

Stephen Friedman Gallery

The Guardian

'It's timely but also belated' – shining a light on art inspired by two Iraq wars

Nadja Sayej

1 November 2019

The Guardian

In a new exhibition, over 250 artworks detail the devastating effect of war on Iraq, something its curators believe has not been addressed culturally until now.



Jamal Penjweny – Work from the series Saddam is Here. The exhibition in New York runs from November until March 2020. Photograph: Courtesy of the artist.

As you walk into Moma PS1 in Queens, New York, visitors are greeted with an unlikely wall sculpture – the CNN logo at the end of an oversized gold chain.

It's great for a selfie op, but there's a deeper meaning to the artwork, created in 2002 by Thomas Hirschhorn. CNN played a pivotal role in accelerating the 24-hour news coverage of the Gulf war, setting the pace for war news.

This artwork is being shown as part of Theater of Operations: the Gulf Wars, 1991–2011, featuring over 250 artworks by 75 artists. It details the tragic, gruesome effects of war, as told by western and Middle Eastern artists.

"We realized there hasn't been a major survey of Iraqi art in the US," said Peter Eleey, who co-curated the exhibition with Ruba Katrib. "Everyone wants to talk about the current conflict, but this conflict has been going on for 30 years. We're looking at what an artist on one side of an issue makes, versus another, sometimes on the same event."

With the recent killing of the Isis leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, and with US troops leaving northern Syria and being deployed in eastern Syria, America's military presence is as topical as ever. But for the artists who lived in Kuwait and Iraq in the 1990s, what was it like to live through such horror?

"It's timely but also belated, because this has not been addressed culturally," said Katrib. "Iraqi art has not been addressed; Iraqi cultural production hasn't been addressed either. But the US has been entangled in [Iraq](#) for three decades, so why has there been such a lack of representation, interest, or time and space given to Iraqi cultural production?"

Stephen Friedman Gallery

The Guardian

'It's timely but also belated' – shining a light on art inspired by two Iraq wars

Nadja Sayej

1 November 2019

Good question. While America is slowly warming up to Middle Eastern art and culture (a new not-for-profit in Washington dedicated to Middle Eastern art opened in September, while an exhibition of female Iranian artists is opening next week at the High Line Nine in New York), the 1991 Gulf war's devastating impact has yet to be fully explored within art – at least that which has been shared with a wider western audience.



Thomas Hirschhorn – CNN, from 2002. Photograph: Nadja Sayej

The exhibition moves chronologically throughout three floors, beginning with paintings by Khalifa Qattan, the first ever Kuwaiti artist to have a solo exhibition. On view are paintings from his Prophecy series, made between the 1960s and 1980s, which were premonitions of war. One self-portrait from 1984 shows the artist behind bars, a metaphor for the occupation of Kuwait.

“Once Iraq invaded Kuwait, he redefined his older work and claimed they were prophecies of the coming invasion,” said Katrib.

Some artists in the exhibition were exiled, while some created their work from studios in New York. “It’s about the proximity artists have to conflict,” said Eleey. “Not all the artists are making art from inside of Iraq during the war. One of the key things that art does is that it’s testimony to personal experience, the life of a single person. Throughout the show, we’ve tried to give examples of that.”

The Kuwaiti artist Thuraya Al-Baqsamī is showing a print that reads ‘No to the Invasion’ in Arabic from 1990. It was distributed ahead of the American intervention, but after activists were arrested – and two were executed – Al-Baqsamī stopped making the poster.

Also on view is Iraqi-British artist Dia al-Azzawi’s 1991 painting Victim’s Portrait, which is based on the face of a dead Iraqi soldier who was burned alive by US airstrikes, while retreating from Kuwait. A photo of the soldier was taken by the American photojournalist Kenneth Jarecke and while American news outlets refused to publish the gruesome image, it was published in the Observer under the headline: “The Real Face Of War.” “It was a problematic PR moment for the US, because people were shocked the military would strike when soldiers were on retreat, counter to the image of the US at the time,” said Katrib.

Stephen Friedman Gallery

The Guardian

'It's timely but also belated' – shining a light on art inspired by two Iraq wars

Nadja Sayej

1 November 2019



Michel Auder – a still from Gulf War TV War. Photograph: Courtesy the artist and Martos Gallery, New York

On the same note, Michel Auder's Gulf War TV War from 1991 was re-edited in 2017, combining news clips with entertainment. "This work is looking back in the era of fake news," said Eleey. "It's not just news coverage, its commercials and other TV shows, how it fit into a larger cultural moment in 1991."

Richard Serra's Stop Bush drawing from 2004 details some of the chilling human rights violations against prisoners in Abu Ghraib in Iraq. And Judith Joy Ross's photos from Gulf war rallies in Pennsylvania in 1990 were taken at a farewell dinner for troops in Allentown.

"People forget this war was celebratory, [that] people were excited about it," said Katrib. "Military technology promised a clean-cut, video game-like war. It was going to be a new model for war; get a smart bomb, search out your target and you're done, but that's not what happened."

Martha Rosler's collages from the early 2000s detail battle photos alongside upscale interior design magazine cutouts, creating a chilling comparison between the east and west. "There was a way to criticize a larger system of American militarization," said Eleey.

Unforgettable, too, are the Guerrilla Girls' advertisement for their Estrogen Bomb, where they write: "Send estrogen pills to presidents, prime ministers, generals, oligarchs and CEOs everywhere," adding that "the world needs a new weapon."

Stephen Friedman Gallery

The Guardian

'It's timely but also belated' – shining a light on art inspired by two Iraq wars

Nadja Sayej

1 November 2019



Nuha Al-Radi – Portrait of Zain Habboo. Photograph: Kris Graves

The exhibition features the voices of Arab artists, such as Iraqi writer and artist Nuha al-Radi, author of a book called *Baghdad Diaries*, which chronicles her experience living through the first Gulf war, who wrote: “The west seems to have only three images of Arabs – terrorists, oil sheiks and women covered in black from head to toe. I’m not sure they know if there are ordinary human beings who live here.”

A series from al-Radi’s scrap wood and metal sculptures from her *Embargo Series* are also on view. The figures are shown alongside an excerpt from a diary entry she wrote in 2003. She was disappointed Iraqi Cultural Week was canceled with the impending US invasion of Iraq. Everyone fled. “So only the art remains,” al-Radi wrote. Referring to her wooden sculptures, she added: “They look as if they are demonstrating, they represent the Iraqi people and I am calling them ‘We the people.’”

There is a room devoted to Jamal Penjweny’s 2010 photo series *Saddam is Here*, where Iraqi people cover their faces with an image of Saddam Hussein. “He traveled across Iraq finding strangers to put this paper face of Saddam over their face,” said Katrib. “It was made after Saddam was killed, as the artist felt subsequent leaders were replicating the same policies.”

Also on show are illustrations by *the Guardian* writer Ghaith Abdul-Ahad, who made drawings of Iraqi men detained in south Baghdad during a US army raid in the early 2000s. There’s also a mural by Dia al-Azzawi called *Mission of Destruction*, which was painted in response to the American invasion, which draws a parallel to Pablo Picasso’s *Guernica*.

“We knew it would be timely. It has been 30 years since various conflicts have centered around Iraq, in one way or another, but they’re mostly western perspectives on the conflict,” said Eley.

Katrib added: “There are different perspective in this show. There isn’t just one here.”

Theater of Operations: The Gulf Wars, 1991–2011 is showing at MoMA PS1 in Queens from 3 November until March 2020