



MONTALVO

ARTS CENTER

Education and Outreach Programs
2007-2008 Master Class Series

presents

Wafaa Bilal

and

Al Dar Al Iraqi

SJCC Youth Corps
at Montalvo Arts Center
Friday, November 2, 2007
3:00 p.m. – 5:00 p.m.

Program Schedule

- 3:00 -- students arrive at Montalvo
- 3:00-3:40 -- docent-led history walk of Montalvo
- 3:40-3:55 -- sneak peek: *Moments from 20th Century Iraqi Art*, Project Space
- 3:55-4:00 -- walk to *Al Dar Al Iraqi*
- 4:00-5:00 -- meeting & discussion with Wafaa Bilal at *Al Dar Al Iraqi*

Wafaa Bilal

Wafaa Bilal was born in Iraq on June 10, 1966. Because a member of his family had been accused of disloyalty to his country, Wafaa was denied the opportunity to pursue his dream of being an artist. Instead, he was to attend college to major in geography. While in college, he continued to pursue his art and was arrested and tortured for his political art work against Sadaam Hussein. Shortly after the Gulf War, Wafaa was inspired by President Bush's message to the Iraqi citizens that if they attempted to overthrow Sadaam, the US would stand behind them. He became involved in organizing opposition to the government and was scheduled for arrest and execution when he escaped into Kuwait. There he was accused of being a spy and was close to being shot when his student ID convinced them he told the truth. Wafaa was sent to a refugee camp on the Kuwaiti border.

In the camp, people laughed when rather than accept life in a tent he began forming brick that he dried in the sun and fashioned into a home. The adobe served a practical purpose, for it provided relative safety from abduction by Kuwaiti soldiers who sneaked into tents in the middle of the night to kidnap young people for sale to Iraqi soldiers who tortured, raped and executed them or the Turkish soldiers themselves would rape and kill them. For two years, Wafaa lived in limbo not knowing if each day would be his last. Still Wafaa worked to improve his art, cleaning toilets in the camp to earn the money for art supplies, buying supplies for children for art therapy to help them to work through the horrors witnessed. His experiences developed within him an abhorrence of violence and oppression and strengthened his inner resolve.

In 1992, Wafaa came to the United States and took classes to learn English. Then, he began art studies at the University of New Mexico where he excelled. His art is of a political nature that speaks to oppression of the human spirit, including that of women who are bound by the rules of culture. He has won many awards for his art as well as a scholarship to the Chicago Institute of Art for post graduate study. He is now teaching at that institution.

In addition, Wafaa travels to give lectures on the oppressive nature of Sadaam's regime in the hope of informing people of the complexities of the situation as well as the atrocities committed and the importance of nonviolent means of ending conflict. He has been interviewed by the History Channel and spoke on the Iraqi conflict at the Democratic Convention in New York City last month. Two months ago, his 21-year-old brother who was staunchly apolitical lost his life to stray American gunfire. A few weeks ago, he lost his father whose health deteriorated after the death of his youngest son. It has been 14 years since he was last able to see his mother and younger siblings. He speaks to them on the phone to hear how they flee from one war torn city to another in an effort to find safety.

Artist Statement :: Wafaa Bilal

My art is most influenced by the pain and suffering of growing up under Sadaam Hussein's repressive rule from 1968 to the recent "Iraqi Freedom War." I experienced violence on a daily basis, and visions of death and terror together with the anguish to the Iraqi people are irrevocably etched in my memory. My generation in Iraq is defined by decades of war. Since coming to the United States I have also seen great injustice and suffering in the forms of poverty, racism, and many other forms of discrimination and hatred. From this point of departure, through art I strive to uncover an overarching human condition while creating a space for provocation, dialogue, and contemplation. As my friend and colleague Gregg Bordowitz has written, "When we are exposed to violence on a daily basis, how can we, as political artists, convey this experience clearly to the viewer and leave a lasting impression that is fresh and solid in its conclusions, not cliché?"

A constant negotiation must take place in order to embrace the aesthetic pleasure of the image's surface, which is so necessary to capture the imagination, and to convey the aesthetic pain of the content. The failure of this negotiation can easily result in the alienation of the viewer, while a successful negotiation may result in active engagement and an opening of the viewer's perspective. While I do not wish to impose narrow interpretations of my work but struggle to create complex and multi-dimensional images, I also do not feel we currently have the privilege to enjoy art purely as aesthetic pleasure. It is a misconception that art has ever been pure; historically it has been a means of expressing personal and societal realities and interpretations. We must actively employ the tension and incongruence produced by the coexistence of aesthetic pleasure and aesthetic pain to attract and jolt the viewer in a thought-provoking manner. As an active player in society and as both educator and agitator, the artist must keep pushing these boundaries.

The photographs I create are highly symbolic, "hyper-real" landscapes, landscapes of possibilities existing just beyond reality, expressing emotions and conditions that permeate reality. They equally could be called "interior landscapes," representative of the psychology of human suffering in a society ruled by oppression, domination, and fear. Figures exist in equal balance with the landscapes, the images drawing their complexity from this dramatic polar tension. Within the frame, time and place loses specificity to become transcendent and expressive of a broader human condition.

Video installations provide another level of impact besides the content of the image: we observe movement, a physical language the body understands. I play with the viewer's presence and engagement or lack thereof, allowing this to directly impact the action and outcome of the piece. As the viewer may be far removed from the conflict addressed within the work, it is important to communicate to the viewer through a recognizable visual language, and so I filter the subject through historical and psychological contexts of the subject's specific locale. The frame acts as a historical window to the past, while the moving image exemplifies a persistent-present, a current condition influenced by internal or external circumstances that inhibit change. The moment something is done to change a situation, the persistent-present becomes a progressive present where change can occur.

My memories of Iraq and my disenchantment with politics have not left me cynical, nor drained of hope for humanity. On the contrary, I am filled with belief in the power of the people to control their own destinies, and I continue to believe in social justice. I hope to foster a sense of self-empowerment in my audience and to counter the sense of powerlessness people feel in the face of inhumanity.

To Learn More:

- See:**
- :: Opening Reception for
Dar Al Iraqi (Iraqi House) and Moments from 20th Century Iraqi Art
Montalvo Arts Center, Sat, Nov 3, 3–5PM
 - :: *Open Shutters Iraq* Opening Reception
ICA gallery, Downtown San Jose, Fri, Nov 9, 6–8PM

Photographic stories created by a diverse group of Iraqi women with no previous photography training. This participatory program reflects some of the realities facing civilian women living in Iraq today.
 - :: *Mutanabi Street: An Exhibition of Broadsides*
Saratoga Public Library, March-April, 2008

More than 30 people were killed in March 2007 when a car bomb was exploded on Mutanabi Street, an old and established bookselling street in the heart of Baghdad's literary and intellectual community. To protest the bombing, the Mutanabi Street Coalition has invited letterpress printers to produce broadsides, presented in this exhibit.

- Hear:**
- :: Soldier/Poet Brian Turner
Carriage House Theatre at Montalvo, April 11, 2008, 7:30 PM

Iraq war veteran Brian Turner writes powerfully affecting poetry that reflects Turner's experiences as a soldier with penetrating honesty and sensitivity, while deploring the violence and acknowledging the grief and terror of war. His debut book of poems, [Here, Bullet](#), was awarded the 2007 NEA Literature Fellowship in Poetry.

- Visit:** http://www.montalvoarts.org/programs/iraq_reframe/
<http://www.crudeoils.us/>



Montalvo Arts Center is a non-profit organization dedicated to forging meaningful connections between art, artists and the communities we serve, through creation, presentation and education in extraordinary ways and settings.

MONTALVO
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Montalvo's *Master Class Series* connects area students with world-class artists representing all artistic mediums. These intimate workshops allow students to learn from master artists dedicated to their crafts and to educating youth. The interactions inspire students to investigate their own creative potential and to develop a life-long love of the arts.

Read more about Montalvo at <http://www.montalvoarts.org/>.

Montalvo's education programs are generously supported by:

Charmaine and Dan Warmenhoven s Sobrato Family Foundation s David and Lucile Packard Foundation s Comerica Bank Foundation s Mark Jon Bluth s Wells Fargo Foundation s All Stars Helping Kids s Kim Worsencroft and Dennis McEvoy s Mindy and Greg Prow s Tomlinson Zisko LLP s Adobe Foundation Fund at Community Foundation Silicon Valley s Applied Materials s US Bancorp s Mission City Community Fund s James Phelan Trust s Montalvo Service Group s Members of Montalvo Arts Center