

Transcript: Art heritage in Iraq - Interview with Ahmed Naji

Mehiyar 0:00

Welcome to the Nahrein Network podcast series. Today we're joined by Dr. Ahmed Naji, an independent researcher and cultural advisor, specializing in the modern contemporary Iraqi art. Naji focuses on research and documentation public art, museum and private collections and related literature from articles to catalogs and books. Between 2005 and 2008, Dr. Naji worked at the Iraq Memory Foundation in Baghdad on various aspects of documentation, research of documents, oral history of victims and survivors and arts and artifacts and the role of the Baath regime from 1968 to 2003. He was also a cultural adviser for the Public Affairs Office at the US Embassy in Baghdad. Later, Dr. Naji served as the founding executive officer of the London based Cultural Centre of the Humanitarian Dialogue Foundation. In 2009 to 2012 he collaborated with several charitable and cultural projects and his work has been featured in several news articles such as BBC, LA Times, and art newspapers. He's the author of *Under the Palm Trees: Modern Iraqi Art* with Mohamed Makiya and Jewad Selim, which be published in May 2019 by Rizzoli, New York, which discusses the trajectory of Iraqi art through the prominent art collection of the late pioneer architect Mohamed Makiya, who passed away in 2015. Welcome to the Nahrein Network. How are you today?

Ahmed Naji 1:18 I'm fine. Thank you. Many thanks for the Nahrein Network for inviting me today.

Mehiyar 1:22 It's good to have you. I'm very much impressed with your work and you have a book coming out about modern art heritage in Iraq. Could you tell us about that?

Ahmed Naji 1:29 The book is actually a sort of a closure, a closure to a long term project that I've been working on in Iraq in terms of documentation, and research of modern and contemporary Iraqi art. I was lucky enough to meet the late Mohamed Maliya in 2006. Then when I moved to London in 2008 I was visiting him on a regular basis, and we started to go through his collection. Then the son, Kana Makiya commissioned me to write a book. The book documents a collection from the early 1940s until 2006, when Makiya's Kufa Gallery in London, Queensway was closed. And the collection is one of the most prominent Iraqi art collections and not only in terms of quantity, but also in terms of quality, in terms of influence. The collection has influenced Makiya's architecture in so many ways, which I discuss in the book. At the same time Makiya influenced Iraqi artists in the 1950s, mainly 1960s, in a way that brings to question the value of modern heritage in Iraq. Modern heritage is related to modernism. It's all that body of publications and different accomplishments, whether on an individual level or in a group effort, or a state sponsored effort that was in Iraq from the 1960s and after the 1950s revolution until today, which, unfortunately, for many reasons, has been neglected. And I find now that with finishing my

book, I have a new calling. And this new calling is to work with as many researchers, as many historians as possible, to recollect to reassemble this body of archives and preserve it for future generation. Could you tell us a bit more about your work in Iraq? Did you go to Iraq for this research? Were the archives based in Iraq, in UK? How did you conduct this research, and where did you find the material for this important piece of research? I was in Iraq until 2008. I actually moved to London in 2008. So prior to that, when I was at the Memory Foundation, I was a deputy director of the art and artifacts project. And this project basically was aiming at documenting propaganda art. So that's all the art that was sponsored by Saddam's regime, the Baath regime, at the same time documenting the opposite art, the dissident, and this is art by the likes of for example, Faisal Laibi [Sahi], a prominent artist, with communist leaning, artists living in London, and several other artists, including Kurdish artists after the Anfal campaign like Walid Siti, Osman Ahmed, and several others. This is one aspect of let's say preliminary research. The other research is that I am related to one of the historians of Iraqi art and the prominent artist, Shakir Hassan Al-Said. My fascination with everything that he wrote led me to collect, over the years, when I was in Baghdad before I left, to collect as many books and journals including Afak Arabiya, Majallat Turath al-Shaabi, different things. And they were just for basically personal interests. Little that I know that all of this basically would come very useful when I'm writing my book on Makiya. Meeting Makiya, and going through his archives has given me an eye opening in terms of how important his actual, actually the personal archive of every one of these prominent figures. So we have Makiya, we have Rifat Chadirji, we have even prominent artists like Jewad Selim, Faeq Hassan and we wonder what happened to the archives, Shakir Hassan Al Said's archives themselves. And one of the people who has been working on this particular area of archives is Nada Shabout. Professor Nada Shabout has accumulated all of her research over the years in one website, which has been extremely helpful to so many researchers I know, it's the Modern Art Iraq Archive. And if you think of a library that you can access anytime, and you can find all these documents, no matter where they were published, or what point in time they were published, that would be the MAIA archive.

Mehiyar 5:24 She's based in US?

Ahmed Naji 5:25 The website is online. But yes, the research was based in US, and Nada is based in US. Yes, what increases the importance and the impact of the MAIA website is the fact that the actual documents on which the MAIA is based, have been greatly or in a very devastating way completely lost. And this is mainly talking or concerning the library at Murka Sadan [Center for Contemporary Art], the finance and now art center, which was looted in 2003. And it included a vast archive that I used to visit when I was a student, I used to visit before 2003. And this is an archive that was accumulated by NOURI AL-RAWI from 1960s, to Shakir Hassan Al Said, the 1980s to several other notable scholars in Iraq. And this was looted and burned to the ground. The other important collection of archives and documents and books is actually the library in the Academy of Fine Art in Baghdad, Al-Wazireya. It was reported that there was about 7,000 books in that library, and it was

burned to the ground. So now we come to a harsher reality, you have modern heritage at risk, modern heritage under- basically there are no laws to protect it, there is no real will or interest from the powers to be in Iraq to work on it. At the same time, the security situation inside Iraq, it is not feasible for any researcher to go and document and collect. At the same time, you have so many researchers who are outside Iraq trying to salvage whatever is available. And these efforts are strictly led by Nada Shabout. To work on this archive, to collect it together, we have to start with something that's established, which is the MAIA archive. And the idea now is to work with Nada Shabout, to work with many other researchers and to pull the archives that we all have individually accessed into one place, let's say, let's call it a mega MAIA website. So I am basically sharing with them everything I have collected over the years, whatever I managed to access it from the Makiya archive, at the same time Nada is sharing the archives that she accessed through MAIA, and there are several other researchers and PhD students who are doing the same. So I'm working closely with a colleague, I was doing a PhD thesis on Jewad Selim in France and he has been extremely helpful in finding lots of archives at the National Library in Paris, that relates to Iraq, that relates to Iraqi students. At the same time I'm collecting and sharing information with him. Another partner in this soon to happen project is Dr. Hasanain Al-Ibrahimi. Hasanain Ibrahimi is a prominent collector of Iraqi art based in Jordan, and he has the Ibrahimi collection, which is again accessible online. And it has about 1000 artworks starting from the early pioneers or the progenitors of Iraqi art, until the latest of contemporary artists- for example, so starting from Abdulqader Rassam to Adel Abidin in a way, and in addition to that Ibrahimi collection also includes more than 1000 books and publications. For example, Majalla Fanun Arabia, Majalla bil Gilgamesh, all the publications that were published in the 1960s and 70s. From Wazait Al Awshat to which was then called Wazeit Thaqafa and so on.

Mehiyar 8:45 Could you tell us if there's a register regarding what's been lost? What's been looted? What's been destroyed in terms of arts in Iraq post 2003?

Ahmed Naji 8:53 The answer is yes and no. The reason for that is there was something published in 2006, or 2007 called the Red List of Iraqi art and it was published by Salam Atta Sabri when he was director of Modern Art Museum in Baghdad, however, this list was proven to be unfortunately misinformed. There are lots of factual mistakes in it. In addition to that, it has created more problems than its attempt to solve any. In addition to that Nada Shabout and several people who used to work at the Ministry of Culture, they have been trying to create a list of what has been looted and destroyed. But the problem lies in that there is no full documentation of what was there before the looting. So in 2003, we know that Saddam Art Center, which is a massive building in Haifa street that occupies five storeys, it was built in the 80s and it was a state of the art institution in Baghdad until its looting 2003 included about 8000 artworks and these started from the Ottoman soldier artists like Abdulqader Assam, Mohammed Selim, Jewad Selim's father, all the way through Iraqi artists in the 70s 80s and 90s and the early 2000s, as well. Most of a big percentage of that 8000 might be propaganda art, because there are several videos that we

have access to from the early 2000s, where it shows hundreds of portraits of Saddam Hussein. But nevertheless, this is still art. And art is a document, no one has a right to destroy it. The first question is, what kind of art or in terms of quantity, quality photographs, etc, documents that were there before the point of looting, and then what happened to these after the point of looting. What the research is, has been going through, for example, for me, or for Nada Shabout, or several others, is we're trying to ascertain what was there before the looting. There are some collections, some catalog, some books that we have been collecting from different sources, which shows you some of the artworks. For example, there is a document of about 93 or 94 photographs, high resolution photographs of some of the masterpieces at Saddam center. This was done in the 80s. And it was done by a prominent Iraqi gallerist and photographer. And these were exhibited recently in an exhibition in Paris called Baghdad Mon Amour, which was curated by Morad Montazami, he's a researcher for-

Mehiyar 11:21 This is where you, you gave a presentation.

Ahmed Naji 11:23 Yes, I gave a presentation. So this for example, like it is 94 masterpieces, from Kathem Haidar to Jewad Selim to Hal Drobi to Atta Sabri, different ones. They're very, very important, very, very valuable. And I have been able to access as well through someone who used to work in the Ministry of Culture, and who was documenting this, some video footage of basically different artworks in different sections. And then they zoom in on each artwork and see what was there and who is the artist etc. And we want to reassemble this archive to create an inventory list, for example. It is an enormous project. And that's why a project like this actually needs a network rather than one team of researchers or one group because- so, so this has given us the idea to work on virtual network. So now we are in the process of establishing a network that starts in Baghdad and ends in the United States. The- in Baghdad, we have three professors at the Academy of Fine Arts. And we have two artists and two historians at the museum in the Ministry of Culture. And then in Jordan, we have a prominent art critic and author, poet, May Muzaffar, who has been writing about Iraqi art from the 1960s. She is the wife of the late Rafa al-Nasiri, and she is a great treasure for Iraqi art and culture, both in literature and art. We have the Ibrahimi collection with a massive collection, as I mentioned earlier of artworks and books, and this is in Amman. Then we want to establish a base in London, because we have, for example, the Makiya Archive in London. There are several other art, art collectors and living artists, for example, Faisal Labi [Sahi], who I've been in touch with and he's willing to cooperate, Dia Azzawi who is willing to cooperate as well, and actually Azzawi has been one of the people who contributed a lot to the MAIA archive, because if you see several of the documents there, they come from his personal library, and he has researchers who are working on his library and his documents. So that's very helpful. And then we have in the United States, we have several people who are also invested in the same effort. We have Nada Shabout obviously, and we have, for example, Wafaa Bilal, a very respected artist who's been working on a brilliant project, to rebuild the library in the Academy of Fine Arts through an art project. So if we create a, let's say, a structure into

which all these people can work, and with support, for example, from other academicians in different disciplines, then hopefully we can start something towards rebuilding this modern heritage. One of the people that I'm working in [with] is an academic at SOAS, he's a poet and a translator, and his PhD thesis was on modernism in Arab literature and Iraqi literature.

Mehiyar 14:15 This is a School of Oriental and African Studies?

Ahmed Naji 14:17 Yes. And his name is Ghareeb Iskender. And Dr. Ghareeb Iskender is going to be one of the people working with us on this because as I was working through my book on the Makiya art collection, you can't study art without studying architecture, without studying poetry, without studying literature, without studying photography, without studying archaeology. They're all interrelated. This was a period of boom, where a new Iraqi identity has been created. Then this Iraqi identity was subjected to different influences to create an Arab stereotype out of it in the 1960s. Then in the 70s, it went through different political influences. In the 1980s, we had the Iraq-Iran war, so this is an identity on the conflict. And the 1990s, the same identity was going through sanctions, and lots of difficulties with the government censorship and the sponsorship. Then in 2003, we have the fragmentation and destruction of everything. So as you can see, it's it's all related. And it's like a continuum. Mehiyar 15:23 Of course, it's related to conflict, politics. Ahmed Naji 15:26 Yes.

Mehiyar 15:26 Is that something that you look at in your book or in your research?

Ahmed Naji 15:29 In my book, on the Makiya archive, it is related to Makiya himself. And it ends with Baghdad, it ends with 2006, it ends with last visit that Makiya did to Baghdad, and then his dreams about Baghdad which were not realized. And in the last chapter, I allude to all the efforts that several people have been doing, trying to document it. For example, you have the Ruya Foundation in Baghdad, they have been working on contemporary art. And they have been working on Iraqi artists inside Iraq, trying to break their isolation. And now the Ruya Foundation has progressed to a new level of growth. And they have just launched a new project or a new organization called Ruya Maps, looking at art in conflict areas, in general. You have other organizations working inside Iraq, and some of them are in Amman. So that's why it's important for us, that the network basically will fill the gaps, the geographical, and the historical gaps, because you have different people researching different things and different times, if you have a way to pull this research into one place in an open source format, so it becomes like a virtual museum and library, which enables everyone inside and outside Iraq to access it. The idea came to me, or not only me it's basically something you learn from others, is that when you see the destruction that happens in Iraq, in a continuous wave, we thought 2003 was the end of destruction. Then in 2015, you have ISIS going into museums and destroying them, burning libraries, like the library of Mosul, etc. What if ISIS happens? And what about, what if ISIS happens in Mosul?

Mehiyar 17:08 Again?

Ahmed Naji 17:08 Again? Yes? What are the safeguards that we are putting to this? How can you-

Mehiyar 17:13 When you're working on the on that emergency, sort of contingency plan-

Ahmed Naji 17:16 It's emergency contingency plan, and it's also, in a way that I'm very inspired one by someone. His name is Mintor Dial, he, he wrote a book or co authored a book called Future Proof. And how can you future proof Iraqi art, and let's say modern heritage? The way you future proof modern heritage is by introducing technology to it. And the way to use technology, now, you can scan 3d objects, you can scan to the objects, you can pull off all of these archives and make them available online. Another partner organization that I'm working with is EDRAAK, which is an initiative for the Queen Rania Foundation. And I'm working on a course with them, basically, on art in the Arab world. This is going to be a MOOC, which is a massive open online course. And there's going to be six episodes that are like six webinars, basically, an hour long, and they go over six weeks. In each week, you would be introduced to art in each country. And you would, the idea is to send a message to every art person out there, to everyone who lives in the Middle East, that art in your country, whether it's monuments or museums or libraries, is an expression of your citizenship, is an expression of your identity. It is not something to be destroyed in conflict. For example, the famous story about the sculpture of Jewad Selim, the Motherhood sculpture, which was salvaged by Mohammed Ghani [Hikmat] and a group of sculptors, Taha Waheeb, and they bought it from a bansharjee, a guy who fix wheels and tires. They bought it from him for \$100. And the guy who sold it for \$100, he didn't even know what it was. And the motherhood sculptures this is one of the most famous-

Mehiyar 19:03 And this is one of the items that was looted from-

Ahmed Naji 19:06 Yes, and it was a retreat, and it still now stands at the museum. However a small piece of it is missing. It's a mother and child, the child is missing. Think about it this way, think if people actually had access to the museum, if people had a narrative into which the museum and the artworks, the work of Jewad Selim is a household name. He was a household name because of Nasb al-Hurriyah. But people don't know much about Jewad Selim beyond Nasb al-Hurriyah. What about Shakir Hassan [Al-Said]? What about Ali Talib? What about Rafa al-Nasiri? What about several other artists you know, Sahel Al-Karib Ali, Ali Najaf, for example, several artists, Suad al-Attar. These are artists who are genuinely Iraqi, very original, their art went through different periods of time. If you read their art, you read your history, the history of Iraq and it will give you a different perspective on your identity. It will, it will increase national cohesion instead of the divisions that we see now, in terms of Sunni and Shiite identities. For example, today is the 10th of Muharram, it's Ashura and it's celebrated in the Shia world. The 10th of Muharram itself was one of the prominent aspects that was heavily studied and discussed through Iraqi art.

Artists from the Dia al-Azzawi to Rafa al-Nasiri to Shakir Hassan to Kadhim Haidar to Faisal Laibi, they all worked on the theme of 10th of Muharram, because it is a very rich theme of folklore. It's Folk art, Islamic heritage, at the same time, it touches on a theme of martyrdom. And the theme of martyrdom is an eternal theme in Iraq. It happened through the Iraq-Iran war, you have one million martyrs. Muharram is also about a way to remember the martyrs. It's a symbol. So you see that when you look at art, this is why Makiya was very interested in it as well, and he was inspired by it. It's that through art, you can reframe, you can rephrase certain concepts, and you take them out of the pigeon holes into which politicians place them to be.

Mehiyar 21:07 Who actually reframes the narrative surrounding modern art, is it the state, is it sort of society? Because obviously, we've seen cultural discontinuity and the fragmentation of Iraq's national identity, national heritage. So in a sense, you're working to salvage what is left the fragments of Iraq's heritage. But in another sense, you're also working as a substitute for the Iraqi state. This is the ruin in many ways of Iraqi state institutions, because obviously, it's an emergency situation, we've had so much destruction-

Ahmed Naji 21:43 It's a very important question that you asked in terms of how much of this is actually a role for the state, or it's a role for society. And the way that I can answer this is that I had a similar question in 2003. And I was thinking that this, all of this, has to be done by the Minister of Culture. But as you know, the people in the Ministry of Culture who work there, whether it's they're historians, or artists, etc., at the end of the day, they are part of the society. So it is a role of society, rather than a role of just government itself. And starting from here, we know that the Ministry of Culture, because of the construct of politics in Iraq is a ministry of inferior importance. That's why there was always difficulty to allocate budget for it, it was always difficult for any Minister of Culture, no matter how influential he was, to make something of substantial importance.

Mehiyar 22:32 But it's one of the most important in terms of the construction of Iraqi identity.

Ahmed Naji 22:36 It is, yes, one of the most important. Maybe you and I have a biased view because of our backgrounds. But is it more important than infrastructure? No, it is not as more important than infrastructure. But if you don't do anything about it, it will get worse. A stitch in time saves nine. I've been working on this since 2005, 2006. And I know people in Ministry of Culture who, especially those who work with the arts, they want to work, they want to access materials, they want to provide access to different things, but it is not easy for them. So that's why a network is important, is that if they want something that can be provided by someone who is in a different country, then we can provide it through the network. That's why this project is a collaborative project to bring everyone together. There has been a lot of emphasis on archaeology, for example, and you can see how multinational effort has produced results in archaeology and that the museum now in

Baghdad is open, even though it is from 10 to 12. But it's still open and people have great pride when they go into it. We need the same multinational effort to happen for Iraqi art, to protect public monuments, restore them, to talk about- increase awareness of the importance of Iraqi art, to work with several people, stakeholders, historians, even the art market, because most of the 8000 pieces, the, the looted ones, they are still in the black market, we need to get them back. And that's how we can we can salvage this. So is it a role for the state? Yes. But does the state need a facilitator? Yes. And that's where the network comes to be. How can we future proof it? we can future proof it by the use of technology so that it becomes democratization of knowledge, it becomes a public access for everyone. A book written by Shakir Hassan in 1962 should be a PDF that anyone can download and read at any point in time. When I went on last trip to Iraq, I bought about 30 kilos of books and catalogs and stuff to bring them with me. And I wanted digitalize all of these and share them with everyone. I've been speaking to several partners and they all want to do the same thing.

Mehiyar 24:46 The connections between heritage, architecture, art, modernism and development during the 50s, 60s, 70s, and onwards, 80s even: is that something you could speak about?

Ahmed Naji 24:57 I can only speak about it through my research on the Makiya archive. What's important about this is you see that there has been lots of efforts started in Iraq, specifically from when the development board during the monarchy was established with different recruitment of architects from around the world like Gio Ponti, Frank Lloyd Wright, Walter Gropius, and how Iraqi architects and artists engaged with that recruitment. So this was a national development board? Majlis Tatwar [Arabic for development board]. So they have commissioned the international architects to come up with these plans, but a lot of these projects because development board worked in 1956 -57, and then the revolution happened in 58, so all of these plans remained on paper. After Abd al-Karim Qasim came to power he initiated the work on some of these plans, like Medina Sadr [then Medina Al-Thawra], the plan by [Constantinos Apostolou] Doxiadis. Several projects by Gropius were initiated. and then you have the Baath regime, Saddam's regime when they came to power. They also looked at some of these projects that they wanted to develop during the boom of the 80s, when Iraq was getting, and Baghdad specifically, was getting ready to be capital for the Arab World, to host the non allied nations movement. This is where Haifa Street was built, the Marka Saddam Fanun [now the National Museum of Modern Art] was built, where Nasb Shaheed [Martyrs' Monument] was, was made by-

Mehiyar 26:17 This was even during the Iran Iraq War.

Ahmed Naji 26:19 Yes, and Le Corbusier, the gymnasium, Corbusier was commissioned but Le Corbusier was not alive at the time. So they had to go through his archives to find the plans. There is actually a great research and a great artwork which goes into this detail, it's by Ala Younis, it's called the Plan for Greater Baghdad and a Plan for a Greater Baghdad,

the female version. It goes actually through how individuals did a great role to support the nation or the state in creating this but if you read about Frank Lloyd Wright, Gio Ponti, Le Corbusier, and then you read about Makiya and Chadirji, that will bring you to Jewad Selim, Faeq Hassan, Ismail Al Shaikhly, all of these artists who were contemporaries, and then that will bring you to also other artists who are influential in the art scene and historians like Nura al-Rawi, who established the 1962 Museum of National Art called the Gulbenkian building, which was funded by the Gulbenkian Foundation. So you see it is all related. Now, how does this play an importance? Today in Iraq, 2018, you go and you stand in front of Naadi Adhamiya [Adhamiya Club], which was called Olympic Club or the Royal Olympic Club, which is the first building that was designed by an Iraqi architect, Ahmad Mukhtar Ibrahim, and there is a great paper on it by Caecilia Pieri on the history of this building. This building needs to be basically a listed building, there has to be a law in Iraq to protect modern architecture. This was built in the 1930s or 40s. It was used for major art exhibitions, like the 1957 art exhibition. The architecture, it is still there. It has a beautiful painting by Faeq Hassan from the 1960s inside it. And the building unfortunately has been defaced because someone had the brilliant idea to cut a small shop out of the facade of it. You can see a lot of people have been working on this, specifically Tamiz Zawur and Muhammad al Malaki from Canterbury University, whose been rallying support to stop such destruction of modern heritage. So modern heritage in terms of architecture, and modern heritage in terms of public monuments, and modern heritage in terms of national museum collections, they all go hand in hand because they were created at the same time, they are interrelated to each other. Rifat Chadirji, the great architect who left several buildings in Baghdad that are in desperate need of restoration was the one behind the construction and the project of Nasb al-Hurriyah of Jewad Selim. The sketches and the studies of Nasb al-Hurriyah are part of the Rifat Chadirji's archive. So there has to be a law, there has to be some movement in Iraq, to protect national heritage. So there has to be a register of modern heritage and a law to protect that modern heritage, to protect the buildings of Ahmad Mukhtar Ibrahim, Qatar Madfayi, Rifat Chadirji, Mohamed Makiya, Said Ali Mathloun

Mehiyar 29:15 The laws we have in Iraq, none of them are actually focusing on arts?

Ahmed Naji 29:18 None of them are focusing on modern heritage as in, as in projects like Rifat Chadirji's project or Mohamed Makiya or Said Ali Mathloun. The monuments that we have in Baghdad, there is also some confusion about it, because the monument itself can belong to the Ammanet Baghdad but the land that its on can be for Ammanet Baghdad or a different place, or some of the monuments they belong to Ministry of Culture, but they are related to Ammanet Baghdad and sometimes you get these ridiculous attempts to, under the heading of restoring a monument, they actually painted in gold. For- and this happened for example, the Karamana from Mohamed Ghani Hekmat, which is a bronze sculpture, was painted in gold. And as in, is oil based color and base. And then Iraqi artists protested and they cleaned it. The obvious way to go about it, is that we have a lot of documentation. There are lots of essays and articles and books and pamphlets and exhibitions and

everything that you can think of, was actually produced during the 70s and 80s. And it's fragmented. We just need to compile it all in one place.

Mehiyar 30:26 Okay, you've compiled it-

Ahmed Naji 30:28 Yes, you create a registry.

Mehiyar 30:29 You've created a registry-

Ahmed Naji 30:31 Yes.

Mehiyar 30:31 A register of lost items, or looted items, you've documented that.

Ahmed Naji 30:35 Or register of standing items.

Mehiyar 30:37 Do you then present that to the Iraqi Government in terms of creating a law that protects that?

Ahmed Naji 30:41 That's one of the ultimate goals, is to work with the Iraqi government, and to make it easier to the lawmakers to create a law that protects these and the process to enforce this law on the ground. More importantly, through this process, when [you've] engaged so many scholars, so many people, you have so many people in Baghdad, young people who are avid photographers, and they're using mobile phone technology, we can easily recruit them through technology to take several pictures. We can do surveys of these places, just by mobilizing young people in Iraq, and you give them a greater cause. So this is where the network comes in. And this is what we want to achieve.

Mehiyar 31:19 Do you see your work in conflict with what could be described as the sectarianization of Iraq's heritage or parts of an increasing movement in Iraq, obviously as an outcome of Iraq's politics, in relation to religious or ethnic based heritage? Do they see that the work that you're doing in the sort of monuments that you work on, are in a sense secular national heritage monuments, symbols of Iraq's development and identity? How do you work in a situation of political fragmentation and of increasing sectarianization of Iraq's heritage?

Ahmed Naji 31:52 I'm sure there will be a conflict down the line. But this conflict can be negotiated, like any other conflict. And the bottom line here is that the monument belongs to the people, the monument does not belong to the state. You and I know that monuments that were created to glorify Saddam himself were torn down by people. And we know from history that bad art is stillborn. So it's not going to survive the test of time.

But Jewad Selim, Halda Rahad's monument, Faeq Hassan's monument, these things, they stand the test of time. And it will not be difficult-

Mehiyar 32:28 But they've been undermined during the past few years because of the conflict.

Ahmed Naji 32:31 Yes, it's also being undermined because you have to look through the bigger picture that when people don't have water and electricity, the last thing they'll think, they will think about is art, right? But if you reframe the argument, if you engage people in appreciating this art, and they feel they are part of it, then the story will change, as in for political parties or religious people or whoever is in a position to instigate conflict. Their views will not stand scrutiny or illogical scrutiny. Plus the Iraqi state, the Iraqi government, is the natural protector of all of this heritage, through the institutions and through the people that there is. All we need to do is to facilitate this process and to engage with people. What I am talking about, this is not let's say a personal view, I did not invent something new. I'm only basically talking about what other people inside Iraq are talking about.

Mehiyar 33:28 One important attempt to fundamentally transform not just money, and there was an idea there to actually create a, sort of an investment park: hotels and shopping center around this very important symbol of the Iran Iraq war. There was an outcry amongst the Iraqi public that this area should not be touched and this is a very positive sign from the Iraqi public, from civil society in Iraq.

Ahmed Naji 33:53 As you know, the Martyr's Monument, designed by Ismail Fatah, it is a part of a big landscape where there is a artificial lake and in order for you to see the monument it has to be seen from 360 degrees. The monument changes its aspects from every degree that you go around it. And by the construction of this basically, new project of shops and shopping center or like an entertainment area, near the monument and on the land on which the monument occupies is going to block and restrict and is going to change the visual narrative of this whole area, which will negatively impact the monument itself. This monument should be celebrated, as in my view, it is one of the most important monuments, if not the most important monuments after Nasb al-Hurriyah. Nasb al-Hurriyah was the first monument by Jewad Selim, 1958, [19]59, [19]60. It's the first monument that was commissioned by an Iraqi state to an Iraqi artist. Ismail Fatah's monument, Martyr's Monument is the most important monument in Iraq because of its innovative way of appropriating tradition and creating it in a very contemporary way.

Mehiyar 35:12 On that note, thank you very much. I look forward to your book Dr. Ahmed Naji, *Under the palm trees: Modern Iraqi Art* with Mohamed Makiya and Jewad Selim, published by Rizzoli, New York and your book is out in May 2019.

Ahmed Naji 35:26 Yes, and thank you very much Mehiyar for all the great work you do with the Nahrein Network and for all the wonderful projects that the Nahrein Network are working on. Thank you very much.