

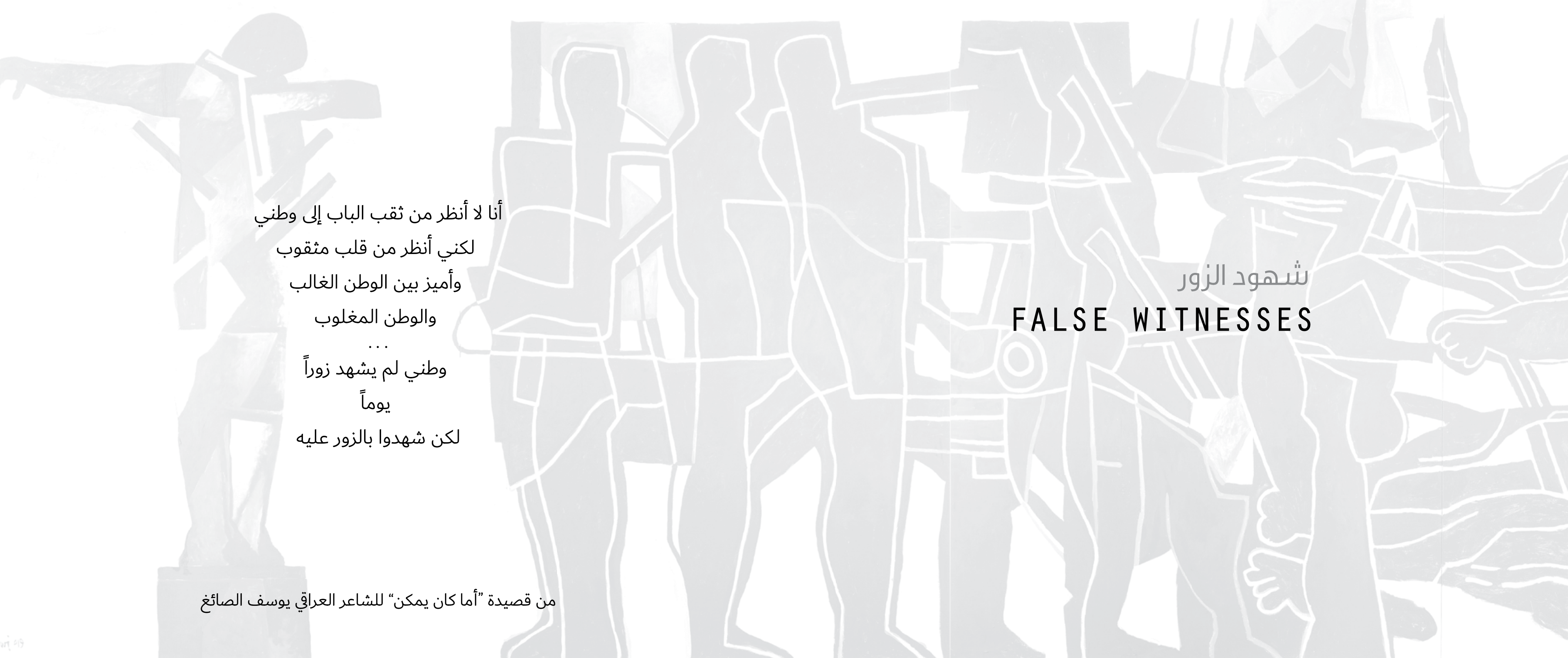
DIA AL-AZZAWI

شهود الزور

FALSE WITNESSES

DIA AL-AZZAWI





أنا لا أنظر من ثقب الباب إلى وطني
لكني أنظر من قلب مثقوب
وأميز بين الوطن الغالب
والوطن المغلوب
...
وطني لم يشهد زوراً
يوماً
لكن شهدوا بالزور عليه

شهود الزور
FALSE WITNESSES

من قصيدة "أما كان يمكن" للشاعر العراقي يوسف الصائغ



DIA AL-AZZAWI

- 1939 Born in Baghdad, Iraq
- 1962 BSc Archaeology, Baghdad University
- 1964 BFA Institute of Fine Arts, Baghdad
- 1976 Moved to London, where he is still based

Over more than half a century, Dia al-Azzawi’s work has been shown in countless group and solo exhibitions worldwide, especially in Europe and across the Arab world (including three retrospectives: Paris, 2001; Abu Dhabi, 2009; Doha, 2016–17). Best known as a colourist painter, Azzawi celebrates Arab culture in his work, blurring the boundaries between artforms and embracing new technologies. His eclectic works can be distinguished by their impressive scale (especially monumental paintings, sculptures and architectural design) and the amalgamation of images and the written word (including intricate works on paper, limited-edition prints and artist’s books, which he has been making since the late 1960s). His work has featured in myriad publications and can be found in numerous public and private collections (see below).

Selected Collections

Azzawi’s work has been collected by public and private institutions worldwide, including The AbdulMagid Breish Collection of Arab Art, London and Tripoli; The Arab Monetary Fund, Abu Dhabi; The Barjeel Collection, Sharjah; Bibliothèque Nationale de France, Paris; The British Library, London; The British Museum, London; Calouste Gulbenkian Collection, Lisbon; Colas Foundation, Boulogne; Fondation ONA, Casablanca; Guggenheim, Abu Dhabi; Hussain Ali Harba Family Collection, Turin; Ibrahimi Collection of Iraqi Fine Art, Amman; Institut du Monde Arabe, Paris; Jordan National Gallery of Fine Arts, Amman; Kinda Foundation, Riyadh; King Abdulaziz International Airport, Jeddah; Kuwait Fund for Arab Economic Development, Kuwait; Library of Congress, Washington D.C.; Los AngelesCounty Museum (LACMA), Los Angeles; Mathaf: Arab Museum of Modern Art, Doha; Museum of Modern Art, Baghdad; Museum of Modern Art, Damascus; Museum of Modern Art, Tunis; Nabu Museum, Chekka (Lebanon); Saeb Eigner Private Collection, London; Sharjah Art Foundation, Sharjah; Tate Modern, London; Victoria and Albert Museum, London; The World Bank, Washington D.C.

ضياء العزاوي : الفنان المتأخر لـ” جماعة بغداد للفن الحديث“

كان العزاوي في الثانية عشرة أو الثالثة عشرة من عمره عندما أطلق جواد سليم ” جماعة بغداد للفن الحديث“. وكانت صور أعمالها الفنية – إلى جانب انطلاقة موجة ” الشعر الحر“ (كما جرت تسميتها) – التمثلات الثقافية والتشكيلية الأولى التي أغوت تطلعه إلى عالم الفن والثقافة.

الربط أكيد بينه وبين الجماعة، إلا أن هذا الرابط لا يلبث أن يؤدي إلى انفصال. إلى انطلاقة أخرى : ما إن قوي ساعد العزاوي التشكيلي حتى أطلق مع رفاق له من جيله جماعة ” الرؤيا الجديدة“، مشحدين على أن الفن في العراق يحتاج إلى رؤيا أخرى.

إذا كانت رؤيا جماعة بغداد ”ثقافية“ (” حضارية“ و” حديثة“ وفق لفظ بيانها الأول)، فإن العزاوي كان أقرب إلى خيار قوامه: الحضور والفعالية في الراهن. هو فنان أقرب إلى صيغ الحضور لدى فنانين في العالم ابتداء من النصف الأول من القرن العشرين مع : بيكاسو وجياكوميتي ودو بوفيه وغيرهم.

فنانو جماعة بغداد استلهموا مثبقيات من الفنون الرافدينية (التي باتت تجتمع في أول متحف عراقي للآثار)، فيما درس العزاوي علم الآثار في الجامعة، وخبر الآثار مثل خُرَاف مع عجين الطين. مع ذلك، كان أقرب إلى ”وثبات“ التطلع العراقي صوب النحر؛ وأقرب إلى السياسة المتحفزة، فيما كانت تظهر اقتراباته في الشكل من النحت الآشوري.

كان يتظاهر، وينفعل، ويتفاعل مع نبض الأيام، ويعقد صداقات قرى مع من يستطلعون أصوات الراهن العراقي الخافية، مثل مظفر النواب ويوسف الصايغ وغيرهما.

إلى هذا العراق المتوثب بقيت جاذبية العزاوي مشدودة. اقترب من شعر أصدقاء لكي يزواج بين النشيد الغاضب والصرخة المعذبة : في ” السواد“، أو في شتات الدم الفلسطيني، أو في ” الشهيد“، الذي رفعه إلى مصاف البطل الأسطوري... أنزل في هيثثا معاصرة ملامح من أور، وسومر، ومن تقاطيع الوجه الجانبي في الفن الآشوري...

قلمه، أو ريشته، لا يتوانيان عن تشكيل ما يعتقد أنه واجب الحضور، واجب الصورة، في المآسي والجرائم والحروب التي تُبدد وجوه المسحوقين تحت دبابات الغضب والاحتلال، لا سيما من تختفي ملامحهم في جرائم ذات كواثم للصوت.

العزاوي يقيم في لندن منذ أزيد من خمس وأربعين سنة، من دون أن يكون منفياً، إذ إنه يحمل وطنه (الضيق والمتسع) معه أينما يكون، أينما يرسم. وفي هذا الوطن الذي صاغه لنفسه، لا يترك صديقاً في سجنه، ولا محكوماً أمام منصة إعدام، ولا يترك صبية تنتظر غروب كل يوم وصول حبيبها البعيد في بغداد...

إنها القوة التي يسبقها الفن على البشر، والتاريخ، والراهن. فالفن، أياً كان موضوعه، احتفاءً بالحياة، بل هو حياة مزيدة.

إنها القوة تغتذي ممّا تعيش، وممّا تأمل به. تغتذي من قدرتها على توليد الشكل، ومن انبثاق اللون، بما يغوي العين، ويجعل مشهد البشر في اللوحة مشهداً جمالياً.

حتى الألم، في الفن، له أن يكون جمالياً!

حتى الصرخة، في الفن، لها أن تكون جمالية!

فكيف إذا كانت للحياة أعيادها، وأفراحها، وموآئدها المبسوسة، في فسحات اللون المشرقة، وفي أهازيج الشكل الغنائية!

مع العزاوي، في فنه، دعوة إلى الحياة من تحت الركام الدامي، وصرخة للحرية في جلاء البناء التشكيلي.

إنه عالم العواطف المتقدمة أبداً.

إنه عالم العزاوي.



Dia al-Azzawi in one of the studios at Fire Station, Doha | 2016 | Photo ©Alejandro Arango



(Top) Paradise of the Forgotten | 2023 (recto) | Photo ©Anthony Dawton and Mohammed Al Shammaray

(Bottom) Paradise of the Forgotten | 2023 (verso) | Photo ©Anthony Dawton

Acrylic on canvas and polyester resin sculpture | 170 x 960 cm

Name of 704 protesters written on the back of the canvas in black ink with dates of death in red ink



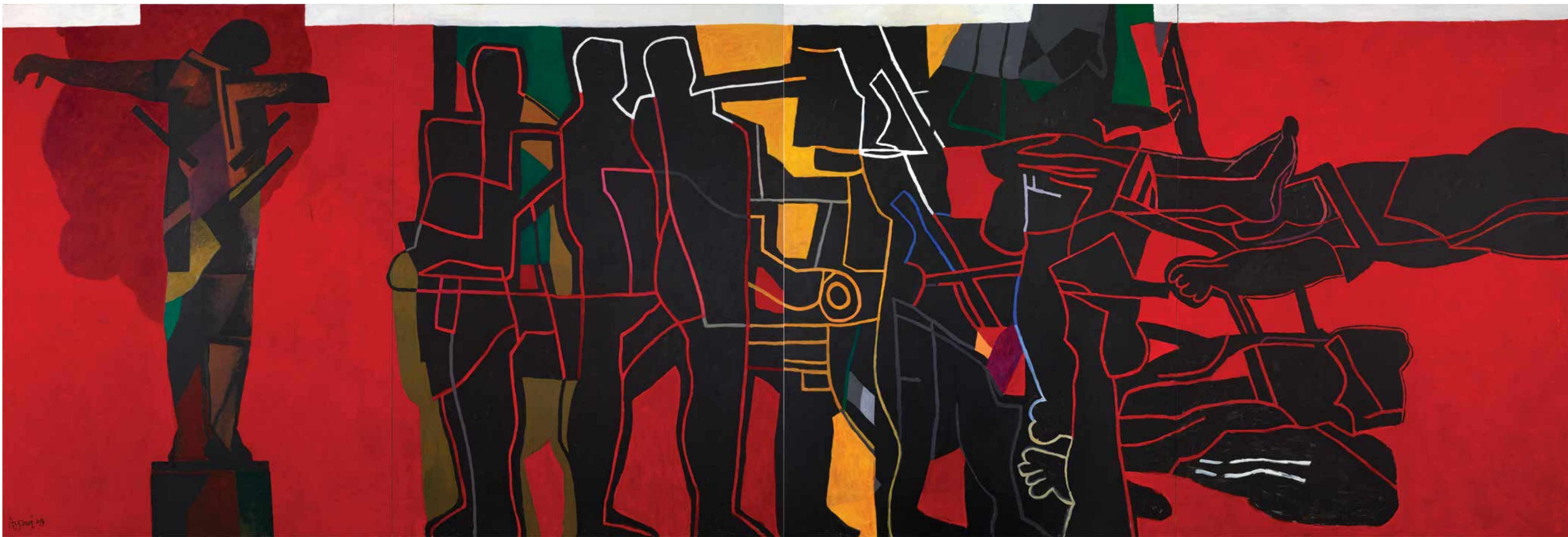
Mosul: Panorama of Destruction | 2017/2022

Cotton, acrylic, wool and 'Trevira CS' thread | 280 x 1000 cm | Produced by Factum Arte 2022



Hidden Wishes | 2019

Acrylic and oil pastel on canvas | 200 x 900 cm (triptych, each panel 200 x 300 cm)



False Witnesses | 2019

Acrylic on canvas | 270 x 800 cm (tetraptych, each panel 270 x 200 cm)



Map of Baghdad After 2003 | 2023

Acrylic on canvas | 270 x 800 cm (diptych, each panel 270 x 400 cm)

(Overleaf) *Ruins of Two Cities: Mosul and Aleppo* | 2020
Polyester resin | 800 x 600 cm x 5 cm

(Right) *Map of Baghdad Before 2003* | 2023
Acrylic on canvas | 270 x 400 cm







October Rose No. 2 | 2023
Stainless steel | 187 x 187 x 75 cm, edition of 2



October Rose No. 3 | 2023
Stainless steel | 200 x 204 x 40 cm, edition of 2



October Rose No. 1 | 2023
Stainless steel | 187 x 187 x 75 cm, edition of 2



Victims' Rose | 2023
Polyester resin | 200 x 204 x 40 cm, edition of 2

FALSE WITNESSES

In October 2019, a wave of hope and rebellion swept across two countries. Lebanese and Iraqi citizens filled the streets, deciding they would take their land back from the jaws of corruption and exploitation – an ongoing reality which was denying them the future they dreamt of. The Lebanese slogan “All of them means all of them” (كلين يعني كلين) denounced every last politician who had taken advantage of the country’s resources and population. In Iraq, young men and women defied the barricades and bullets, holding placards stating just one humble yet tragic demand: “We want a homeland” (نريد وطن). As Dia al-Azzawi watched joyous videos of unity and camaraderie online from both countries – one the homeland that he left in 1976, and the other a place close to his heart – he felt deeply moved and inspired by the bravery he was witnessing. However, the hope in the streets quickly began to take a mournful turn in Baghdad, with daily reports of protestors being abducted, injured and killed in targeted attacks, an unjust but inevitable fate for those seeking justice and peace in a state riddled with corruption and fear.

Standing as the monumental centrepiece of this exhibition is *Paradise of the Forgotten* (2023). At the centre of the artwork, a life-sized polyester resin figure creates a focal point, hands outstretched towards those around him and above twelve white ceramic birds at his feet. This figure represents Safaa Al Saray, a 26-year-old protestor who was killed after a tear gas canister struck him in the head on 28th October 2019. The young Al Saray, born and raised in Baghdad, became an icon of the uprising and a source of inspiration for his fellow Iraqi protestors, many of whom accompanied his enshrouded body to Jewad Selim’s *Freedom Monument* before his final burial. Here, Al Saray welcomes his fellow martyrs of the uprising and their families to paradise. They are faceless figures enveloped in darkness; however, their names – all 704 deceased protestors – are clearly and permanently listed on the back of the canvas. In this poignant artwork, Azzawi wanted not only to memorialise Al Saray and other martyrs of the uprising (very likely numbering more than this), but he also wanted this list to act as a testimony to the unlawful murders of hundreds of brave and hopeful Iraqis across the country. Alongside this work, three sculptures placed throughout the gallery are part of a series dedicated to these very martyrs. The limited-edition *October Rose* series – two silver and one gold – was created in memory of the dead, allowing them to rise up and blossom as a rose in the physical world but with the protection of a hard metal shell. Also on display is *Victims’ Rose*, the latest in an ongoing series of the same name, comprised of a triptych painting made in 2010 and a bronze sculpture in 2011, both marked with bullet wounds, which honoured the many victims of the Iraqi occupation.

Another artwork dedicated to this tragic period of recent history is *Hidden Wishes* (2019), painted just three days after the October Uprising began in Iraq. This wide, immersive piece acts as a commentary on the Iraqi state and mercenaries hired to kill their own people, hiding behind the façade of national and sectarian unity while feigning innocence. Two figures stand on either side of the artwork, identical but in opposition, targeting one another and causing chaos and suffering between them. This painting is a continuation of Azzawi’s ongoing *Land of Darkness* series (1991–present), in which colour is drained from artworks lamenting Iraq through a monochrome world stained only by red, with the artist evoking both blood and the sights of snipers’ rifles to mark the victims.

Many protestors in the October Uprising were in their late teens and early twenties and had grown up only seeing the instability and suffering following the 2003 invasion. Azzawi has created many works related to the invasion and illegal occupation of Iraq, and continues to make work about the impact of the conflict. *False Witnesses* (2019) is another reflection of the post-war reality in Iraq, lining up faceless figures who bore witness to the widespread destruction after the occupation forces

left the country, a period Azzawi considers far more destructive than the invasion itself. Looking to Iraq remains heartbreaking for Azzawi, who often reads and listens to poetry to process events in his homeland and find inspiration. The title of this work – and the exhibition itself – is inspired by the 1990s poem *Was It Not Possible?* by the Iraqi poet Youssef al-Sayigh (1933–2005), in which he laments:

*I do not look through the peephole at my homeland
But I look from a pierced heart...*

Azzawi’s heartbreak is also a result of the changing face of Baghdad, which shifted dramatically following brutal sectarian clashes that overwhelmed the city between 2006 and 2007. He noticed this stark difference in a series of maps developed by Columbia University’s *Gulf/2000* project, two in particular: the first made in 2003 before the war (a colourful patchwork of historical settling and mixed communities); and the second in late 2007 (after which the city is divided into clear sectarian divisions). Deeply moved by this new cartographical view of what was once his home, Azzawi painted both *Map of Baghdad Before 2003* (2023) and *Map of Baghdad After 2003* (2023). In the former, he intertwined the colours across the wide canvas; in the latter, the colours become more disconnected and divided, with the shift in scale perhaps also being indicative of the narrowing of minds within the now isolated communities.

Beyond Baghdad, Azzawi was increasingly affected by the destruction of Iraq and the wider region, through ongoing wars and at the hands of ISIS from 2014 onwards. *Mosul: Panorama of Destruction* (2017/2022) was created by the artist in mourning for one of Iraq’s key cities, which not only fell to the barbarism of ISIS, but was also further destroyed in retaliation against the terrorist organisation. Initially a smaller 2017 ink drawing, the tapestry was created as a monumental facsimile by Factum Arte in 2022. Much like *Hidden Wishes*, this monochrome interpretation of a trail of destruction is a continuation of Azzawi’s Land of Darkness series, and the black pen strokes against the white background draw the viewer into a violent whirlwind of conflict: ruins, militants and corpses of all shapes, sizes and denominations. This reflection on the demise of historic Arab cities continues with the large sculptural work *Ruins of Two Cities: Mosul and Aleppo* (2020), which Azzawi created in Enki Ceramic Atelier in Amman. Displayed on the floor to give a bird’s-eye view of this urban sprawl, the grid-like structure feels organised and methodical, yet the shells of indistinguishable buildings (former homes, mosques, churches and shops) creates a sense of disorientation. The cities of Mosul and Aleppo were once historically linked and were both decimated in recent years: this is Azzawi’s solemn and silent cry for a lost culture, history and people.

Many of the artworks in this exhibition, including *Hidden Wishes and Map[s] of Baghdad*, as well as the eponymous *False Witnesses*, were painted in Azzawi’s joint studio with Iraqi artist, Mahmoud Obaidi, part of the Nabu Museum complex in Lebanon. Azzawi has always felt a deep connection to Lebanon, ever since his first solo exhibition outside of Iraq took place at Beirut’s Gallery One in 1966. Despite many differences, the events of October 2019 showed Azzawi how Lebanon and Iraq increasingly share common ground and a mutual understanding of the impact of a corrupt and divided country, while the hopes of their populations fan the flames of revolution.

Mysa Kafil-Hussain

