



'IRAQ IS NOW A TEENAGE COUNTRY'

A film-maker, a musician and a photographer are helping shape and document how, after decades of restraint, their country is taking back its narrative – and dreaming again



Lorraine Mallinder

In 2003, when then US president George W Bush announced the beginning of combat operations in Iraq, he spoke of “disarming Iraq” and “freeing its people”. Donald Rumsfeld, then US defence secretary, couldn't say if it would last “five days or five weeks or five months” – but it certainly wasn't going to last any longer than that.

As it turned out, Saddam Hussein's weapons of mass destruction did not exist. As for freeing the people, hundreds of thousands died as a result of the invasion, a sectarian civil war, the emergence of Islamic State and the general collapse of infrastructure. Even today, the fallout continues – the state now captured by corrupt politicians and powerful militias.

It was arguably the greatest fiasco in US military history, for which the Iraqi people were forced to pay the highest price. Yet the world has not really heard the story from their perspective. Most war-related narratives about Iraq have been produced by the West, deploying a visual shorthand of guns, bombs and oil derived from TV news coverage. It's a dominant narrative that is hard to shift.

The Berlin Biennale art exhibition last year is a case in point. Three Iraqi artists – Sajjad Abbas, Layth Kareem and Raed Mutar – contributed work on the theme of decolonisation and repair. Despite their direct experience of the subject, their work was overshadowed by a French exhibit showing the torture and sexual abuse of Iraqi prisoners at Abu Ghraib, alongside images of bombed towns. The organisers appeared to have opted for shock value.

Iraq's artists have been under pressure for decades. The collapse of the country's creative sector after the US invasion pushed them to the brink. But, even before that, artists and storytellers were suffocated by Saddam Hussein's regime, says filmmaker Ahmed Yassin al-Daradji (profiled below). UN sanctions imposed after Iraq invaded Kuwait in 1990 had crushed society as a whole.

The 2019 Tishreen uprising marked a watershed moment. Young people took to the streets, first to protest against corrup-

tion, then to overturn the system. They knew how to spread the word: posting images, live-streaming videos, turning the Saadoun tunnel beneath Tahrir Square into an art gallery filled with defiant, hopeful messages, with imagery inspired by anime, pop art and Islamic art. Stories about national unity, social justice and women's rights went viral.

After decades of being held back, Iraq is more than ready to take back its narrative. The Irish Times interviewed three artists – a filmmaker, a musician and a photographer – who are telling it their way.

Ahmed Yassin al-Daradji Film director (36)

It's Iraq as you've never seen it before. Twenty years of turmoil embodied by a silicone sex doll kitted out in a star-spangled bikini in the middle of a smouldering rubbish dump.

Ahmed Yassin al-Daradji, director of Hanging Gardens, offers a daring slice of life from this hellscape, swerving between hilarity and horror with the sure-footed instincts of someone who has seen enough to know.

“We don't trust the Americans, you know,” he says, a wry smile playing on his lips.

Little wonder. In the chaos of the US invasion, al-Daradji was kidnapped twice by mercenaries, receiving a bullet to the leg on one occasion. The second time, he says he was sold for \$700 to the US army, and locked up for 10 days in Al-Zuhur Palace in Baghdad, once a torture chamber for high-ranking Baathists.

The US army accused him of making films for Al-Qaeda. During his detention, he claims he saw the photos of prisoner abuse at Abu Ghraib before they were aired in April 2004. The images, which depicted tortured and abused Iraqi prisoners forced into humiliating poses by US military personnel, shocked the world. He says a sergeant showed them to him on a laptop, saying: “Do you want to be like these people?”

Luckily, a Dutch filmmaker, who had employed him as a sound recordist, was able to pull strings to secure his release. Recently named by Esquire as one of the Arab world's most promising film and TV talents, after bagging best film award at the Red Sea Film Festival, his life could have turned out quite differently had it not been for that fortuitous intervention.

In many ways, Hanging Gardens is an antidote to the sexualisation of war in

Hollywood films. He recalls watching American Sniper, a biopic of US Navy Seal Chris Kyle (played by Bradley Cooper), considered the most prolific sniper in US military history. Al-Daradji was appalled to see the brawny protagonist flaunting his sex appeal as he gunned down his countrymen, all depicted as shady and menacing.

Fuelled by outrage, he wrote Hanging Gardens, a coming-of-age tale about As'ad, a 12-year-old rubbish picker, who spends his days scouring a Baghdad rubbish dump for pickings from the US embassy. Usually on the lookout for porn magazines, he comes across the life-size talking doll, who reminds him of his mother. He develops a tender relationship with her, while also hiring her out to long queues of local men who pay fistfuls of crumpled dinars to use and abuse her.

It's a film devoid of moral signposting, leaving the viewer with more questions than answers. The title alludes to the mythical Hanging Gardens of Babylon, created by King Nebuchadnezzar II for his Persian wife – a clear reference to foreign influence in Iraq.

Al-Daradji grew up in a conservative Shia family in Baghdad's Sadr City, stronghold of populist preacher Muqtada al-Sadr. His father, a powerful local sheikh, wanted him to go into medicine. But after a shift as a trainee in a hospital emergency room, where he pulled the blanket off a stretcher to find a collection of smoking body parts from a suicide bombing, he immediately transferred to film school.

It was an exciting time, he says. He and his fellow students occupied the bombed-out Baghdad College of Fine Arts, playing football, drinking alcohol and making run-and-gun films. It was around this time that a cousin working at the US embassy brought back a sex toy, planting the idea for the film. “For us, in Sadr City, it was the first time we'd seen anything like that,” he laughs.

Making films in Iraq is a “minefield”, says al-Daradji. Hanging Gardens shines a light on a hyper-masculine, militarised society blighted by sectarian conflict. Women are noticeably out of the picture, the boy protagonist hinting at men's brutality when he asks them not to introduce sharp objects into the doll. “There's an imbalance in society when women are isolated,” says Al-Daradji. “This is how intense men can get in their behaviour.”

Right now, it's difficult to know where Iraq is heading, he says. “What happened post-2003 is that we went to ground zero.

“Iraq is now a teenage country.”

Qamar Alani Musician (22)

Qamar Alani was still at secondary school when Islamic State reached the gates of Baghdad in 2014. A virtual prisoner in her home, only half an hour by car from the front line at Abu Ghraib, she was terrified of going into the city.

Back then, much of her time was spent in panicked thought, trying to find a place to hide her beloved “santur” – she had received the traditional Iraqi dulcimer instrument from her school, so she could practise ancient songs from the Abbasid era at home.

“I was psychologically imprisoned,” she says. “I remember always thinking, ‘Where I could hide it? If they could, they would break it and kill the musician.’”

With its unwieldy trapezoid shape, and 96 strings stretched across the gleaming walnut surface, it wasn't the sort of thing that would fit snugly in a hidden corner. Everyone said the terror group's militants

would leave no stone unturned, searching every inch of the house and garden.

The terror group, now still waging a low-level insurgency in the country, has not quite been defeated. But those dark days of 2014 are in the past. Today, Alani and her fellow musicians are leading Iraq's heritage revival movement, playing glittering compositions dating to the eighth century, when Baghdad was at the epicentre of the golden age of Islam.

It makes sense, says Alani. The Iraqi maqam music that she plays used to ring out from the coffeehouses of Baghdad, Basra, Kirkuk and Mosul. The compositions, played with a variety of ancient instruments, including the santur, the oud and the joza, are rooted in Iraqi poetry and Sufi mysticism, hitting singularly plaintive notes of melancholy and romance. But war almost destroyed this rich cultural heritage.

Now, young musicians are keen to reclaim the music of their ancestors from the ashes – before it's too late. “We want to protect Iraqi art and heritage,” says Alani, who plays with Iraq's National Musical Heritage Orchestra. “Only Iraqi musicians can play this music. If we can't play it, it won't stay alive.”

Over the past two decades, sectarian conflict and religious fundamentalism pushed music to the margins. “In Iraq, a lot of people still think music is haram,” she says, using the Arabic word for “forbidden”. “A lot of people turned to religion because they thought it would change things for the better in their lives.”

Being a female musician is still challenging, Alani says. More conservative members of her family have tried to persuade her mother to stop her playing. On Instagram, where she regularly posts performances, she has had to deal with disapproval and sometimes outright trolling.

But, she says, she now feels able to breathe again. Picking up her mezzrab hammers, she plays a glittering Mesopotamian composition that likely would not have sounded out of place at Nebuchadnezzar's marriage feast in 630BC.



■ Above, from top: film director Ahmed Yassin al-Daradji; musician Qamar Alani; visual artist and photographer Ayman al-Amiri. Below, a photograph from al-Amiri's exhibition Baghdad Gazette; a still from al-Daradji's film Hanging Gardens



This is the sound of the cradle of civilisation. “After all the things that happened here, pop songs seem so silly, so empty, with no feelings,” she says. In reclaiming her country's glorious past, this musician has her sights set firmly on the future.

Ayman al-Amiri Visual artist (27)

For Ayman al-Amiri, taking photographs in black and white was a natural choice.

After the US invasion in 2003, his whole world turned black.

A young boy at the time, he recalls the skies turning black when Saddam Hussein burned crude oil around Baghdad to obscure bombing targets. The streets, the buildings, people's faces were black with the smoke. Mourners would wear black for 40 days after their loved ones died. And all around him, the women and men were sad.

“There was no colour at all. Everything was black, black, black,” he says.

So, it comes as no surprise to see the sombre photos on display in the Baghdad Gazette, an exhibition currently showing at The Gallery in downtown Baghdad. It consists of a series of front-page splashes on the most pressing issues facing a country that has been in crisis mode for the past two decades – though the stories aren't the usual newspaper fare.

The Baghdad Gazette specialises in underreported stories of the kind you are unlikely to find in Iraq – or, indeed, in the rest of the world. Take one exhibit, which sees roving reporter al-Amiri go underground – literally – to “interview” a 21-year-old in her grave. Nisan took her own life after her father tried to marry her off to his friend, 30 years her senior. Devastated at the prospect of abandoning her studies to marry a man she did not love, she decided to end it all.

“Don't you miss life?” asks the reporter. “Can you miss something you never had?” she replies.

They killed the dead twice, says Nisan. Iraq's reported suicide rate is on the rise, owing to problems including crime, poverty and abuse. But, in this conservative society, it's a taboo subject, so the root causes go unaddressed. Nisan now lies abandoned in her grave, her soul screaming for eternity. The failed wedding singer in the grave next to her provides a touch of galloWS humor.

The photo accompanying the article features the silhouette of a lone person on a bridge beneath an overcast sky. “Sometimes I feel alone like this guy, as if I was the only person in the city,” says al-Amiri. He took his photos with expired film, the results damaged and grainy. “Because my life is like this. Baghdad itself is an expired city,” he says.

The articles, created with writer Furat al-Jamil, blend fact and fiction in a bid to get people thinking about issues such as health, poverty and climate change. “People in Iraq stopped using their imagination, they stopped dreaming. They don't have time to process,” says al-Amiri. “With the Baghdad Gazette, we wanted to tell people: let's think again, dream again, have hope again.”

Al-Amiri was introduced to photography by his father, who started documenting everyday life after the 2003 invasion. Only seven at the time, he helped his father photograph inside the house and around Baghdad – “in all sorts of situations, with water shortages, power cuts, a lack of food, the people crazy and scared”.

He takes inspiration from local photographers such as the late Nadhim Ramzi, known for his photos documenting life in Iraq from the 1950s onwards.

“The best Iraqi photographers show how people walk, talk, eat,” he says. “They show how people change.”

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