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 شاليد یدشاید

CURATED BY JULIA MOUSTACCHI, INTERIM CURATOR

15 SEPTEMBER - 4 DECEMBER 2023

EXHIBITION PREVIEW THURSDAY 14 SEPTEMBER AT 6PM

The LAB Gallery, Foley Street, Dublin 1.

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ADMISSION FREE

Open Monday to Saturday 10:00am - 6:00pm.



*Shahid* is a mixed-media exhibition by artists Basil Al-Rawi and Daa Lagan, in which metaphorical narratives and symbols weave an intertextual dialogue on symbolic spirituality, mediums of control and representation, while also exploring dual identity. In Arabic, *Shahid* means 'witness' – someone who observes, but also someone who hears and encounters experiences in their unconscious. This is the proposal that the artists are making: an intertwined stream of unconsciousness, roaming through the lived and inherited memories that inhabit them.

Through a variety of artforms and visual methodologies, the artists use the gallery to organise their combined meditative observation, which moves from significant cultural and mythical references, as well as references from vernacular traditions, to imaginary landscapes and personal reminiscences. The complex layering of legacies, memories, identities, all fusing into a unique self, augmented by the plurality of influences, is presented here in a mosaic of deeply rooted forms.

Irish artist Al-RAWI is a first-time multidisciplinary artist whose practice is concerned with the landscapes of memory, identity, politics, and mediated reality. Employing remediation, reconstruction, and participatory methods, he works with photography, film, and immersive technologies to recompose architectural material and create expanded photographic moments. Al-RAWI recently completed a practice-based PhD at the Glasgow School of Art, where he utilised participatory methods to explore the creative reconstruction of photographic moments and associated memories from Iraqi diaspora in VR. He has exhibited in group shows at IMMA, Rua Red, The Photographers Gallery, and the Institute of International Visual Arts, amongst others. In 2022 he received a Cork County Council Creative Arts Bursary and an Arts Council Art Participation Project Award for the creation of 'Between Lines', a participatory project with the Iraqi diaspora in Ireland to be presented at IMMA, Galway Arts Centre, and Crawford Art Gallery in 2023 & 2024 as part of the Museum of Everyone's "Communal" Project.



SHAHID

BASIL AL-RAWI

diar LAGAN

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Comhairle Cathrach  
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visual arts



## Shahid / Witness

**Shahid** with Diaa Lagan and Basil Al-Rawi traces ongoing cultural and artistic evolutions. Al-Rawi's background as a photographer and cinematographer has imparted a sense of responsibility, and with this we see sensitivities towards representation of people's stories, while Lagan fictionalises various art-historical movements sweeping across thousands of years of visual expression in his paintings, prints and sculptural pieces. Both artists are concerned with identifying and bearing witness to a fuller and more truthful narrative from the remnants of collective cultural epiphany. However this pursuit has manifested divergently for each artist. **Shadid** demonstrates the potential for personal expression and archiving to bring fragments together to create cohesive cultural narratives.

Diaa Lagan presents a series of painterly epiphanies that bring disparate cultural movements and traditions into dialogue with one another. These references are often tongue-in-cheek, with elegant classical-style painterly flourishes of Greek mythological figures alongside expressionist renderings of kebab rotisseries. Lagan explores meta-narratives with a vast array of references to pattern and calligraphy-as-form in Islamic art, and utilises paint to collapse the boundaries of various traditions.

It's here within these paintings that humour flourishes and we can see that Lagan tries on art-historical movements like hats. We can observe, through the work, that he has been intrigued by a particular branch of European art history here and tradition of Islamic calligraphy there. He dabbles and then moves on, loosely combining weighted iconography and sensitive subject matters. References to Francis Bacon and Rodin might co-exist with Islamic mosaic and calligraphy. He springs these juxtapositions on us to suggest the absurdity of a colonial ignorance that flattens vast historical narratives into narrow clichés and tropes.

The contemporary trope of identity in art is given a wry side-eye by Lagan who moves to express, not just the implications of conflict through its representation in his practice, but the proliferation of more particular and personal responses to contradictions and hypocrisies around him. The extremities of war and the banality of evil, East meets West, the rape of Europa, imperialism, colonialism and a rotating kebab grill. Identity as a highly personal prism through which the world is observed, and then mediated. Lagan pokes fun at the complex codes we create through visual expression and how they become the focus of destruction during conflicts. In this way he offers a unique epiphany from personal experience: panache in the face of the abominable destruction of artworks that have arisen from, and borne witness to the best of humanity. There is no rhyme or reason for what is preserved and what is lost, that is the crux of these paintings.

The story of art history is mediated divergently depending on where you grow up. In the Irish art curriculum at school, it is a linear trajectory that begins with neolithic standing stones, the megalithic tomb Newgrange, moving through the Bronze Age with the influence of La Tène culture that came with Celts or Gauls. Celtic crosses, illuminated manuscripts and the Ardagh Chalice feature prominently as prime examples of insular art. After 1200 the curriculum travels briskly through medieval, Renaissance and Impressionist movements in Europe, jumping towards Picasso and Mondrian and ending with 'art appreciation' which incorporates all contemporary art. Such a doctrine delineates a national understanding of how culture works. In reality this is a minuscule tile of an expansive mosaic of broader cultural narratives. Such narratives spiral and loop, ignoring our concept of borders and persevering through persistent upheaval, conflict and migration. Look for example, at the interlacing serpents at the gates of a 13th-century citadel in Aleppo to witness a surprising aesthetic resonance with earlier Irish Celtic motifs. Or the Georgian follies dotted around Ireland which appear to be replicas of structures encountered by landed gentry on colonial safari in Asia and the Middle East.

Basil Al-Rawi, through his practice, identifies the need for explorations of cultural and diasporic identity, specifically in relation to Iraq. His work titled, **Baldati** بلدتي (**My Town**), comprises six constructed postcards that form a personal reckoning with global events, at a point of convergence where the emotional meets the political. One postcard shows the Minaret of Anah which dates back to the 7th century and was moved from its place in 1985 to the new Anah city where it was destroyed in 2016 (it has subsequently been rebuilt). Another postcard depicts an Irish Folly near Leixlip (Al-Rawi's home town) called The Wonderful Barn and we are reminded of its similarities to the Great Mosque of Samarra. The Connolly Folly also appears, an obelisk which bears resemblance to a number of Islamic minarets in Iraq. The postcards are interspersed with personal messages from loved ones intimating a sense of grief for the loss of shared histories and the search for cultural connections between these two disparate lands.

In this regard, Al-Rawi's practice considers how cultures are mediated and accessed. With dual heritage he has spent most of his life in Ireland and considers it home, however Iraq is also home, albeit a home he has not been able to connect with experientially due to conflict and exile. He incorporates material such as the work **Munim with Lamb** as a touchstone for memory, and in so doing he defies the dominant chronicles of media coverage to create space for warmth and lightheartedness.

With a background in photography, Al-Rawi often revisits early works which indicate a consistent and unwavering interest in the ability of the medium to tell stories. **The Salmon Leapt Toward Babel**, for example, incorporates photographs that were taken by Al-Rawi when he was 12 and living in Jordan, using his father's camera. The film considers a correlation between personal histories and photography as a medium, taking photographs, manipulating and reconstructing them, or collecting them and forming a personal archive to put forward this idea that you can create a reality in retrospect. The archive, as Hal Foster might describe it, is a site of excavation, but also a site of construction,

'found yet constructed, factual yet fictive, public yet private' (Hal Foster, 'An Archival Impulse'). Al-Rawi's approach also highlights a phenomenon: in lieu of a national archive, a network of informal archiving takes place across social media on Instagram, Facebook, Telegram, and Pinterest where people are scanning what they have and uploading them for circulation, offering an alternative to the proliferation of images of Iraq as a site of conflict and oil reserves.

The destruction Islamic art is an affront to all humanity. In this lifetime, we bear witness to the loss of some of the most sophisticated and complex artworks ever created. Diaa Lagan and Basil Al-Rawi in **Shahid** share the common ground of bringing together fragmentary cultural revelations to suggest something regenerative and cohesive. While there are commonalities in the ideas and approaches presented here, the dynamic of their practices, upon which the exhibition is built, is based not on similarity, but symbiosis.

*Ingrid Lyons is a writer and researcher currently living and working in Donegal, Ireland.*