



Press Release  
13 March 2015

### Ruya Foundation announces plans for National Pavilion of Iraq at 56th Venice Biennale 2015 and a collaboration with Ai Weiwei

The Ruya Foundation for Contemporary Culture in Iraq (Ruya) is pleased to announce its plans for the National Pavilion of Iraq at the 56th Venice Biennale in May 2015. The exhibition, *Invisible Beauty*, will be curated by Philippe Van Cauteren, Artistic Director of S.M.A.K. (Museum for Contemporary Art) in Ghent. It will feature five contemporary artists from across Iraq and the diaspora. The artists work in a range of media and the Pavilion will include new works that have been produced specifically for the exhibition as well as works that have been rediscovered after long periods of inattention. The exhibition will be accompanied by a display of over 500 drawings made by refugees in northern Iraq. World renowned artist Ai Weiwei has selected a number of these drawings for a major publication that will launch at the Biennale.

'Invisible Beauty' refers both to the unusual or unexpected subjects in the works that will be on display and to the inevitable invisibility of Iraqi artists on the international stage. The relationship of art to survival, record-keeping, therapy and beauty are amongst the many themes raised by the exhibition. The endlessly interpretable title is intended to reveal the many different ways of approaching art generated by a country that has been subjected to war, genocide, violations of human rights and, in the last year, the rise of Isis. The systematic demolition of the cultural heritage of Iraq by Isis, seen recently in the destruction of centuries-old historical sites at Hatra, Nimrud and Nineveh and the events at the Mosul Museum, has made it more important than ever to focus on artists continuing to work in Iraq.

Curator Philippe Van Cauteren has said: 'Invisible Beauty is like a fragile membrane that registers the oscillations of an artistic practice permeated by the current condition of the country and the state of the arts.'

The artists in the exhibition will comprise two generations of Iraqi photographers, in the shape of Latif Al Ani and Akam Shex Hadi, visual artist Rabab Ghazoul, ceramicist and sculptor Salam Atta Sabri and painter Haider Jabbar. This selection was chosen by Van Cauteren following a journey to Iraq that was organised and facilitated by Ruya and carried out in company with Tamara Chalabi, the Foundation's Chair and Co-founder. Van Cauteren and Chalabi also visited Iraqi artists working in the US, Turkey, Belgium and the UK.

Both Al Ani and Atta Sabri are based in Baghdad, whilst Shex Hadi is based in Iraqi Kurdistan and Jabbar and Ghazoul work outside of Iraq, in Turkey and Wales respectively. A great number of Iraqi artists continue to practise an orthodox aesthetic tradition that is constrained by classical education methods. The Pavilion artists represent a break from these traditional constraints, both in terms of style and media and in terms of wider social concerns such as gender and age. All of the artists relate to the current political situation in

their work, negotiating between ethics and aesthetics, social concerns and artistic values. With the artists' ranging ages, the exhibition in some ways represents a mental and emotional history of Iraq and seeks to ask what the word 'contemporary' can mean for a nation that lacks a well developed cultural infrastructure.

Latif Al Ani (b. 1932) is considered the founding father of Iraqi photography and his extensive documentary career spans from the late 1950s to the late 1970s, when it became impossible to photograph in public due to the increasingly authoritarian atmosphere of the Saddam regime and the Iran-Iraq War. A duality of thinking makes both modernising trends and the retention of ancient traditions themes of Al Ani's work and the Pavilion exhibition will focus on works from the early period of his career.

By contrast, Akam Shek Hadi (b. 1985) represents a later generation of Iraqi photography and his staged, symbolic works have seen him participate in photography festivals across Asia and the Middle East. His work, along with that of Haider Jabbar, is concerned with the rise of Isis and the refugee crisis. He has created a new work for the Pavilion that consists of 28 photographs. A recurrent motif in the series is an unwinding thread, which resembles a snake but is revealed to be the Isis flag, a continuous reminder of its ensnaring qualities. Shek Hadi will also present a series of aerial photographs depicting what appears to be a large floor clock, except that the digits are not in their expected positions. A prostrate figure representing a hand of the clock makes the works a rumination on human capitulation to time, a kind of *momento mori*.

Painter Haider Jabbar (b. 1986) will show a series of watercolour portraits reflecting on the Isis crisis and the numerous victims it has claimed. These works are shocking, often brutal, renditions of the fates of young men who have died in the conflict. The men are identified only by case numbers and Jabbar, who considers himself part of a generation of young men who have had their lives needlessly ruined by decades of conflict in Iraq, intends to make 2,000 of these works. Jabbar is himself a refugee, now living and working in Turkey with the support of the Ruya Foundation.

Rabab Ghazoul (b. 1970) also responds to her particular geographical relationship to Iraq in her work. Based in Wales, Ghazoul is producing a new video work for the Pavilion that will take the Chilcot Enquiry for its point of departure. Ghazoul's work investigates our relationship with political and social structures and part of this new work will be an inventory of official testimonies about the Iraq war, newly spoken by anonymous British citizens. This aspect of the work highlights three of the exhibition's key themes – art as an act of cataloguing, the correlation between the moment that a work is made and its formal qualities and ideas about what constitutes community. Ghazoul, who will be the only female artist on display, has had several solo exhibitions in Cardiff and has participated in numerous group exhibitions in Wales and the rest of Europe.

Salam Atta Sabri (b.1953) has worked extensively in arts administration in Iraq and abroad but despite training as a ceramicist and drawing extensively, he has never shown his drawings in public. He produced some 300 drawings between 2012 and 2015 that he has never shown in public and more than 100 of them will appear at the Pavilion. These intensely personal works exhibit the experience of an artist striving to create under the shadow of a crumbling arts infrastructure. Atta Sabri returned to Baghdad in 2005 after having lived in the US and Jordan for 16 years and his drawings can be understood as a diary in which the artist addresses the existential tragedy he undergoes returning to his native city.

As more and more ancient sites and shrines that are part of the universal heritage of Iraq are being destroyed, Ruya believes it is more important than ever to focus on artists who continue to work in such difficult circumstances. The Pavilion will provide a platform to make these artists visible.

#### **TRACES OF SURVIVAL: Drawings by Refugees in Iraq selected by Ai Weiwei**

The exhibition will be accompanied by a display of drawings made by refugees in northern Iraq. In December 2014 Ruya launched a campaign to provide drawing materials to adult men and women in refugee camps. Ruya visited Camp Shariya, Camp Baharka and Mar Elia Camp and over five days the Foundation collected 546 submissions, including drawings, poetry and prose, all of which will be on display.

The submissions present incredibly powerful responses to life within the refugee camps. A depiction of tanks and aircraft returning fire on each other was drawn by a forty-year-old man carrying the caption, 'our people have only lived amongst wars and destruction', whilst another image depicts an isolated figure in a flooded refugee camp who petitions, 'save us from drowning. I am Iraqi'. By contrast, other drawings depict life before the refugee crisis, including a shining depiction of Mosul before Isis took control and a depiction of a traditional Yazidi festival.

A number of these images have been selected by Ai Weiwei for a major publication, *TRACES OF SURVIVAL: Drawings by Refugees in Iraq selected by Ai Weiwei*, that will be published to coincide with the Biennale. Proceeds from the book will go back to those who provided the content.

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#### **Notes to Editors:**

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#### **About Ruya Foundation for Contemporary Culture in Iraq**

Ruya Foundation for Contemporary Culture in Iraq (Ruya) is an Iraqi-registered, not-for-profit, non-governmental organisation founded in 2012 by Iraq art and culture enthusiasts with the aim of aiding and enriching culture in Iraq, and building cultural bridges with the world. Ruya's fundamental aim is to promote culture in Iraq – a mission with particular significance at a time when priorities are focused elsewhere – and to build a sustainable platform that will enable Iraqis in the arts, the young in particular, to benefit from and participate in international events. Please visit [www.ruyafoundation.org](http://www.ruyafoundation.org) for further details on Ruya's wide range of projects.

Concurrent with its ongoing support of local projects, Ruya's focus rests on creating a network of intercultural events by which it can contribute to the development of civil society in Iraq and continue to nurture a multicultural dialogue through the arts. Ruya's unique network of artists includes those working both within Iraq and outside of it, spanning all disciplines in the visual, performing and literary arts. This network provides an incomparable overview of Iraq's contemporary culture and allows cultural organisations to view and engage with this culture through the foundation. Collaborating worldwide, Ruya works with institutions to create regular and meaningful opportunities for Iraqi artists, including residencies and exhibitions.

## **About Philippe Van Cauteren**

Philippe Van Cauteren is Artistic Director of S.M.A.K. (Museum for Contemporary Art) in Ghent, Belgium. Since 2004 he has been leading the museum through new developments that will allow it to meet the needs and requirements of a contemporary art museum. Under his guidance the exhibition programme has mainly concentrated on major monographical exhibitions: Lois Weinberger (2006), Kendell Geers (2007), Paul McCarthy (2008), Mark Manders (2009), Dara Birnbaum (2009), Koen van den Broek (2010), Jorge Macchi (2011), Nedko Solakov (2012), Joachim Koester (2012), Maria Nordman (2013), Javier Tellez (2013), Richard Jackson (2014) and Thomas Ruff (2014). At the 55th edition of the Venice Biennale in 2013, he was co-curator of the National Pavilion of Belgium exhibition *Kreupelhout – Cripplewood* by Berlinda De Bruyckere. Van Cauteren's particular interest in art in the public sphere was exemplified by the international exhibition *TRACK* (2012) in Ghent, which was co-curated with Mirjam Varadinis (curator at Kunsthaus, Zürich). Before joining S.M.A.K. Van Cauteren worked as a freelance curator and publicist in Germany, Mexico, Chile and Brazil. He was the curator of the first Biennal Ceará America in Fortaleza, Brazil in 2002. He regularly writes and lectures on contemporary art.

## **About the Pavilion Artists:**

**Latif Al Ani** (b. 1932) produced most of his substantial oeuvre between the 1950s and 1970s and his realist works document the broad sweep of Iraqi daily life over that period. His work thus encapsulates a now lost aspect of Iraqi society. Al Ani started his career as a photographer for the Iraqi Petroleum Company (most of the work he produced before 1958 is still owned by its surviving associated companies) and he went on to have solo exhibitions across the Middle East. He has worked in the Middle East, Europe and the US and his work reflects his interest in archaeology and modern life and the intersection that architecture makes between the two.

**Salam Atta Sabri** (b. 1953) is Lecturer at the Folkloric Art Institute, Baghdad. Between 2010 and 2015 he was Director of the National Museum of Modern Art, Baghdad, which in 2003 lost 75% of its collection due to looting. Atta Sabri returned to Baghdad in 2005 after living in the US and Jordan for 16 years and his works deal directly with the experience of returning to a country so changed by conflict. Despite working in the arts all of his life and initially training as a ceramicist, Atta Sabri has kept all of his own works of draughtsmanship out of the public eye until now.

**Rabab Ghazoul** (b. 1970) is a visual artist working with participatory and performative elements, based in Cardiff, Wales. Her work investigates the causes and effects of political and social structures and how ordinary people negotiate the political. Her work takes many forms, as video, installation, text, performance, or public realm intervention and encounter. All of her work is based on dialogues and she draws heavily on texts, either found, written, sourced or invited. At the Pavilion Ghazoul will be displaying one part of a larger project that takes the Chilcot Enquiry for its point of departure. Ghazoul has had solo exhibitions at g39 and Chapter Arts Centre, Cardiff and has participated in numerous group exhibitions internationally.

**Haider Jabbar** (b. 1986) started his career in film, working in art direction on short and feature films. He received a classical art education at the Baghdad Institute of Fine Arts but succeeded in escaping canonical restrictions and now works in a very intimate and direct style of painting. He has had two solo shows in Baghdad, the second entitled RCU (Respiratory Care Unit) in 2013 in homage to his late mother. Now a refugee in Turkey, Jabbar is continuing his career as an artist by way of a grant from the Ruya Foundation.

His Pavilion works will focus on those who have been killed by ISIS in Iraq and can be understood as a personal registration of human catastrophes.

**Akam Shex Hadi** (b. 1985) is a photographer from Sulaymaniyah in Iraqi Kurdistan. His practice can be understood as staged photography that nevertheless has a strong documentary aspect. Shex Hadi has made a new work for the Pavilion that deals directly with Isis and the fate of Iraqi refugees and internally displaced people. For this project he spent time photographing four different refugee communities from across Iraq, Yazidis, Kobanis, Christians and Kakais. Shex Hadi has participated in several festivals across Asia and the Middle East, including the Chobi Mela International Photography Festival in Bangladesh, 2013. He has also won awards for his work, including the T.A.W. Larsa Prize for Creative Photographers.

#### **Further Information:**

To coincide with the exhibition Ruya is also producing a publication in collaboration with Mousse Publishing on the theme of 'Invisible Beauty'. The publication will include specially commissioned new writing as well as texts about the Pavilion artists.

Curator: Philippe Van Cauteren, Artistic Director, S.M.A.K. (Museum for Contemporary Art)

Commissioner: Ruya Foundation for Contemporary Culture in Iraq (Ruya)

Local commissioner: Nuova Icona

[www.ruyafoundation.org](http://www.ruyafoundation.org)

#### **Visiting Information:**

Invisible Beauty will be open Tuesdays to Sundays from 10.00 till 18.00 over the period 9 May – 22 November 2015. It will travel to S.M.A.K. in Spring 2016.

Press preview: Wednesday 6 May 14.00 – 16.00 (14.30 Curator talk)

The exhibition will be housed in a 16th Century building that overlooks the Grand Canal from the San Tomasso District.

Ca' Dandolo

Grand Canal

San Polo 2879

Venice

Nearest Vaporetto: San Tomà