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Islamic Art Now: A Conversation with Wafaa Bilal

Regina Mamou



Wafaa Bilal, *The Ashes Series: Chair*, archival inkjet photograph, 40 x 50 inches, 2003-2013.
Copyright Wafaa Bilal. Courtesy Driscoll Babcock Galleries and Lawrie Shabibi Gallery.

Wafaa Bilal is an Iraqi-born artist, and Associate Arts Professor at New York University's Tisch School of the Arts. He's known internationally for his online performative and interactive works provoking dialogue about international politics and internal dynamics. Wafaa is currently exhibiting artwork at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art (LACMA) in *Islamic Art Now:*

Contemporary Art of the Middle East, which is an ongoing exhibition that commenced on February 1, 2015. *Islamic Art Now* "marks the first major installation of LACMA's collection of contemporary art of the Middle East." Wafaa and I met at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago in the Department of Photography in 2005. We recently caught up via email to discuss his work, the LACMA exhibition, his recent show at Driscoll Babcock Galleries, New York, and the Venice Biennale 2015.

Regina Mamou: In LACMA's *Islamic Art Now: Contemporary Art of the Middle East*, your work from *The Ashes Series* (2003–2013) is currently on view. The series utilizes small-scale models of destruction as a method of speaking to the literal and metaphorical toll that war takes on infrastructure and architecture, culture and the soul. This concept, or the effect of war, is present in many of your works, including *Domestic Tension* (2007), *Virtual Jihadi* (2008), and *...and Counting* (2010). Can you speak directly about how *The Ashes Series* was conceived and the process of creating it concurrently with your other projects?

Wafaa Bilal: *The Ashes Series* was composed over the course of ten years beginning in 2003. I had been collecting media images of the Iraq War and realized that the sheer quantity and magnitude of these images created a growing immunity to their power. I began to consider how I could slow down the viewer, allow them to inhabit and immerse themselves into the settings of destruction and re-sensitize them with its entrenched power of loss. So I decided to rebuild the photographs in miniature reconstructions. The sets were compiled, scattered with 21 grams of human ashes, and then re-photographed. Each image was produced through a meditative process with the motive of ensnaring viewers into an encounter with the image, in which they could dwell psychologically in its atmosphere of loss. The process also allowed me to mentally connect with my homeland, allowing me to confront my sense of distance and displacement from the war.

At the time, I also worked on *Domestic Tension*, *Virtual Jihadi* and *...and Counting*, among others. These performances were immensely demanding—exacting a severe physical and emotional toll. *The Ashes Series* served as a shelter from the intensity of these projects, creating a meditative and tactile space in which I could endure the strain of projects like *Domestic Tension* and *3rdi*.

RM: In *Islamic Art Now*, the exhibition curator Linda Komaroff discusses the importance of highlighting contemporary Islamic art and its relationship to historical Islamic art through the LACMA exhibition. Can you discuss a few threads of historical Islamic art that are present in contemporary Islamic art now?

WB: The show title presents an interesting conundrum—we cannot interpret the title literally because there is no such thing as contemporary Islamic artwork. However, *Islamic Art Now* re-contextualizes the artwork as a reflection of the Islamic world, representing a shift of evolving states in what constitutes the contemporary Islamic world. In answer, the show offers a strong

representation of female artists as well as depictions of powerful women. Many of the artists who live in the region encode their work with a duality of influences that allows it to exist without censure—referencing historical Islam while also combining Western influences. These threads of commonality arise from necessity and commentary—the artists do not enjoy the privilege of free expression.

RM: On that same note, what are the main themes that you are seeing in contemporary Middle Eastern art right now?

WB: Political and social issues remain the dominant concerns of Middle Eastern artists, who are also increasingly adapting Western approaches to their aesthetic practices. This is due in part to a dramatic rise in cross-cultural dialogue between Middle Eastern and Western cultures, fostered by growing Internet access and other platforms. Many contemporary Middle Eastern artists are also choosing to live outside of the Middle East, facilitating more opportunities for artists to mediate their work through a hybrid of transcultural strategies. These artists navigate a terrain of censorship and persecution in their home countries, further cementing a shift towards Middle Eastern artists who engage with Western strategies for a Western audience. Such strategies focus on filtering the pain of their subject matter through an aesthetic or playful veneer, allowing audiences de-sensitized by the mediated banality of disaster to access the work.



Wafaa Bilal, *Virtual Jihadi*, video game, 2008. Copyright Wafaa Bilal. Courtesy Driscoll Babcock Galleries.

RM: The category of Islamic art is a broad one, especially in a contemporary context, when including the regions of the Middle East and North Africa. What are the best ways or successful strategies to approach this categorization of artwork?

WB: In approaching Islamic art, we can assume that such a category necessarily indicates art in the regions where an Islamic empire once existed, stretching from Central Asia to Spain. If we examine these locations geographically before the expansion of Islam, they were each culturally distinct from one another. We can then derive Islam's influence on art in these regions as a strong unifying aesthetic that today is merged with contemporary influences and concerns.

RM: In a few instances, you have exhibited the same work in both the United States and the Middle East. For example, I am thinking specifically of *Virtual Jihadi*, which was shown at both the Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute in Troy, New York, and the Beirut Art Center in Beirut, Lebanon. How have public reactions to the works varied based on the exhibitions' locations?

WB: *Virtual Jihadi* was based on an Al Qaeda hack of an American video game titled *Quest for Saddam*. In Al Qaeda's version, *Quest for Saddam* is transformed into *The Night of Bush Capturing*, with Saddam Hussein re-skinned as President George W. Bush. In an aesthetic intervention into *The Night of Bush Capturing*, I interpolate myself as a suicide bomber, recruited to further Al Qaeda's objectives after learning of the death of my brother.

Virtual Jihadi was intended to emphasize the vulnerability of Iraqis to recruitment by violent groups. It was made for a primarily U.S. audience, in order to expose crass stereotypes of Arab culture and the harmful nature of such reductive narratives. My hope was to engage audiences in a dialogue on the intricacies of the conflict in Iraq.

The reaction at RPI in upstate New York was severe, condemning *Virtual Jihadi* for its political narrative. Its critique focused on the politics of the game rather than the intentions of the artwork. When *Virtual Jihadi* was shown in Germany, France, Lebanon and the U.K., people were more interested in seeing the game and interacting with it. It did not generate the strong political controversy as it had in the U.S. Instead, people responded to its aesthetic, celebrating the power of aesthetic acts.

RM: You recently presented new work in a solo exhibition entitled *Lovely Pink*, which ran from February 26, 2015, to April 25, 2015, at Driscoll Babcock Galleries in New York, New York. *Lovely Pink* featured scaled-down models of well-known ancient icons that are covered with materials like black enamel paint and pink sparkly nail polish. In many ways, the work is a destabilization of this iconography, which has been canonized in art history by the Western world. Much like *The Ashes Series*, *Lovely Pink* emphasizes a kind of defacement and destruction that is witnessed in war. How has moving between media and time periods (i.e., from present-day destruction to historical destruction) allowed you to tackle these concepts in different ways using unique strategies?



Wafaa Bilal, *Lovely Pink*: Ares, God of War, cold cast resin, enamel paint, shrink-wrap, fabric, latex and crude oil, 12.5 x 6 x 5.5 inches, 2014. Copyright Wafaa Bilal. Courtesy Driscoll Babcock Galleries.

WB: *Lovely Pink* was crafted in direct response to ISIS's destruction of cultural heritage in Syria and Iraq, produced while the destruction was (and continues to be) ongoing. The project appropriated Western art historical iconography as a filter for the concept of Iraq, which was then altered with petroleum-based materials—a reference to the oil that fuels ongoing conflict. The result is an object that does not appear defaced or destroyed, but aesthetically pleasing. Such a contrast between the intended action and its received perception suggests the duality of cultural destruction and pleasure.

In contrast, *The Ashes Series* invokes a very different type of destruction, albeit affected by external, Western powers. Both concern the loss of cultural heritage in Iraq; both losses are driven by a stronger force imposing its cultural values on the weaker.

When considering a project, it is important that the project's concerns determine the medium and materials used. In *Lovely Pink*, the destruction of iconography by ISIS determined my use of Western counterparts in art historical statues and vaulted sculptural objects of the ancient Western world. On

the other hand, *The Ashes Series* was a meditation on the compromised power of mediated images to convey loss, indicating that the project would require an unfolding of layers of photographic meaning, which determined the process in which images unfold into three dimensional sets, and collapse back into a flat photographic plane.

RM: It was just announced that you will be presenting work this year in the Iranian Pavilion at the 56th Venice Biennale. Congratulations! Can you share information about your work *Canto III* (2015), which will be included in "The Great Game: Iran, India, Pakistan, Afghanistan, Kurdistan, Iraq, Central-Asian Republics: Art, artists, and culture from the heart of the world"?

WB: Thank you! *Canto III* is inspired by an homage that members of the Ba'ath party in Iraq planned in honor of Saddam Hussein at the height of his power—propelling a golden statue in his likeness into space to orbit Earth for all eternity. In the first stage of *Canto III*, I fabricated a large golden bust of Saddam crowned with the Dome of the Rock, alongside a series of home décor items in winterstone. The home décor items feature Saddam as a candlestick holder,



Wafaa Bilal, *Canto III*, 2015, bronze sculpture with gold finish, 37 x 27 x 15 inches. Photo credit: Daniel Akselrad. Copyright Wafaa Bilal. Courtesy Driscoll Babcock Galleries and Lawrie Shabibi Gallery.

bookend and mantelpiece bust, illustrating the infiltration of Saddam into every aspect of home life, even or most especially the mundane. The next stage of *Canto III* focuses on propelling the statue into space, in order to posthumously fulfill the Ba'athist tribute. I am still conducting research on the requirements for this phase and pursuing partnerships with various satellite agencies that conduct orbital launches.