IN THE STUDIO
AHMED ALSOUDANI
WITH SARAH SCHMERLER

OUTSIDE AHMED ALSOUDANI'S *New York studio last March, headlines in the newspapers shouted of tragedy in Japan, violence in Libya and massive upheaval in the Middle East, but inside all was quiet, sunlit, calm. Seven large canvases hung in varying states of readiness, four of them bound for Venice for inclusion in the first Iraq pavilion the Biennale will host in 34 years. Titled "Wounded Water," the exhibition at the Iraq pavilion includes the work of five artists in addition to Alsoudani. Three other canvases, also in progress, were destined for the artist's upcoming solo show at Haunch of Venison in London in October, and three of eight paintings purchased by the 36-year-old artist's devoted collector, François Pinault, had already been shipped to Venice for a group show at the Palazzo Grassi, Pinault's private museum. The works themselves gave off a vibe of harmony in tumult. Tacked directly to the wall, they brimmed with fragmented (and at times rather disturbing) forms like severed limbs, eyeballs and distorted faces. Areas of raw canvas that might have clashed with abutting areas of opaquely applied color (in a rather idiosyncratic palette) somehow got along. Picasso, Guston, Grosz and Beckmann felt as present as the rippling effects of the fall of Baghdad.*

Alsoudani, at this point, has a personal narrative that follows his painterly steps almost as closely as each stroke follows his brush: like some kind of enigmatic shadow. He defaced—in youthful folly, rather than with political severity—a mural of Saddam Hussein in his native city of Baghdad in 1995, and was forced to leave the country at the age of 20. He has not seen his parents since. He fled first to Kurdistan and then to Syria. He lived in Damascus and painted; fortune smiled on him and he made his way to America in 1999, settling in Maine. He attended first the Maine College of Art and later Yale University, where his painterly mettle was tested and honed. Today, his near mythic story of leaving Iraq feels subsumed by the pure exigencies of wrestling with art history, and the daily process of putting paint on canvas. Seeing the works in their unfinished state only affirmed the sense that painting—the act—is somehow both inside, and out of, time.

That said, Alsoudani's career has ascended rapidly. Pinault, Paris collector Steve Rosenbaum and Paula Al-Sabah (of the Royal Family of Kuwait) have been frequent visitors to the artist's studio as well as devoted collectors, his works going for a reported $100,000-200,000 a pop—with a waiting list. Soon after our talk, Alsoudani's scheduled week included interviews with the New York Times *and* W, *and a photo shoot (including wardrobe!) with* Italian Vogue. *Yet, here we sat, unrushed. Our talk, over four hours [here condensed and edited], touched on the importance of honoring one's studio practice, what it means to be "American" or "Iraqi," and, perhaps most thornily of all, "successful."*

Ahmed Alsoudani in his studio, 2011. Photo Alix Smith.

CURRENTLY ON VIEW
Ahmed Alsoudani's work in the Iraq pavilion at the Venice Biennale through Nov. 27, and at the Palazzo Grassi through Dec. 31.

SARAH SCHMERLER I get the sense that you're pretty hermetic in your studio practice, yet there are so many influences that are clearly moving through your work. What sort of studio visit do you feel "feeds" your work most?

AHMED ALSOUDANI The most exciting thing for me is when students come here. I always say yes to that. VCU [Virginia Commonwealth University] recently passed through. A Maine College of Art class will be coming soon. I don't want to romanticize the notion of a painter in his studio not communicating with anyone or anything outside his work. We artists are part of society. We are dealing with it every day. On a personal level, I feel I have a responsibility to say something about this in my painting.

SS Tell me a little about your working practice, your day and how you bring larger events into the work.

AA I come to my studio seven days a week. In order to do that I have to not simply *like* what I'm doing, I have to love it. I have to be really close to it. I start my day by going to the BBC online to look into the news and see what's going on. I'm not making a manifesto here that everyone has to paint what I paint. I'm just saying I would be lying to myself if I didn't engage in the issues that I care about; I want to know what's out there before I come in here.

SS Can listening to the news get to be too much sometimes? Overwhelming?

AA At one point I got so fed up with the utterly repetitive broadcasts I was hearing on NPR I decided to go on a news fast. I was doing a residency in Connecticut and I figured I'd try it for 100 days, block myself from all news. So I did it. Sadly, when I came back, I found there was no difference. We always think the world is getting better but it didn't after 100 days. It is a continuation of suffering and chaos.

SS So, if it's not possible to change events, why not leave society?

AA This is a decision I made. There is always some hope. Always there is some potential to change. If all of us stop listening, we would be very selfish. People in 100 years will want to know what happened.

SS You merge painting and drawing in your work. The straight pedagogy most art schools propound is—and, I don't know, maybe you even experienced this at Yale?—that painting is the more serious art form, and therefore, must always "win," that drawing is just a kind of handmaiden art form.

AA That is a very important issue for me. One of my biggest aims is to bridge the gap between the process of drawing and the final product of painting. Always there is this gap. People associate drawing with the interior world of the artist—a place we don't normally have access to—and painting with the final product that we present to the viewer. In reality, however, these two worlds are actually one—they live inside the artist. It is so important for me to unite them.

SS Can you take us inside that process?

AA Drawing gives me the freedom to express myself. So I'm sketching directly on the canvas. Very quickly. I put it straight against the wall so I have resistance. I really start to visualize my thoughts with the drawing. When the composition reaches a certain level, then I start pushing the color. I don't want to wait until I "finish everything." I don't want the color to be just a decorative element; I want to generate the painting and the drawing at the same time. This is the most challenging aspect.

SS So it's a battle, but of process: a "win-win" battle?

AA Ultimately, am I communicating with color? With line? Really, for me it doesn't matter. But the drawing creates a breathing space with the raw canvas. You see it. It puts a lot of energy in the painting.

SS Let's talk about the content. And, if you don't mind, about your palette, which also . . .

AA [Laughs] Yes, some rules are broken there, too, right?

SS Well, yes. But I'm guessing you're going to tell me such rules are asking to be broken.

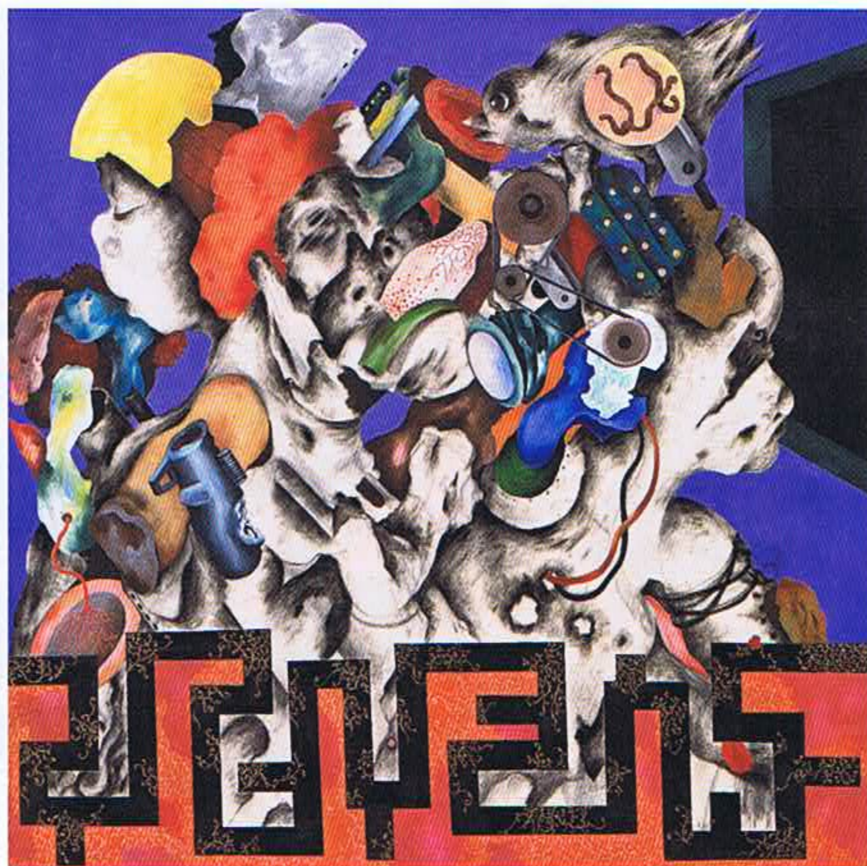
AA To me there is an edge I am walking between surprise and confusion. Usually, you find there is a certain color palette that goes with a certain subject matter. You can recognize Northern European painters by their palette. When van Gogh went to the South of France, his palette changed to warm and sunny. Now, for violence or chaos, because this subject matter is dark, people expect cool color, grayish, earthy tones, not purple and orange and green. So people say, "Oh, from this distance, this subject looks beautiful," but when they get close, they see the orange is where I chopped up somebody's hand, and I show the flesh. I really want to grab the attention of the viewer; I want the viewer to engage. As an artist I will say it clearly: when I work, I always think about the

"IN IRAQ WE HAVE HAD AN ESTABLISHED ART SCENE SINCE THE 1950s. SO IT IS NOT SO STRANGE FOR MY COUNTRY TO BE PART OF VENICE."

the chaos in every single painting and this chaos exists in our lives. Most of us want to consciously or unconsciously pretend this chaos doesn't exist, but it is there. No matter how far we are from it, we are in it. The world is getting smaller and smaller. The small events in a village in Norway will show their effect here. When I see a person just standing on a sidewalk, say, outside a Starbucks eating a sandwich, oblivious to everything, in some ways that is one of the scariest things to me. People, just walking in the street, I assume, are loaded with issues or problems, but it seems like they have nothing to do with anything around them, or the fact that people are suffering every single day. This is the violence, this is the chaos I am addressing in my paintings.
SS We're talking about world history. Tell me about the mantle of art history; how are you bearing it? And what about the opinions of your peers, your professors? Certainly you feel all this.
AA I try not only to be part of that history but to also connect to this current period. Let's say I'm using Max Beckmann, or Guston, who took a lot from Beckmann. Or let's say Carroll Dunham, who took from Guston who took from Beckmann: I am building with the work of these people to be part of the history of painting, but on the other hand, to also bridge the gap between their period of time and mine. A few years ago when I was in grad school at Yale, during "pit crit"—Sam Messer, Mel Bochner, Peter Halley, Deborah Kass, Robert Storr and Rochelle Feinstein were present—everyone was looking at a big drawing I had done of a ball. And someone said "Oh, that ball looks like Carroll Dunham." I said, "Well, Dunham took that ball from Guston, and two years from now people will call that Ahmed's ball." I know that sounds arrogant, but Deborah Kass was clapping, because history is like a circle, and really, I didn't mean it to be arrogant.
SS How does that famous quote from Guston go? "When you're in the studio painting, there are a lot of people in there

Above, Untitled, 2011, charcoal and acrylic on canvas, 62 by 110 inches.

Right, Untitled, 2011, charcoal and acrylic on canvas, 63 by 64 inches.



viewer. I don't believe any artist who says "I don't think about the viewer."
SS Who do you picture in your mind as your viewer? What do you want them to know?
AA There could be many people over your shoulder, or there could be your girlfriend, or your teacher. But whoever that is, I greatly respect their effort, and I owe it to them to make a statement that is clear, not loud. I'm more interested in whispering my message than screaming it.
SS What's the message?
AA There is not a specific message that I can put into words. But, you see, there is

"PINAULT IS REALLY PASSIONATE ABOUT THE WORK. HE HAS BEEN TO MY STUDIO AND HAS SEEN EVERY SINGLE PAINTING I HAVE MADE SO FAR."

with you—your teachers, friends, painters from history, critics . . . and one by one if you're really painting, they walk out. And if you're really painting YOU walk out."

AA I have such respect for Guston as an artist and as a human being, too; he was never satisfied with his own success. He wanted to be honest with himself. He was clear and connected to his painting. That's why he's still "alive" now, why he's more influential than any other artist—in the '80s you couldn't make a line on a canvas without being aware of Guston's shadow.

SS What are your feelings about your career success? You've come so far, so fast.

AA True. Success is a great thing to make life easier. But on the other hand it puts pressure on you. I am working so hard to consciously live in a bubble where success is concerned. I read. I see some shows. I paint seven days a week. I am not saying I am a genius or smart. But artists who believe in their own success forget what they are supposed to do. New York is a gigantic machine that needs to be fed in order to run. I don't want to be someone who gets into the machine and, after two years, is pushed out. So success is great, but I know that if I don't keep painting, this will all disappear.

SS Tell us about the Palazzo Grassi show, and Pinault. Did you consider that Grassi would be the venue while you were working?

AA We have already shipped all the work I'm going to show at Grassi, three big pieces. I made those at a very large scale [11 by 12 feet, 10 by 9 feet], more so than the others, taking into consideration the impressive scale of the site. Pinault is really passionate about the work. He has been to my studio and has seen every single painting I have made so far. I produce 13 to 15 a year maximum and he took eight, so that's formidable.

SS What are you bringing to the Iraq pavilion, and how do you feel about representing Iraq?

Above, Alsoudani at work on paintings for his upcoming shows.

Left, Untitled, 2011, charcoal and acrylic on canvas, 63 by 61½ inches.

All photos this article, unless otherwise noted, Jeffrey Sturges.

AA These [points to four works, still in progress] are the pavilion works here. I think Venice is the highest point for almost any artist. Also, it's such a great privilege to represent a country. It is an amazing feeling and such a responsibility to represent my home, where I am from. In Iraq we have had an established art scene since the 1950s, with artists who studied in Europe. So it is not so strange for my country to be part of Venice and its history. I think from a political perspective people will think that, with all the violence in Iraq, there is some other reason we are seeing Iraqi art now. But, really, the participation, as least as far as art is concerned,

will impart a much-needed sense of stability, to show that Iraq's art is part of a much larger community of art, and that the country, too, is part of a world community. With this show, coupled with the show at Grassi—which is such an established place, where the elite of Venice go—people will make the connection that an Iraqi artist on the scene is not an anomaly, an isolated incident, but a sign of broader things to come. I am crossing boundaries. And I am hoping it makes a difference.

SS The political and the personal—having to always identify who you are—is so thorny. For my part, I'm Jewish. That's who I am. I'm an American but I'm also part of a diaspora culture. I have to live within a prevailing culture; I use its language, I seem to assimilate into its society, but I'm not assimilated in who I am. Am I making sense?

AA Yes, exactly. That's how I feel. I consider myself as much an American as an Iraqi; I use the nomenclature "Iraqi-born American artist," which I like. You know me as an artist; what does this mean? I studied here and an American teacher taught me all these details. I learned about art and, with all this information and education, I present what I carry with me, my past, like you just said.

SS So, you use art history and the precedents of Picasso and others kind of as tools, and it's actually okay for artists to steal these tools, use them at will.

AA Yes. Beckmann, Caravaggio; I always go to Caravaggio if I have a problem. Guston, Picasso. These artists are like tools. These artists are also like roots. They give you a strong foundation. They let you move around so that you can always go back to your own ground.

SS So the formula for young artists reading this might be something like: "Steal the tools, but don't compromise your foundation"?

AA Lived experience can never be stolen. Rilke said that. Your life experience, even your childhood, is the biggest treasure you have. You can dig into it, and nobody is going to take that away from you. ○

Ahmed Alsoudani's works are on view in the exhibition "Wounded Water" at the Iraq pavilion at the Venice Biennale, June 4-Nov. 27, and in "The World Belongs to You" at the Palazzo Grassi, June 2-Dec. 31. He will have an exhibition at Haunch of Venison, London, in October.

SARAH SCHMERLER is a writer who lives in Brooklyn.