

AHMED ALSOUDANI MATRIX 165



SEPTEMBER 6, 2012 – JANUARY 6, 2013
WADSWORTH ATHENEUM MUSEUM OF ART

ABOUT WAR...

A visual encounter with a painting by Ahmed Alsoudani feels more like a visceral confrontation with the aftermath of violence. The artist intentionally uses alluring, jewel-toned background colors, reminiscent of Renaissance palettes, to temper the dark subject matter, but the vivid tones give way to the surreal assemblage of disturbing imagery. Raw and injured flesh and corrugated metal tubing with dangerous jagged edges are graphically rendered alongside haunting spectral figures and threatening beasts that emerge in ghostly variations of gray from the compressed spaces, marked by heavily barred windows and reinforced steel cages. Overall, Alsoudani's agitated and chaotic compositions convey impressions of devastation, despair, and political unrest. However, the artist explains that the aggressive work does not directly depict war:

I'm not trying to make "war paintings," but paintings about war. I'm more interested in depicting the effects of war on people who live under these circumstances. So generally I don't show actual battle scenes in which there are soldiers, or fighting or weapons. I've been in the unique and painful situation of observing the war and being in the U.S. while my family remains in Baghdad. I'm away physically, but I talk to my family very often, so I feel caught between. The state of being "between" two places and two worlds allows me to see and hear things from a different point of view.¹

Alsoudani's exile and personal history are central to his work. His story has been well documented.² Born in Baghdad, Iraq, in 1975, the artist grew up there during the Iran-Iraq War (1980-1988) and the Gulf War (1990-1991). Alsoudani immigrated to the United States in 1999, initially landing in Washington, D.C., where he learned English before moving to Portland, Maine, to attend the Maine College of Art.³

Alsoudani began art school in 2001, just weeks before the tragic events of 9/11 when the world changed. The new, heightened levels of security across the nation affected the Iraqi native more than most. In addition to being uprooted from his own war-torn country, the young artist now faced suspicion and xenophobia in America.⁴ In the paintings in this exhibition, Alsoudani refers to homeland security and this larger altered world by incorporating restricted areas, numerous recording devices (individual and banks of microphones), signs of surveillance (staring eyes), and metal desk lamps commonly used in interrogation.

COVER IMAGE:

UNTITLED, 2011

CHARCOAL AND ACRYLIC ON CANVAS

87 1/2 X 63 1/2 IN.

PRIVATE COLLECTION

IMAGE: COURTESY HAUNCH OF VENISON, NEW YORK.

© AHMED ALSOUDANI

IMAGE 2
UNTITLED, 2012
CHARCOAL AND ACRYLIC ON CANVAS
72 X 60 IN.
PRIVATE COLLECTION, SWITZERLAND
IMAGE: COURTESY HAUNCH OF VENISON, NEW YORK.
© AHMED ALSUDANI



Over the past year, Alsoudani has shifted his approach to his subject matter. Rather than focus on violence, the most recent paintings address the reasons behind the violence.⁵ *Untitled* (2011; cover image),⁶ the signature image for the exhibition, is an abstracted portrait of a corrupt dictator—his true identity is not important, as such leaders can be found across the globe. (The artist also prefers the viewer to draw his own conclusions in reading a narrative.) The portrait subject dons a non-specific military uniform, and his ghoulish face is a hideous tacked-together construction of byproducts of the violence he generates—misplaced body parts, shrapnel, tubes, and electrical elements. A single light bulb occupies one of three available sockets for a brain, a reptilian protuberance replaces a nose, a puckered anus stands in for a mouth, and a trio of eyeballs stares downward toward a broken microphone awaiting its words. In the lower left, a small monkey, with two lamps trained on it, represents mimicry and what leaders become when they lose sight of their actions.⁷

In *Untitled* (2012; image 2), Alsoudani represents corruption in the tortured form of another grotesque creature—a raw, pocked-flesh sock puppet emerging from a blue sleeve—that takes its place before a bank of microphones. Supporting the wooden podium, a hollow dog-like phantom keeps watch through gas mask lenses, its ribs exposed. Behind the scenes, in back of a broken mirror, terrifying hybrid ghost-beasts, connected by ribbed tubes, oversee the spectacle with a variety of glaring eyes. A barred window traps the subjects in the space, and a heavy metal pipe, carrier of the precious oil at the monetary heart of so many political conflicts, protrudes into the scene.

Oil—in the form of a peeled-open oil can—also features prominently in the largest painting in the exhibition, *Untitled* (2012; image 3). A corrupt and aging dictator (on the right side of the canvas) defies death with continual “watering,” from his grassy patch of hair, to his failing body that is held together with an alarming array of metal cogs and tubes, wires, electronics, and pills. He stands vertically only with the support of a harness and three chains, while propped against a wood ledge topped by a glass partition. Behind the glass curtain, Alsoudani reveals the complex machinery that maintains the life of any number of ancient, ailing political leaders. A decrepit conveyer belt is attended by the artist’s signature specters and monsters (rendered all or partially in charcoal). Ironically, they assure an endless supply of replacement hearts (for the heartless dictator). A spare arm with gloved hand waits in the wings; chessboards punctuate the strategic game and continuing charade, while time stands still in an alarm clock without hands.

The subject matter in Alsoudani’s art is derived from his personal experience, friends and family, as well as world politics—and most certainly not only the Middle East. He begins most mornings by visiting BBC Online to follow the latest news.⁸ At the same

IMAGE 3
UNTITLED, 2012
CHARCOAL AND ACRYLIC ON CANVAS
72 X 108 IN.
COURTESY THE ARTIST & HAUNCH OF VENISON, NEW YORK
IMAGE: COURTESY HAUNCH OF VENISON, NEW YORK.
© AHMED ALSUDANI





UNTITLED, 2010
CHARCOAL AND ACRYLIC ON CANVAS
80 X 80 IN.
PRIVATE COLLECTION
© AHMED ALSOUDANI



time, he generally ponders political stories for multiple years before bringing the content into his paintings. Although Al Saudani's work is regularly associated with powerful war-themed masterpieces like Pablo Picasso's *Guernica* (1937), and Francisco Goya's *Disasters of War* (1810–1820) and *The Third of May 1808* (1814), the artist finds connections to other artists. He is more interested in viewing his work as an extension of the New York School that gave America its own identity in the art world, outside of the Eurocentric art scene. Al Saudani particularly aligns his work with the movement's Philip Guston and Willem de Kooning, who both employed figuration and abstraction in an expressionistic language.⁹ Like Guston, whose unique style and lexicon included a signature large head, the sole of a shoe, a hanging light bulb, and cigarette as recurring imagery, so Al Saudani continues to develop his own personal technique and visual vocabulary. Al Saudani's work already looks like no other contemporary painter's.

UNTITLED, 2012
CHARCOAL AND ACRYLIC ON CANVAS
44 X 45 IN.
COURTESY THE ARTIST & HAUNCH OF VENISON, NEW YORK
IMAGE: COURTESY HAUNCH OF VENISON, NEW YORK.
© AHMED ALSOUDANI



Steeped in recent political subjects and narratives, AlSoudani's paintings employ a wide variety of conflicting elements that combine to bring explosive power to his compositions. Using equal parts realism and abstraction, along with the unusual combination of acrylic painting and charcoal drawing that highlights vibrant coloration alongside monochromatic grays, the artist activates the already visually-loaded compositions and complex themes with these additional dynamic contrasts. Endlessly engaging and open to interpretation, his art is about war, and so much more. Ahmed AlSoudani's wildly agitated paintings express the pervasive anxiety of the contemporary world in which we live.

PATRICIA HICKSON

Emily Hall Tremain Curator of Contemporary Art

UNTITLED, 2012

CHARCOAL AND ACRYLIC ON CANVAS

34 X 32 IN.

COURTESY THE ARTIST & HAUNCH OF VENISON, NEW YORK

IMAGE: COURTESY HAUNCH OF VENISON, NEW YORK.

© AHMED ALSUDANI



AHMED ALSLOUDANI

EDUCATION

- 2008 MFA, Painting, Yale School of Art,
New Haven, CT
- 2006 Skowhegan School of Painting & Sculpture,
Madison, ME
- 2005 BFA, Maine College of Art,
Portland, ME
- 2004 Yale School of Music & Art,
Norfolk, CT

SELECTED SOLO EXHIBITIONS

- 2012 *Ahmed Alsoudani / MATRIX 165*, Wadsworth
Atheneum Museum of Art, Hartford, CT
Ahmed Alsoudani, Haunch of Venison,
New York, NY
Ahmed Alsoudani, L&M Arts,
Los Angeles, CA
- 2011 *Ahmed Alsoudani*, Haunch of Venison,
London
- 2009 *New Drawings*, Goff+Rosenthal,
Berlin, Germany
Ahmed Alsoudani, Goff+Rosenthal,
New York, NY
Art Dubai, solo booth, Goff+Rosenthal
- 2007 MEHR Gallery, New York, NY
Thierry Goldberg Projects, New York, NY

SELECTED GROUP EXHIBITIONS

- 2013 *Francis Bacon, Philip Guston,
Paula Rego and Ahmed Alsoudani*,
Marlborough Fine Art, NY
- 2011 *Boundaries Obscured*,
Haunch of Venison, NY
Wounded Water, 54th Venice Biennale, Iraq
Pavilion, Gervasuti Foundation, Venice
*The Future of A Promise: Contemporary Art
from the Arab World*,
54th Venice Biennale, Venice
The World Belongs to You, Palazzo Grassi,
The Francois Pinault Foundation, Venice
- 2010 *Le Route de la Soie*, The Saatchi Collection,
Tri postal, Lille, France
Natural Renditions, Marlborough Gallery,
New York, NY
- 2009 *Unveiled: New Art from the Middle East*,
Saatchi Gallery, London
- 2008 Union Gallery, London
Michael Janssen Gallery, Köln, Germany
- 2007 National Gallery of Saskatchewan,
Canora, Canada
Thierry Goldberg Projects, New York, NY
Biennale Exhibition Hall,
Gwangju Museum of Art, Korea
- 2006 *Maine Menagerie*, Center for Maine
Contemporary Art, Rockport, ME
Springtime Salon, Filament Gallery,
Portland, ME

SELECTED COLLECTIONS

- Burger Collection
Dar Noor Collection
Francois Pinault Foundation
The Saatchi Gallery
Columbus Museum of Art, Columbus, OH
- Mead Museum, Amherst College, Amherst, MA
Bates College Museum of Art, Lewiston, ME
Portland Museum of Art, Portland, ME
Virginia Museum of Fine Art, Richmond, VA
(Promised Gift)

American, born 1975, Baghdad, Iraq
Lives and works in New York, New York

WORKS IN THE EXHIBITION

Untitled, 2010

Charcoal and acrylic on canvas

80 x 80 in.

Private collection

Untitled, 2011

Charcoal and acrylic on canvas

87 1/2 x 63 1/2 in.

Private collection

Untitled, 2012

Charcoal and acrylic on canvas

72 x 108 in.

Courtesy the artist & Haunch of Venison, New York

Untitled, 2012

Charcoal and acrylic on canvas

72 x 60 in.

Private collection, Switzerland

Untitled, 2012

Charcoal and acrylic on canvas

44 x 45 in.

Courtesy the artist & Haunch of Venison, New York

Untitled, 2012

Charcoal and acrylic on canvas

34 x 32 in.

Courtesy the artist & Haunch of Venison, New York

ARTIST TALK

MATRIX Gallery Talk

Ahmed Alsoudani

Thursday, September 6, 2012

6:00 pm

Ahmed Alsoudani will discuss his artworks
in the Eleanor H. Bunce Gallery.

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The MATRIX program is also supported by the current and founding members of the Wadsworth Atheneum Museum of Art's Contemporary Coalition.

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¹ "Ahmed Alsoudani in Conversation with Robert Goff" in *Ahmed Alsoudani*, (Ostfildern: Hatje Cantz and New York: Goff + Rosenthal, 2009), p. 61.

² Alsoudani's journey from Iraq to the United States is discussed in great detail in his conversation with Robert Goff. *Ibid.*, pp. 59-60.

³ *Ibid.*

⁴ Michael Lobel, "Ahmed Alsoudani: Origins and Departures," *Ahmed Alsoudani*, (Los Angeles: L & M Arts, 2011), p. 6.

⁵ Discussion between the author and artist in the artist's studio, 3 June 2012.

⁶ It should be noted that Alsoudani's paintings are all untitled in order to not lead the viewer's reading of the compositions.

⁷ Suzannah Biernoff, "The Impurity of Painting," *Ahmed Alsoudani*, (London: Haunch of Venison, 2011), p. 6.

⁸ Ahmed Alsoudani in Sarah Schmerler, "In the Studio," *Art in America* (June/July 2011): p. 113.

⁹ Ahmed Alsoudani in Mark Wiener and Linda DiGusta "Stretching Time: In the Studio of Ahmed Alsoudani," *Huffington Post Arts*, 28 October 2010. See www.huffingtonpost.com.