

Volume 18, Number 2 Summer 2009

# MCR

## MultiCultural Review

Dedicated to a Better Understanding of Ethnic, Racial, & Religious Diversity



*Interviews with Iraqi-American artists • Historical young adult fiction set in South Asia • The rise and evolution of Japanese hip-hop • The Righteous Gentiles of Romania • Recommended books in Spanish for children and teens • EMIE Bulletin*

# The Concealed Gift of Our Society: The United States Gives Iraqi Artists a Voice

Weam Namou

Until my first novel was released in 2004, I was not aware of the diverse Iraqi artists who were part of my community. I had mostly lived and worked with non-Iraqi Americans. Yet in the process of promoting the book, I was introduced to a wonderful group of creative and intellectual men and women of Iraqi descent. Their work inspired me to join in the founding of the Iraqi Artists Association (IAA), a nonprofit organization.

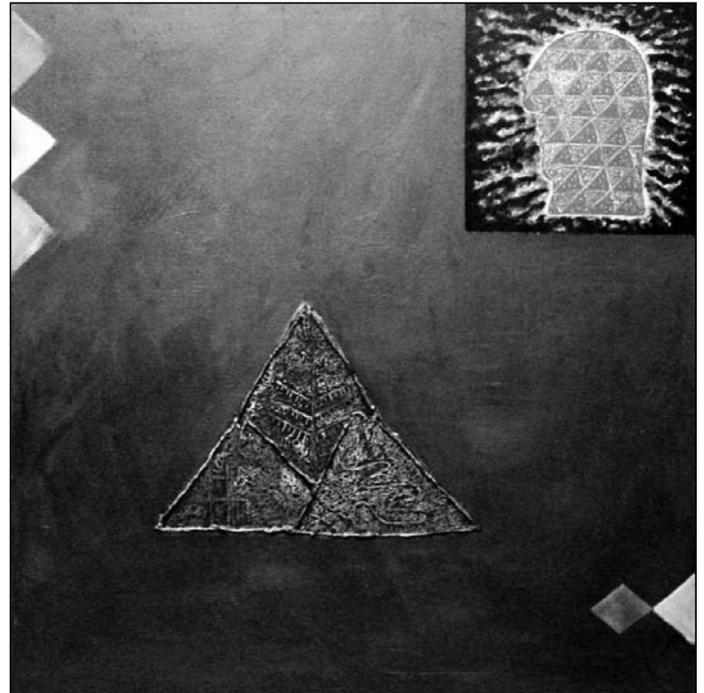
We wanted to broaden appreciation for Iraq's rich history and culture and foster understanding between East and West. With so many social, political, and religious issues regarding Iraq and Iraqis in the news, we felt it had become absolutely essential to address the neglected though highly compelling issues of art and education.

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Since the start of the 2003 war, insurgents have been killing Iraqi intellectuals, artists, and professionals. Those who have survived are today in diaspora. Iraq once was a modern society, with well-developed infrastructure and health and education systems. About two million Iraqis now live abroad, and as many as 50,000 join them every month, according to UN figures.

I was born in Baghdad, Iraq, as a minority Christian and came to the United States at age ten. In my new home, I learned about my heritage, that civilization was born in ancient Mesopotamia over 7,000 years ago. It is where writing, math, science, and astronomy were invented. The first school, law and order, parliament, separation of church and state, map of the world, and the idea of dividing time and space into multiples of 60 started in this historic land. Abraham, the forefather of the "Abrahamic Religions," was from Ur of the Chaldeans in Babylonia (Genesis 15:7).

Today, Mesopotamia, the Biblical Garden of Eden, is a flat desert—thanks to overuse of agricultural land and multiple invasions. Along with the artists who are here telling their stories, I feel that the past is a warning of how our current civilization could destroy the environment of the future. By viewing the East's vision as a counterpoint to that of the West, we can prevent further catastrophe.



Fleeing a Paradise © 2006 by Amer Fatuhi  
Acrylic on canvas with mixed media, 36" x 36"

## Amer Hanna Fatuhi

Amer Hanna Fatuhi is an artist, historian, and activist of Chaldean (Christian Iraqi) descent. He studied engineering and earned many academic degrees in art and Mesopotamian history. Through his unique art works, academic studies, and aggressive articles, he stood up to the unfairness and mistreatment of Iraqi intellectuals and ordinary Iraqis under Saddam Hussein, and the irrational wars and violence that Iraq has endured since the 1980s. He fled Iraq as a result of political persecution.

### *When did your relationship/conflict with the Baath Party begin?*

I was five or six years old when the Baath Party came into power. From the start, I didn't believe in them. That attitude was largely due to my father. He said, "Anytime someone kills an Iraqi citizen, it means they are not Iraqi citizens." When the Baathists executed former president Abd Al-Karim Qasim, my father said, "Bad people came into power."

Although I often stood up to the Baath Party by defending Iraqi intellectuals, promoting the artists that others were afraid to promote, and by encouraging freedom, I was smart enough to work on a thin line that would protect me from abuse. But as

smart as one was, when negative points against him or her piled up, more questions were raised by the Baath Party, which led to further interrogations. They would come and ask me, “Why don’t you want to join the Arabic Socialist Baath Party?” and I would reply, “I’m not an Arab.”

***What consequences did you have to face for not joining the Baath Party?***

Not being part of the regime led to having fewer rights than Baathists, who would receive scholarships and higher education. For instance, when in 1986 I won the Iraqi National Flag Competition, the competition was canceled because I am a Chaldean and not an Arab, a Christian and not a Muslim, an independent and not a Baathist.

For years I was interrogated on numerous occasions, but I was never sentenced to jail. I was, however, sentenced to death three times. In the 1990s I endured torture by the regime for several reasons: I was asked to draw portraits of Saddam but refused; I did not participate in an annual Baath Party Exhibit, which was mandatory (anyone who didn’t was considered an enemy and faced execution); I refused, as head of the visual arts magazine, *Fanoon*, to glorify the regime by writing articles about Saddam and his son Oudai.

As an artist, I can’t have anyone lead me.

***What led you to eventually flee Iraq?***

I had lived in Amman, Jordan, for two years. During this time, many of the Iraqi artists in Amman met at my studio. One of them, a Baathist, returned to Iraq and reported that I was an anti-Baathist and used my studio as the center of an opposition movement.

I returned to Iraq in order to get my wife and four children (two sets of twins) out of the country. That’s when, after another round of torture, a lieutenant warned me, “The next time they take you in, Amer, you’ll never leave. They’ll execute you. Try to leave Iraq.” So I took my family and escaped. Afterwards, I was sentenced to death in absentia. They also withdrew my citizenship.

I came to America, which was a dream of mine since age ten. Who hasn’t dreamt of coming to America?

***What was your initial opinion of America, particularly its art?***

Coming to America was shocking because what I had read in Iraq about America was quite different. Iraqi artists love and respect works of Rauschenberg, Pollock, and Gasper. But today’s American art has no soul. It’s just merchandise. Well-known artists are made by the media—produced for money purposes. And it’s not just in American art, but also modern Western art. Today’s artists are copycats of European and famous American artists.

That is why I am surprised that despite the rich history and background of Iraqi artists, Americans look at Iraqi artists’ works as being less worthy. I don’t do artwork to place it in my studio. I want to share it with the public. But because I’m Iraqi-born, Americans don’t have enough of an appreciation for it. My work is post-modernism, my major theme the pictograph, which is the first writing system created in Mesopotamia in 4100 B.C.E. I use techniques related to me, my heritage, and my system. But Americans have an image of Iraq, a stereotype—that it consists of mosques, Aladdin, camels, and Islamists. But that’s not the Iraq that I know best, it’s not part of my culture, it’s not me.

America offers me freedom but at the same time, there are lots of discrimination issues. They will accept me based on their terms. They want to put me in a box. But I cannot bring myself to do that because art and love are similar in that there are no rules.

By Americans allowing various perspectives to interact, they are doing something for themselves. Since they [Americans] are part of humanity, they have to share their point of view with others. There should not be obstacles when it comes to cultural matters. We’re all living in a small street. Although there is law and order, which are very important, there are no borders. What happens thousands of miles away, whether in China, Iraq, or Italy, you learn about it within seconds.

***Why do you think Americans should join forces with Iraqi artists and intellectuals?***

Art is outside of history, which deals with two factors—time and location. Art has no time. No location. If a

Sumerian statue is shown to someone, it will be accepted by an American, Spanish, Chinese, Russian living in 2008. The person will love it no matter when and where it was made. Art is universal and eternal.

I am sad about what has happened to Iraq, since it is now under four occupiers—Americans, Iranians, Kurds, and Arab fanatics—but I believe that the current chaos is the result of Saddam’s regime. America was just a player seizing an opportunity. But art will have the last word.

## **Issa Hanna Dabish**

Born in 1919, Issa Hanna Dabish was a founding member of the first officially recognized artist organization, “Friends of Art Society,” in Baghdad in 1941. He studied at the Institute of Fine Arts in Baghdad and years later at Syracuse University in New York. Approximately 20 of his art works were housed in the modern art wing of the Baghdad Museum before the museum was looted in 2003. Twelve of these looted art works were later recovered and displayed at the Baghdad Museum of Modern Art on Haifa Street.

Despite his age and inability to walk, Dabish has not stopped

creating art in his current home in Canada. No longer able to work with oils, he continues to execute small art works with pastel, aquarelle, and other materials.

***When did your interest for art begin and who or what was your support system?***

From the age of five or six years old, I did sculpture from mud while living in Telkaif, a village in northern Iraq. At six we moved to Baghdad and I started drawing. When my family gave me four floos (pennies) to spend in school, I would hide the money and then buy a box of watercolors. Sometimes my mother would catch me, and say, "Oh, he's sketching again!" My parents wanted me to be an engineer or a doctor.

My beginnings were very strong, although I'm mostly a self-taught artist. During middle school, the principal made a special room for students who were good in art, to paint in and exhibit their work at the end of the year.

Art was very good to me. I worked at the Baghdad Museum, cleaning and renovating tablets. I had the opportunity to travel to Europe and learn from their famous art museums. I was also sent to Syracuse for a year and a half, through a project offered by the U.S. in an effort to help third-world countries. There I studied audio-visual aids in education. I was then sent to Washington, D.C. [My supervisor] there was impressed with my work in design and print and offered to pay me eight dollars an hour if I stayed with him. That equates to a hundred dollars an hour today. I said no because I lived well in Iraq and I had the association to deal with. It's not just money that makes one happy but the community that one lives in.

***When did you most experience conflict and struggle in your career?***

The situation in Iraq became terrible during World War II. Employees' wages were too little to support a family. I was working at the museum and had to find a second job, one outside the government. That's when I began doing screen painting in order to make a living. I opened a shop, where I drew and did commercial work such as posters. I also did photography, which I taught myself through reading about it. I was very famous in photography.

Other than that, during the monarchy and the Baath Party, I felt no pressure to do what I did not want to do. Back then, the government helped artists. They mostly cared about politics. So unless the painter was associated with communism, they let you be.

***How do you compare what is happening in Iraq today to what you witnessed during World War II?***

The current war in Iraq is very different. During World War II, we were with Germany and against England. There was a strong national soul. Now people come in from outside and steal your home. Or they're allowing themselves to be led by their religious views. Before, we would leave our doors open. No one touched anything.

I am sorry that Iraq, the most elegant country in the world in regard to education and the arts, is now led by chaotic and

barbaric people who kill and kidnap. We, the Assyrians and the Chaldeans, taught people writing and reading and art.

***What brought you to Canada and how has immigration affected your work?***

I followed my son to Canada in 1993 because life in Iraq became economically and socially intolerable. Here, I looked for galleries for my paintings, but they already had enough artists exhibiting. Then I found someone who had a gallery nearby, and I began teaching seniors and children. I trained them to paint. After two years, the gallery closed. I began working at home, in an apartment. I am sad that I don't have a studio that I can draw in,



Enlil, Nannar, Sumer & Uruk © by Amer Fatuhi  
Oil on hardboard canvas with mixed media, 24" x 36"

and it's my dream to have one. I also don't have the opportunity to draw what I like.

I liked the atmosphere of my birth country, and the subjects I draw deal with that country. Today, I'll see something from my window and draw it, or I go to the park to draw a few trees, or still life. I don't have subjects that deal with where I'm currently living.

America and Canada are separated artistically from Europe and the rest of the world. True, they have museums and such. But

as individuals, they are not concerned or have the background for art. They are not educated in that field.

### *Have you visited Iraq since you left?*

I want to, but Baghdad doesn't give hope for someone to visit it.

## **Paul Batou**

Paul Batou's journey as an artist started during high school. In 1989 Batou traveled to Italy to study art, but his father refused to finance his studies. He returned to Baghdad and was accepted in pharmacy school, so he followed that direction. Luckily, the school had a studio for the arts. One of the protocols in Iraq was that each college had a music and art department to be used for students' hobbies.

### *Why didn't you study art in Baghdad?*

The College of Arts was exclusive to the Baath Party. I didn't even bother to apply, because I had no desire to become one of their members. I was fortunate that the director of the studio in the pharmacy school was one of the most famous Iraqi artists, Abdul Ellah Yassin. That's how I practiced and learned art in a more professional fashion. It was as if I'd missed something and then found it. I was hungry to absorb all the knowledge I could in art.

### *While living in Iraq, did you have any serious encounters with the Baath Party?*

After I received my bachelor's degree, my problems with the Baath Party began. They offered me to study nuclear pharmacy in Sweden. In return, I would receive excellent pay and my family would be provided with a nice home and a comfortable life. It was either that—higher education—or the army. It was like having to choose between heaven and hell. I chose hell.

I served in the army five years during the Iraq-Iran war. The first few months I was on the front line, and every night I asked myself if I had made the right or the wrong decision. I played by my principles, and my principle was not to give up my freedom.

Matters changed when I was placed in the medical unit and began focusing on helping as many people as I could. We were in a city that bordered Iran, where there was shelling and wounded men every day. That's when I forgot my doubts and questions. God gave me peace in my heart, and I ended up staying in order to help the people who needed me. I stopped feeling that I made a bad decision, and I felt happy being a pharmacist. I was helping more people.

### *What was the driving force behind leaving Iraq and coming to America?*

Freedom. The turning point in my search for freedom was when I started reading and painting the Epic of Gilgamesh. That story had a major impact on my thinking as a human and as an artist. Gilgamesh and his long journey and search for life, love, and freedom opened my mind and caused me to look back to my roots as a Mesopotamian. I became more determined to love my land and my people, and to fully understand that this is my Iraq, not owned by Shiites, Sunnis, or Kurds. The Christians of Iraq are the natives of Iraq. They carry the heritage of Iraq.

Seeing my friends, mostly artists, writers, and poets in opposition to Saddam's ideas, taken by Baath Intelligence or put in prison or disappearing from the university, affected my thinking. If you search for freedom while under the dictator's rule, either you exit Iraq, or if you can't do that, your alternative is connecting to whatever makes you feel free. To me, the gypsy culture, writing poems, painting, and playing classical guitar provided me with the ideals that I live by and the freedom to express myself among the people who fear God and pray all day.

In 1989 I moved with my family, a wife and a son, to Athens and eventually to the United States. Although it was difficult in the beginning, the image of America being the land of freedom and opportunity lived up to its name. I found American people very helpful. They assisted me as best as they could. One person who played a big role in my success was a friend and pharmacist by the name of Ira Freeman. He offered me a job in his pharmacy even though I had no experience with computers and I didn't know the name of the drugs, since they were different than what I had learned in Iraq. He even provided

me with financial assistance to get me through.

One thing you learn in America is that you have full freedom. Humans with freedom will have more powerful production than humans under oppression.

I'm happy in America, but I miss the friends I left behind in Iraq. I've written many times that I can't feel joyful and happy when my friends in Iraq are sad and worried.

One day my father told me Iraq is your homeland. It was called Mesopotamia before, the land of two rivers. My mom said any land that gives you freedom is your land. Finally, this is my land. I lost my home in Iraq; I don't want to lose my home here. The way to keep my home is to restore the world to peace.

### *How do you plan to restore the world to peace?*

For me art has a universal message, to deliver beautiful pieces with nice colors, logic, and philosophy for all humans. My colors reflect the tone of the Earth, the language of the universe, the cry and pain of the oppressed people.

As an artist, I go back to that civilization, that beauty, and ask myself, "Why do I need to restore that to Iraq?" It's because [Iraq] represents the source of civilization, beauty, and knowledge. My

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love for the U.S. plays an important role in my art. Since 9/11 there has been less freedom in the U.S., affecting the way people live and think. One of my goals is to restore that freedom.

Usually artists, whether they are American, Iraqi, or from any other country, don't like war. Our concern is mostly for the innocent people who will suffer, whether they are the citizens of Iraq or our troops and their families in America.

***Why do you think that America is not very familiar with Iraq's art?***

Everyone agrees there was a big arts movement in Iraq long before Saddam came to power. Many artists had traveled to Europe and accomplished such extraordinary work there that they were very well known there. While American professional observers who deal with art know about the high standards of art and music in Iraq, the general public does not know. There were not good enough relations with the United States to where programs were created that would send people to Iraq to witness for themselves that culture, or people coming from Iraq to the United States to exhibit.

Since there was no cultural interference or exchange with Iraq, Americans didn't know anything about Iraq's history, culture, and heritage. That's the one reason that the U.S. failed to deliver Operation Iraqi Freedom.

## Nadwa Qaragholi

Nadwa Qaragholi was born and raised in Baghdad, and educated both in her native city and the American College in Beirut. Her earliest influence was her mother, a high school art teacher who instilled in her a deep appreciation for color and beauty in all of its manifestations.

She went on to study fine arts in Baghdad under the acclaimed Iraqi artist Miran Al Saadi. After leaving Iraq in 1980, she lived in London, studied art at Santa Monica College and UCLA in Los Angeles, and finally settled in metropolitan Washington, D.C. An active member of the Alexandria Art League for the last 20 years, she has continued to refine her art under the guidance of distinguished sculptor Liberace and notable portrait painter Danny Dawson.

***What was the driving force behind your leaving Iraq, and if you plan to return for a visit, are you ready to face the changes that have occurred there?***

I didn't leave Iraq for any political or ambitious reasons. My life there was secure. I wanted to study abroad—in Paris originally—but we ended up in the U.S. Once we came here, the [Iran-Iraq] war started so we couldn't go back. It was meant to be. It wasn't planned at all.

I have been to Iraq twice, in 1985 and in 2002.

***Describe your relationship with your mother, in regards to you both having a love for art?***

My mother was an artist in soul, personality, and appearance, but she was against me becoming an artist, concerned that I

wouldn't have a future in this area. But my generation was different than hers. Some of my friends became very famous.

My parents were U.S. citizens but lived in Iraq. They didn't belong here. When my mother died, I couldn't make it to the funeral. Afterwards, I couldn't express my grief with portraits (I'd spent a substantial portion of my career on painting portraits) so I found another way. I did it through abstract. And I loved abstract for that.

As a portrait painter, it is much harder to do exhibitions. Rarely are people interested in someone else's portrait. So as an abstract painter, I had the opportunity to have my first exhibition in New York in 2006. My father traveled from Iraq to Jordan and then flew to the U.S. to attend. My daughters were already in



The First Paradise © 1993 by Amer Fatuhi  
Mixed media on paper, 16" x 11"

the States, so it wasn't difficult for them to be there. But my son was across the world and came to surprise me. I don't even know where he had come from.

***How did you feel during the 2003 U.S. led coalition, given that Iraq is your birthplace and the U.S. your home?***

I felt pain for both sides. Seeing people get killed is very painful. You feel you can't do anything about it. The only thing you can do is paint. Maybe I'm blessed. I can at least express myself

with my paintings; others can't.

I feel fortunate to have had such a magnificent community of artists in the city of Alexandria. That's where I belong. That's how you grow as an artist—when you're surrounded by artists. Encouragement and motivation, continuous growth and learning—that's what I was lucky to have.

While there was a big movement towards art in Iraq, artists were not exposed to the world. They were enclosed within Iraq and maybe some of the Arabic countries. Now we're very much in demand.

Over two years ago, a friend and I envisioned a project where Eastern and Western art met each other. It's through art that you can feel the humanity of the other side.

For a long time, Americans had no idea where I was coming from. They didn't believe that there are independent women in Iraq. From the beginning they knew who Nadwa is, but they couldn't put the picture with that part of the world. Maybe they thought I'm exceptional, or not the norm. They've only started knowing about Iraq from the last war.

### *Whose works have been your inspirations?*

The *Rubaiyat* was written in the thirteenth century, a time when oppression denied the poet open expression. Omar Al Khayyam's brilliant use of metaphor was the cloak through which he relayed his indignation. I have borrowed his cloak, embedding images behind paint as a voiceless testament to the human spirit's cry against subjugation.

In my latest series of work, inspired by the *Rubaiyat*, I embarked on a journey of dream exploration, one intimately tied to the present inasmuch as it calls forth the past. My paintings are a narration of my innermost thoughts. Very much the way a writer uses his pen, I use my brush to confide a story to my canvas, into which I step to investigate what is intangible and elusive. This series of work is based on my life's experience coupled with the poetry of Khayyam. It is a gateway to the unconscious level of dreams. Like the archeologist who digs with diligence and delicately dusts precious remnants from another time, I am searching for fragments of the past to decipher my feelings of the present. I apply my paint softly, layering transparent veils of color so as not to disturb the dream.

While a strong believer in God, I am always against labels, which can be harmful. I prefer instead to see the goodness in people and not their labels. In this way, I feel I resemble Khalil Gibran, who has also been my influence. I've always felt he was beyond nationality and religion.

### *How would you describe yourself as an artist?*

It takes forever for me to finish a painting because I put my heart into it. My goal is to say, or change, something. I try to express women's issues and my dissatisfaction with women's situations.

Even when I'm not drawing, I'm drawing. I'm one of those who can see faces in everything—in curtains, in the marble, the grain of the marble. Everywhere.

## **Farouk Kaspaules**

Farouk Kaspaules is an Iraqi-born Canadian artist who left Iraq in the 1970s. He obtained a Bachelor of Fine Arts at the University of Ottawa in 1988 and has participated in exhibitions worldwide over the last 20 years, including France, Egypt, Jordan, and Brazil. During that time he has been actively engaged in artist-run centers, organizing and curating exhibits with political and cultural themes.

### *As an artist, did you receive support from family and your community? Who and what has been your primary influence(s)?*

In Iraq, when I was in secondary school, I would go through foreign magazines looking for images of works by artists. In 1982 I graduated with an M.S. in Economics from Ottawa University. After working as an economist for two years I realized the need to find a medium to express myself. I decided to study visual arts. The change to art came from a need to express my ideas, my position regarding political events in Iraq, and issues of human rights. I had much encouragement from my friends in Ottawa, who saw the strength of my interest in art. My major influences were Joseph Beuys, Robert Rauschenberg, and Andy Warhol. Of course, I am influenced

by art theories, such as postmodernism.

### *What was the leading force behind your leaving Iraq and how has your life as an artist been in Canada?*

Like many Iraqis, I left because of internal conditions. I came to Canada, because, as with many Iraqis, if a country gives you permanent residency you stay. You don't choose. Living in Canada, my home now, has opened many possibilities [for] production and teaching. I teach at Ottawa School of Arts. I am involved with my peer artists in art making, exhibiting, discussion, and so on.

Over two years ago, a friend and I envisioned a project where Eastern and Western art met each other. It's through art that you can feel the humanity of the other side.

*How have the wars in Iraq affected your life or your art?*

War has been a central topic in my art. I went into studying art and expressing my concerns about Iraq visually. My visual experiments in mixed media focus on concepts of displacement and exile, and employ a complex vocabulary of images, symbols, and aesthetic forms derived from ancient and contemporary Iraq, as well as from my mixed cultural background, Chaldean and Arab.

Using my art, I try to engage the viewer to become aware of the situation in Iraq, and what that means. Sure, every day the media cover news about Iraq. But an exhibition in a gallery about the situation in Iraq is a different dialogue, has a different impact. It is the closeness, and the connection between the work and the viewer. I always make statements about Iraq.

The political in the arts becomes an activity that cannot be separated from lived experience. In my work, I strive to relate

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daily events to broader geopolitical and social questions, thereby affirming the cultural and the political on the one hand, and the artistic position on the other. Remaining intimately linked to my birth country through my past and my art, I preserve my memories through these images while also acknowledging their painfully ephemeral nature—geopolitically speaking, Iraq as I remember it no longer exists.

*Do you think it's possible for art to help establish peace between East and West?*

Any dialogue or interaction between two entities will create the condition for understanding each other's position. I don't think conflict between East and West is inevitable. There are concerns on both sides to be addressed. These concerns are internal and external regarding the East. Through art, and engaging audiences to see their concerns (on both sides), I believe we can create closeness and familiarity with each other and distance ourselves from the rhetoric. Throughout history, art was always a means for bringing people together. This is a first step, and art in any form can do that.

*To what do you attribute the West's lack of awareness about Iraq's history and culture?*

Iraq has been in the books since day one. A student from any culture has studied ancient Iraq. But I believe an attempt to erase the identity and culture of this country was made to serve rulers, one of which was the previous regime in Iraq. Meanwhile the U.S. pretended not to know anything about that culture, and in their way erased many of its elements as well.

The situation in Iraq is very critical. The country and its people are subjected to very difficult conditions economically, socially, and culturally. People are caught between zealous groups on one hand and the U.S. on the other. Artists are fighting the dogma of certain groups forcing them to produce works of art that do not address the real issues in Iraq.



Bull & Female © 1992 by Amer Fatuhi  
Mixed media on paper, 16.25" x 11/25"

**Weam Namou** was born in Baghdad, Iraq. She received her bachelor's degree from Wayne State University; she studied screenwriting at MPI (Motion Picture Institute of Michigan) and poetry in Prague. She is the president of IAA (Iraqi Artists Association) and the author of three novels, *The Feminine Art*, *The Mismatched Braid*, and *The Flavor of Cultures*. Her articles and poetry have appeared in numerous journals, and she currently writes a regular column for the *Macomb and the Oakland Observer*. 🌐