

SADIK ALFRAJI



ayyam  gallery

GODOT TO COME YESTERDAY

SADIK ALFRAJI

Ayyam Gallery Jeddah
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Iraqi artist Sadik Alfraji blends art and philosophy as a means of expanding the formalistic and conceptual boundaries of his aesthetic. Much of his work explores the expressionistic intensity of the graphic form, with a focus on the ideas and concepts of human existence. His haunting mixed media compositions, inhabited by shadowy figures and faceless bodies, speak to the artist's experience of exile, loss and fragmentation.

Born 1960 in Baghdad, Sadik Alfraji lives and works in Amersfoort, the Netherlands. His work is housed in numerous private and public collections including The National Museum of Modern Art, Baghdad; The Art Center, Baghdad; Royal Association of Fine Arts, Amman; The Khaled Shoman Foundation, Amman; French Cultural Center, Amman; Novosibirsk State Art Museum, Russia; and the Cluj- Napoca Art Museum, Romania. Solo shows include Ayyam Gallery London (2013); Ayyam Gallery DIFC, Dubai (2011); Ayyam Gallery Damascus (2011); Stads Gallery, Amersfoort, Netherlands (2010); Station Museum, Houston (2008-); Stedelijk Museum, Den Bosch (2007-). Selected group exhibitions include Mori Art Museum, Tokyo (2012); Mathaf Arab Museum of Modern Art, Qatar (2010-); CBKU & Centaal Museum, New Salon, Utrecht (2008). In 2014, Sadik Alfraji will present his installation *The House that My Father Built* at the Fotofest Biennial of Contemporary Arab Photography, Video and Mixed Media Art in Houston, Texas.

Existence through the Eyes of Sadik Kwaish Alfraji

by Ipek Ulusoy Akgul

Sadik Kwaish Alfraji's works – regardless of the medium – have a unique way of blending art and philosophy. Through his strikingly dark paintings, prints and video, Alfraji explores a variety of themes such as issues of existence, identity, feeling of loss and perpetual state of longing. Moreover, he tackles anxiety, emotions and thoughts related to these themes, which are quite prevalent in his life as an exile artist as well. In this respect, his memories of social and political events, especially the Iran-Iraq War, and personal experiences such as the loss of his father, add to the intensity and depth in his work. Having shown his work internationally throughout the Middle East, Europe and the US, Alfraji's engaging exhibitions encourage the viewers to tackle questions of existence that are relevant to all our lives.

Alfraji is a philosophically-driven artist whose education is extremely relevant to his multifaceted creative personality as a visual artist, printmaker and designer. Additionally, the fact that he was born in Baghdad in 1960 and left his homeland over two decades ago to live and work in The Netherlands, has deeply impacted his artistic practice. Currently based in Amersfoort, The Netherlands, Alfraji studied painting at the Institute of Fine Arts in Baghdad and continued his studies in plastic art, receiving his Bachelors at the Academy of Fine Arts in the same city in 1987. He then earned a high diploma in graphic design from CHK Constantijn Huygens Academy in Kampen, The Netherlands, in 2000. Although the artist defines Iraq as his identity, home and source of his memories, he considers his move from one country to another and the cultural transition

that came along with it as a wealth of experience and a contribution source to his art.

Alfraji often states that he takes his inspiration from anything and everything. However, he also explains that his work is heavily moved by German Expressionism and Existentialism. For him, both belonged to an era very similar to the times he has experienced in Iraq during the Iran-Iraq War, which the artist described as 'looking existence in the face'. Moreover, the shared understanding of existence was manifested through the daily question of death and simultaneously through the expectation of liberation from pain.^[i] Thus, using the two movements as lenses through which he sees the world, Alfraji argues for their relevance in our contemporary world.

Following his solo appearances at Ayyam Gallery's Damascus, Dubai (DIFC) and London venues, as well as participation in numerous notable group exhibitions and festivals, such as ikono on Air Festival, his thought-provoking new show "Godot to Come Yesterday" will draw from the aesthetic and conceptual framework of his earlier practice. As the artist states:

'These works go along in the same stream as my earlier work. They treat the issue of our existence through themes, concepts and ideas related to its daily experiences and situations, which we encounter as individuals or groups/societies. This takes the form of a constant questioning of life and purpose in most of my works.'^[ii]

Despite the fact that he is quite famous for his Indian ink, charcoal, rice paper and oil on canvas works, Alfraji explores different mediums through his artistic practice. His new exhibition brings together Lambda prints from his Waiting for Godot (2011) series and two videos, Godot

[i] Email Correspondence with Sadik Alfraji, November 5, 2013.

[ii] Ibid.

to Come Yesterday (2013)^[iii], from which the show takes its name, and The House that My Father Built (Once Upon a Time) (2010)^[iv], originally commissioned by Mathaf: Arab Museum of Modern Art. One may argue that style is more important than medium for the artist. While the artist does not prefer one medium over the other, the static and moving images have a mutual effect on each other and both are important in his show and practice in general.^[v]

Inspired by Samuel Beckett's famous existentialist play Waiting for Godot (1952), Alfraji explores the idea of futile waiting that is 'incredibly relevant to all of our lives'^[vi] in his series of prints. In the play, the two characters Vladimir and Estragon wait for a third character Godot that does not arrive. Referring to this, Alfraji describes Godot as one of his masters: 'He is the impossible. He is an existentialist symbol that you wait for, but who never comes.'^[vii] The artist is also conceptually moved by other literary characters such as Gregor Samsa in Franz Kafka's novella The Metamorphosis (1915) and Antoine Roquentin in Jean-Paul Sartre's novel Nausea (1938) that associate with what he describes the problem of existence.^[viii]

The faceless shadowy figure, with hands in pockets and whose feet are rarely represented, appears bruised and vulnerable in Alfraji's prints. The body language is especially symbolic in portraying this recurring figure in vain, lonely and somewhat depressed. For the artist, with its shape, features and motion, the human body is actually 'the first blank page' that manifests our feelings, emotions and thoughts. Explaining why he often uses the body or human figure in his works, Alfraji explains; 'I strongly believe that the human body in general is one of the most elaborate languages which can easily express and explore our emotions and thoughts in this short journey of existence.'^[ix]

The colour black is another key visual element in emphasising the

[iii] Alfraji's video 'Godot to come Yesterday' is accessible here: <http://vimeo.com/66819083>

[iv] 'The house that my father built', <http://vimeo.com/28503557>

[v] 'Sadik Alfraji Interview', designboom, <http://www.designboom.com/art/sadik-alfraji-interview/>, March 20, 2013.

[vi] Ibid.

[vii] 'Artist in Focus: Sadik Alfraji', In the Frame, http://intheframe.org/artists_info/artists-in-focus/

[viii] Ibid.

[ix] Email Correspondence with Sadik Alfraji, November 5, 2013.

impression of sorrow in Alfraji's work. The artist elaborates:

'Black, in its nature, is a colour which contains and swallows all other colours. Black's engulfing qualities makes it one of the best colours to work with, as it is powerful and effective in expressing and forming ideas and concepts. The colour can emphasise its subject and is malleable, lending itself to symbolic meaning, just like a shadow that can take on all possibilities of shapes of matter.'^[x]

The visual dialogue between Alfraji's prints and his video *Godot to Come Yesterday*, for example, is clear in the choice of colour. Reference to the character Godot is obviously another aesthetic and conceptual theme that adds to the dialogue among the works.

Godot to Come Yesterday is a video work that combines drawing and digital animation. It has premiered during "I Do Not Feel That I Am Free"^[xi] held at Ayyam Gallery London this spring. The film can be considered a reconstructed vision of Beckett's play. Reciting a self-written, existentialist text in Arabic, the artist portrays two grey, isolated figures on a black void-like background. While the 'intense moment of bewilderment and anticipation' in the prints takes a rather continuous and fluid form in the video,^[xii] the two body of works complement each other.

Alfraji's video *The House that My Father Built*, on the other hand, draws on the artist's personal memory and family background. In its original presentation at Mathaf: Arab Museum of Modern Art in Doha during "Told/Untold/Retold: 23 Stories of Journeys through Time and Space," curated by Sam Bardaouil and Till Fellrath, *The House that My Father Built (Once Upon a Time)* included a multimedia installation consisting of a large-scale painting, several ready-mades, and an animation film projected on a wall.^[xiii] The installation was later shown on a smaller scale

at another group show entitled "Arab Express" at Mori Art Museum, Tokyo. The video section of this installation that will be on display in Jeddah will once more put viewers in dialogue with the artist's past, especially the loss of his father and the fact that he could not manage to see his father alive one last time during his trip back to Iraq in 2009.

The visual imagery of this intimate video work is thus heavily influenced by emotional elements, especially feeling of nostalgia, in other words, 'yearning for innocence' and 'childhood long-gone.'^[xiv] In this respect, Alfraji sees video as the perfect media to explore the feeling of loss as the sound component of the video adds to the sentimental nature of the work even more. The video refers to 'house' as a metaphor of identity, not in its physical meaning. In a recent interview, the artist suggests that identity 'cannot be combined with contemporaneity' and his Iraqi memory is part of his identity formation.^[xv] The artist further explains this:

'The family house is eventually the sum of all those days lived there for years. It is a diary filled with memories, people and events, moments which speak to our sentiment, and constantly filling our conscience, mind and memory with new experiences and knowledge and therefore take part in creating and forming our identity. That house has grown within us as we have grown in it, becoming an inseparable part of our identity at some point.'^[xvi]

For Alfraji, there is no difference between our longing to past moments and yearning for long-awaited hopes.^[xvii]

This notion emphasises the link among the prints and two videos

[x] 'Sadik Alfraji Interview,' designboom, <http://www.designboom.com/art/sadik-alfraji-interview/>, March 20, 2013.

[xi] Prior to his appearance at Ayyam Gallery's London venue, Alfraji had two other solo shows, entitled, 'Waiting for Godot' and 'Nothing, Nobody' at Ayyam Gallery Damascus and Ayyam Gallery DIFC respectively.

[xii] Email Correspondence with Sadik Alfraji, November 5, 2013.

[xiii] The group show entitled "Told/Untold/Retold: 23 stories of journeys through time and space" was one of the three inaugural exhibitions of Mathaf: Arab Museum of Modern Art in Doha, Qatar held between December 30, 2010 and May 28, 2011.

[xiv] Bardaouil, Sam and Till Fellrath, 'Sadik Kwaish Alfraji: Waiting for the Past, Seeing the Future,' *Nafas Art Magazine*, http://universes-in-universe.org/eng/nafas/articles/2011/sadik_kwaish_alfraji, September 2011.

[xv] 'Artist in Focus: Sadik Alfraji,' *In the Frame*, http://intheframe.org/artists_info/artists-in-focus/

[xvi] Email Correspondence with Sadik Alfraji, November 5, 2013.

[xvii] Ibid.

exhibited in his new show “Godot to Come Yesterday”. Alfraji will continue to draw on both philosophy and literature in Jeddah and his works will allow the viewers to articulate on philosophical concepts deeply connected to war, philosophy, culture, change and alienation. Questioning existence’s relevance to the contemporary culture, Alfraji will invite them to trace light in the dark reality with Godot.

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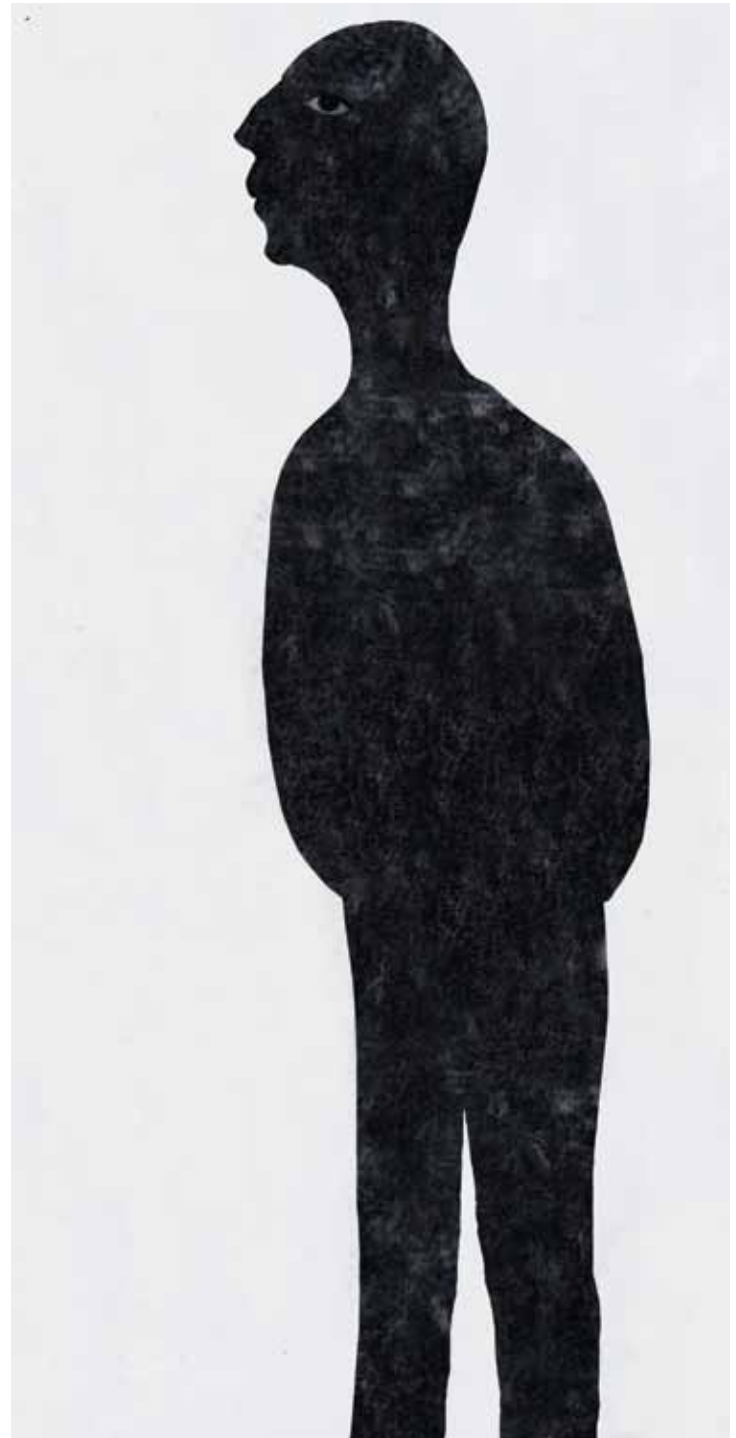
Waiting for Godot Series
2011
Lambda Print
200 x 100 cm
Edition of 5



Waiting for Godot Series
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200 x 100 cm
Edition of 5



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2011
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200 x 100 cm
Edition of 5

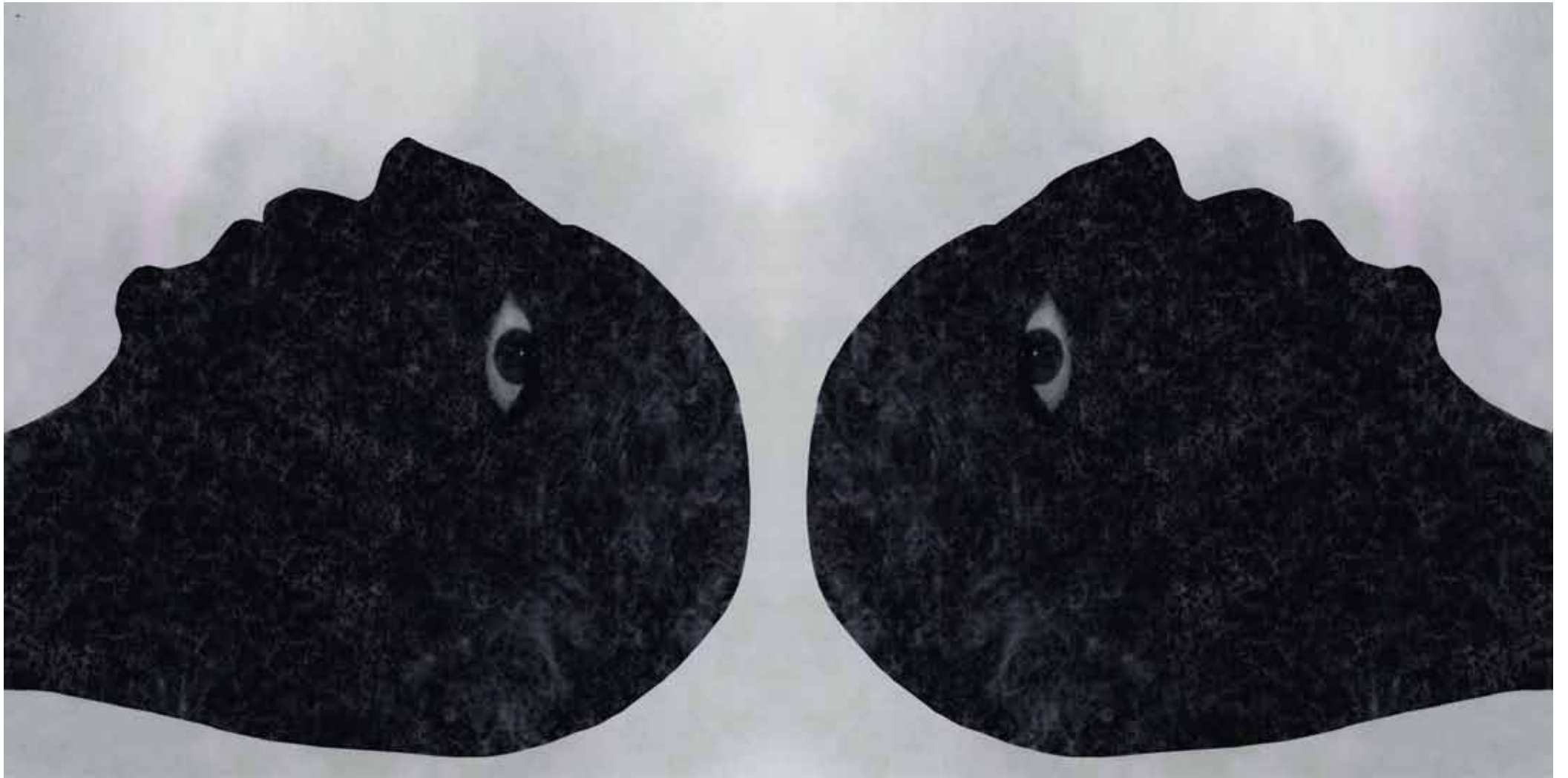




Waiting for Godot Series
2011
Lambda Print
125 x 250 cm
Edition of 5

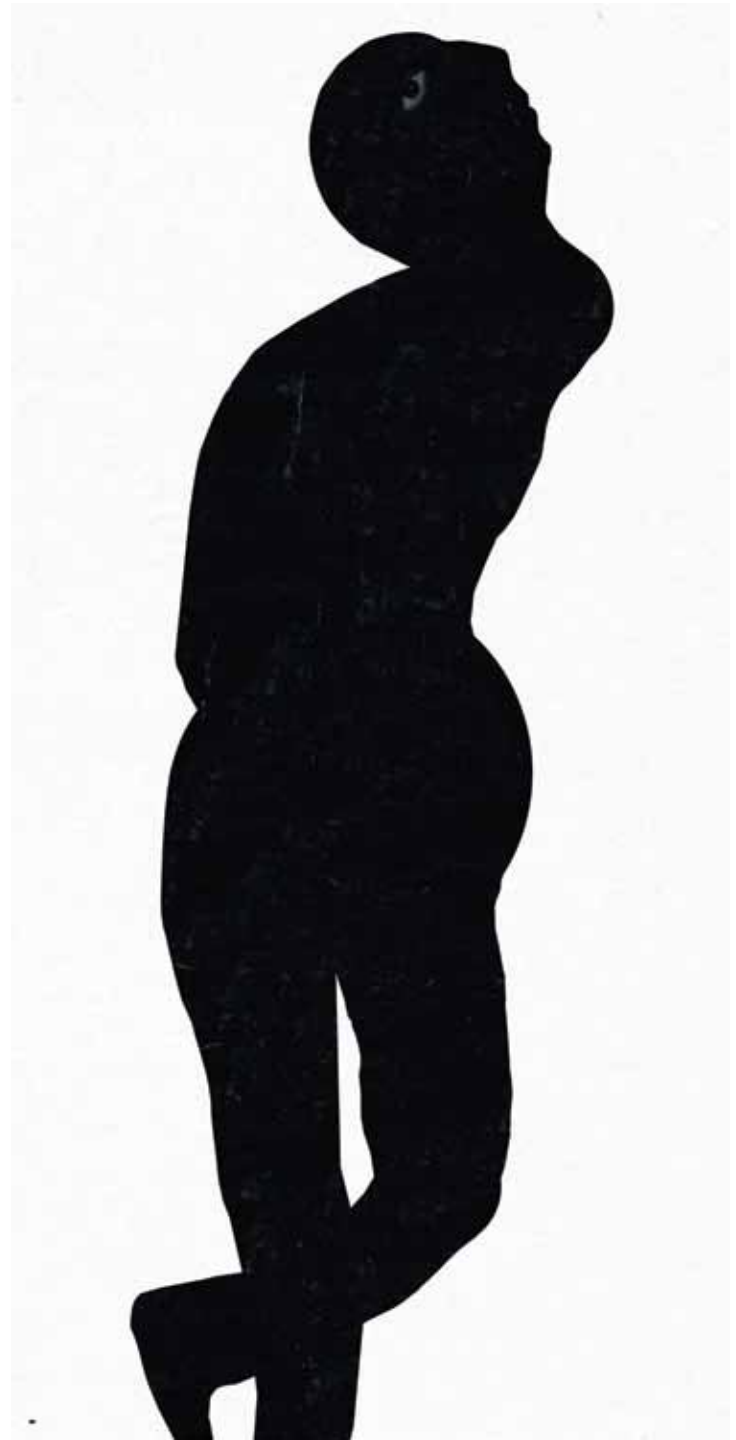


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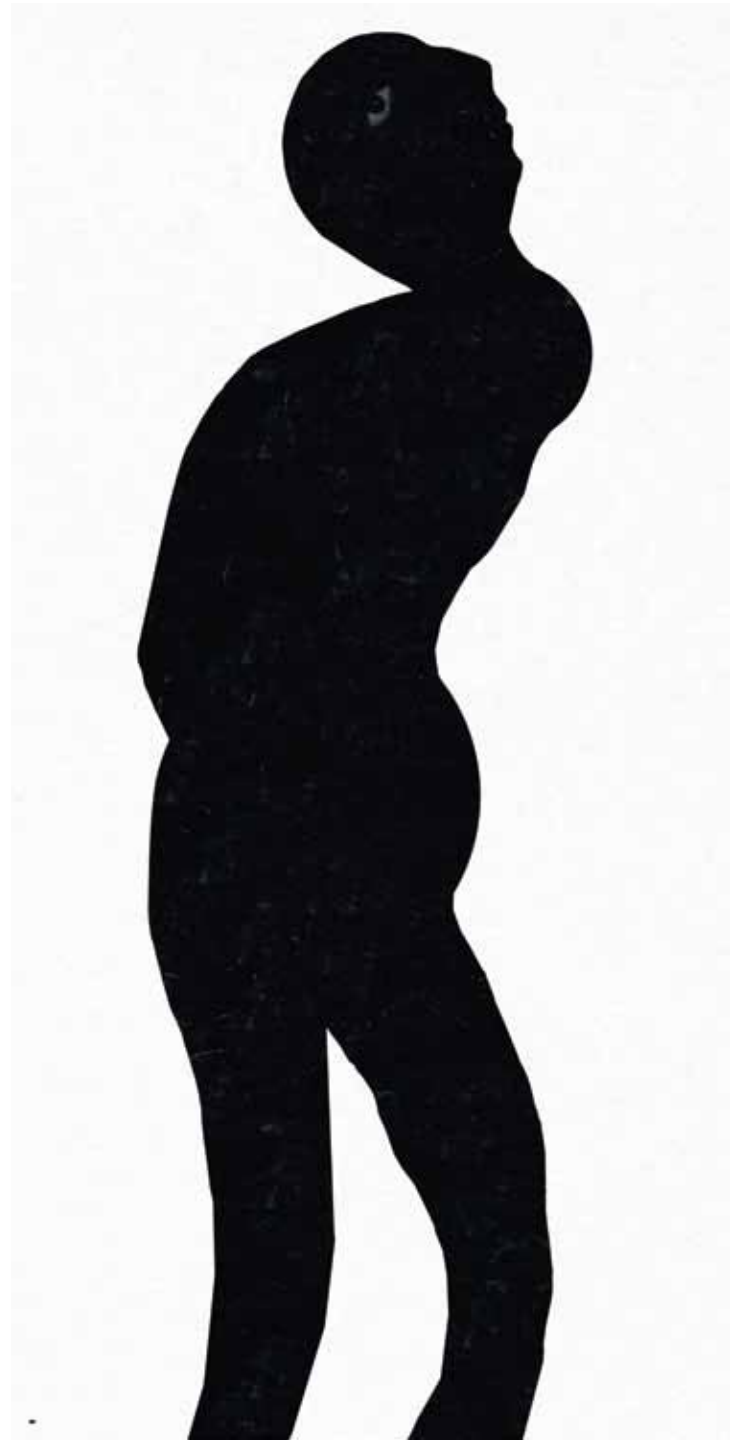


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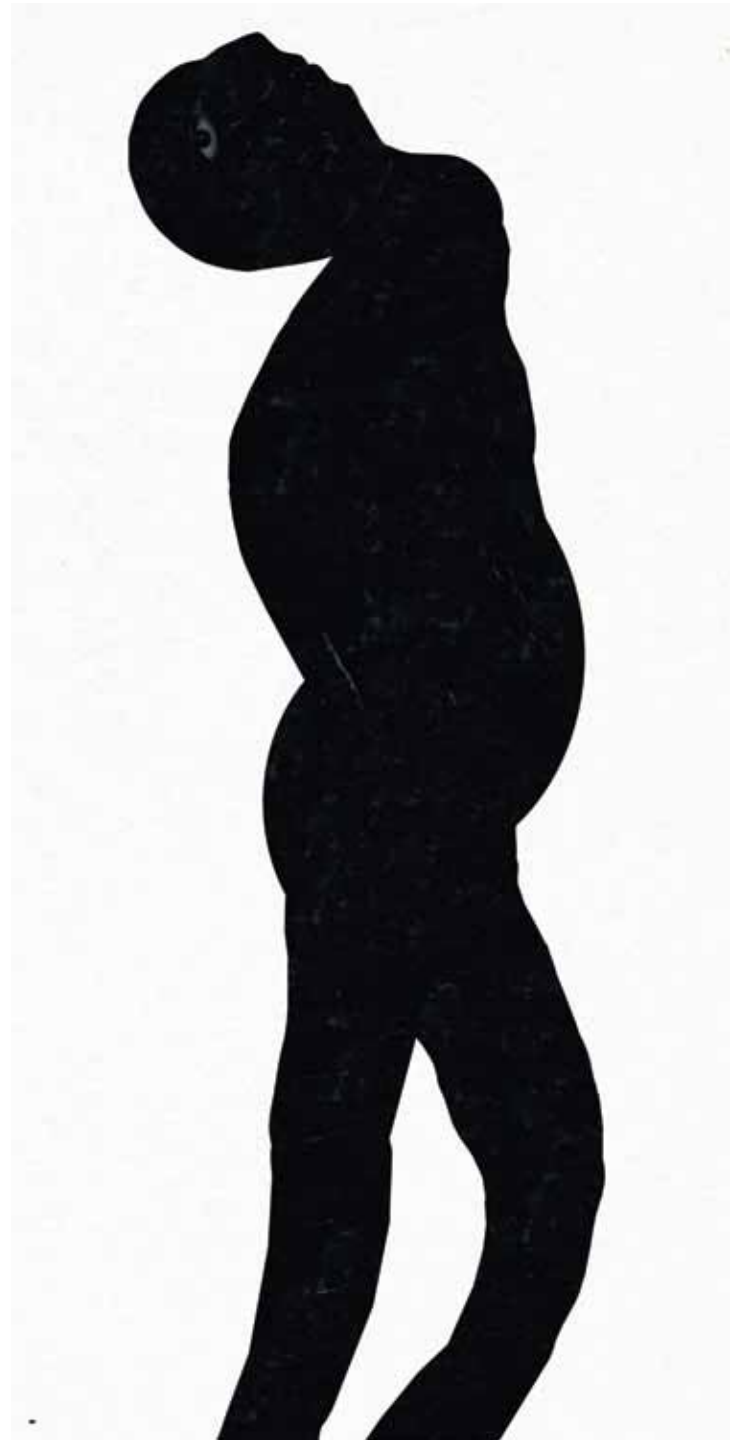
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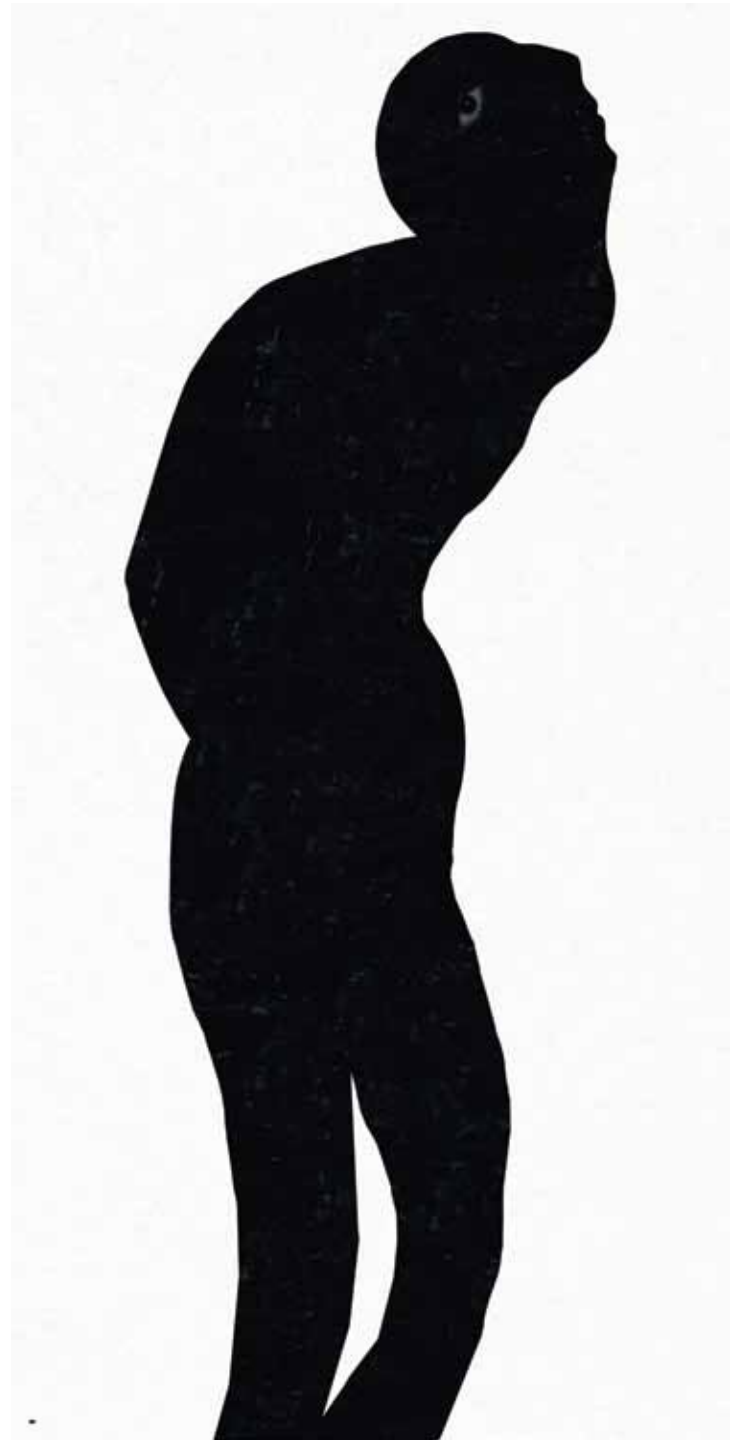
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The House that My Father Built (Once Upon a Time)

2010

Film

6:12



Godot to Come Yesterday

2013

Film

12:59

Ayyam Gallery

Founded by collectors and cousins Khaled and Hisham Samawi in Damascus in 2006, Ayyam Gallery sought to nurture Syria's burgeoning and dynamic contemporary art scene through landmark non-profit initiatives such as the Shabab Ayyam Project, an incubator for emerging artists. Expansion into Beirut and Dubai enabled Ayyam Gallery to broaden its scope from the promotion of work by Syrian artists to those from the wider Middle East region. In doing so, Ayyam Gallery has established itself as one of the foremost exponents of Middle Eastern contemporary art to the international community.

Today, Ayyam Gallery is recognized as a leading cultural voice in the region, representing a roster of Arab and Iranian artists with an international profile and museum presence. A number of non-commercial exhibitions, as well as the launch of Ayyam Publishing, Ayyam Editions, and The Young Collectors Auction, have further succeeded in showcasing the work of Middle Eastern artists with the aim of educating a wider audience about the art of this significant region. Ayyam Gallery Damascus currently functions as a studio and creative haven for artists who remain in the war-torn city. In early 2013, Ayyam Gallery launched new spaces in London and Jeddah.

