he continues to draw inspiration. Sami's father, a professor of history and an amateur photographer, encouraged him to read art history, make art, and sent him to a summer art program. Much of Sami's early inspiration draws from the collection at the Iraqi National Museum, where he spent most of his free time in the midst of Sumerian and Babylonian antiquities with his brother Halim AlKarim and their uncle, the curator.

In protest of the Saddam's oppressive military regime, young Sami AlKarim adopted the role of a journalist, artist, and documentarian to create huge political paintings on canvas. In the dark of night, the artist



**Defacement 2, 2010, C Print, diasec face, 200x100cm, Edition of 3 + 1 AP - Courtesy of the artist and XVA gallery.**

climbed onto the rooftops of buildings, painted quickly, and hung his rough installations on the faces of Baghdad's buildings, providing the general public unsanctioned news about what the regime had done the day before and commentaries on the urban Iraqi's suffering. These temporary installations, measuring up to 15 meters, were read the following morning and immediately destroyed. On occasion, Sami was arrested for this political artwork – sometimes they kept him overnight, other times for up to three days. As Sami



**Defacement 1, 2010, C Print, diasec face, 200x100cm, Edition of 3 + 1 AP - Courtesy of the artist and XVA gallery.**

recalls “it was a boiling time in Iraq – Baghdad was filled with violence. These messages [I made] conveyed our tragedies, but at the same time they were comic relief.” What he did was very dangerous, and yet he reflects that, “I never regretted what I did, nor did my family. They were proud of me as I stood up and I faced the monster.” In 1986, the regime sentenced Sami to death for his political artwork and for couriering letters to northern Iraq for the Islamic Dawa party. He was sent to Abu Ghraib. He held his first solo exhibition within



**Ernest Hemingway - Foreshadowing series, 2010, C-print, Edition 5+2AP, 140x110cm - Courtesy of the artist and XVA Gallery - Dubai**

his prison cell – drawings with the thin layer of salt that laced the concrete block walls in the winter morning. As a further incarnation of his temporary exhibitions, the artist drew these on the walls at night, had an official “opening” with other inmates in his cell, and erased the artwork before the guards discovered it the next morning. He recalls that one of his narratives was a satire of a beautiful cat stood before a row of judges who punished her, then executed her for spilling milk. Death and torture was everywhere. But no matter how difficult the situation was for Sami in Abu Ghraib, he refused to let the regime break him. His sentence was reduced to 15 years, and shortly after the end of the Iran-Iraq war, he was released, thanks to assistance from the United Nations. Yet, he immediately became a refugee in his own country. One of Abu Ghraib’s special agents was assigned to Sami’s neighborhood; he jailed Sami on his second night out of prison, and conducted an intensive interrogation. Several of his friends and family members were dead, his immediate family was scattered,



**Gibran K Gibran - Foreshadowing series, 2010, C-type print, Edition 5+2AP, 140x110cm - Courtesy of the artist and XVA Gallery - Dubai**

and his home was repeatedly searched and looted by the regime. The Baghdad Academy of Fine Art, where he attended school prior to imprisonment, would not allow him to matriculate as Sami was not a member of the Ba’ath party. While seemingly destabilized, the Iraqi military viciously suppressed the political uprisings following the Iran-Iraq war, fighting with Shia protesters from the South and the Kurdish military in the North. Sami had no choice but to leave Iraq. During the 1991 revolution he escaped to Syria and later Beirut. However, the political climate in Beirut was not safe. The Ba’athist-led Syrian government occupied the region and was in communication with Iraq’s military regime; it was dangerous for Sami to appear in public. He spent the following ten years in hiding, building his family, and quietly making his art. He reflects, “I have lived in constant fear. But there is an advantage to this. It has given me a lot to work with as an artist. Inside me, I have a lot to say about my personal experience, my family, my friends, my country.”



In 2001, he arrived in the US under political refugee status, along with his parents, wife, and children. While the family received their citizenship status relatively quickly, Sami experienced difficulties, as his prior affiliation with the Islamic Dawa Party raised concerns within the US government. Following 9/11, the US Department of Homeland Security classed Dawa as a Level 3 terrorist organization, even though Iraq's current elected prime minister, Nouri al-Maliki, is a member. Forced to remain within the United States until his citizenship was conferred, Sami returned his focus to art, continuing to build experiments aligned with Abstract Expressionism, and finished his BFA in 2008 at the University of Colorado with honors.

Utilizing a variety of materials, the artist forms simple devices to accentuate the memory of places and time. Manipulating architectural views of different cities, the series Identity Steps layers approximately six cityscapes into each monochromatic square photograph. The source images merge Middle East and Western influences, combining of the artist's reclaimed archive from Baghdad, photographs he made while living in Beirut, and others from his journeys within the confines of the United States. Their palette, akin to a yellow onion made of built environments, is nostalgic. In each of the Identity Steps photographs, locating the time and place become exercises in deconstruction and visual familiarity within the urban landscape. The horizon lines of each source image do not align, forming a mismatched and confused amalgamation of buildings. While the title refers to a methodical rebuilding of identity that hinges upon a sense of place – what the artist describes as his personal story and the diasporic Iraqi experience – the compositions are chaotically constructed patchworks.

In 2008 series, "Foreshadowing", is a photographic body of portraits featuring members of the intellectual and cultural elite including Om Kalthoum, Ernest Hemingway, Gibran K Gibran, and Picasso. The artist believes that these leaders are the ones who build advanced societies, whereas the "war-makers" destroy what they achieve and ignore their contributions. The series incorporates drawing, painting, sculpture, and photography, beginning with the appropriation of portraits of the leaders. Placing these images on models,

he fancifully adorns each character. In a makeshift blackened studio in his backyard, the artist photographs his sculptures in natural daylight.

This feeling of entrapment, coupled with the challenges of growing up in a region rife with conflict, defines Sami's moral framework and artistic output. He responds by creating art from materials used in war. The artist affectionately titles one of his 2010 series, Baghdad Burned, a collection of two-meter square canvases covered with handmade paper, metals, and gunpowder. The colorful works derive their palette from a variety of metals, including iron, silver, copper, and aluminum. Sami ignites the surface of these canvases, allowing chance to articulate the primary shapes. Each canvas is a living creature; through the process of oxidation, the material changes with time.

"Sami Al Karim has recently exhibited a body of work that comprises of four different series: Dream (2005), Saga (2007), Defacement (2010) and Rebirth (2011). Each of these complex series reflects on Sami's experiences, both during his time in Iraq and when seeking asylum. In the Dream series he explores the idea of paradise, both mental and physical. The photographs depict ambiguous landscapes that to Sami represent his dreams of freedom during his time in incarceration; dreams that were an escape from the harsh reality of Abu Ghraib. The Defacement series sees Sami confronting the concept of memory, using a montage of images to create a human figure, a figure that doesn't quite seem correct – as if the memory is fading and the result is confused. There is a sense of catharsis in the works from the Rebirth series; bright eyed Western woman are photographed portrait style, close up and intimate achieving a sense of clarity and openness to the works; which is instantly juxtaposed by what Sami describes as 'ash maps' tracing across the women's faces. These 'ash maps' are images from aerial maps of Iraq that have been altered from rural landscape into images of destruction over the years of conflict. For Sami these works are symbols of hope rather than of destruction: symbols of rebirth."

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