

## Between Dream and Reality

*In his surrealistic paintings Iraqi artist Sinan Hussein confronts the viewer with the paradoxical conditions of life.*

He is a traveller between the worlds – a 'homeless' person whose senses are heightened, whose gaze is fascinatingly clear and whose perception is all-encompassing. The deeply felt pain of having to leave his beloved homeland as a young man has obviously left a lasting impression on the artist Sinan Hussein. This traumatic experience has made him attentive, sensitive and vulnerable. With some of his paintings he has succeeded in using this sensitivity to look beneath the surface and notice connections – as if he had 'second sight'.

Again and again it is therefore the large, wide-open, stylized eyes that stand out in the artist's works and fix the viewer with their powerful gaze. For Sinan Hussein, eyes are the symbol of perception par excellence and the medium of contact and communication. Eyes reflect the soul, they let us look deep into the other person. 'The most prominent symbol in my paintings is the eye – any eye,' says the artist. 'It could be a camera's eye staring at the viewer, capturing the moment.' Hania Zawaneh, curator and manager of Karim Gallery in Amman, Jordan, adds: 'The symbolism of the eyes in Sinan's work is a mixture of his mother's eyes, which he described to me as being large, and the eyes of Jesus and the Virgin Mary in icons.'

In his current figurative works orient and occident meet, dream and reality, truth and illusion, past and present, violence and the indelible longing of all mankind for harmony, love and a life in peace and freedom. 'I see, I feel, I listen and I speak with the souls in between the two worlds,' confirms the artist. 'They are all around me, they are everywhere. They leave our reality trying to search for a new haven, a better place full of friends and joy. Yet, they are lifeless there, because their bodies are still here. Yes, I am in between two worlds.'

Sinan Hussein was born in Iraq in 1977. His great talent became apparent early on. He was already passionate about painting at the age of 14 and created splendid portraits of his parents and friends. The family, above all his father, who loved

music and was interested in art, motivated him to work on developing his painting and drawing skills. The family supported his self-study for several years and then encouraged him to go to university. Sinan studied Art at the University of Fine Arts in Baghdad, where he graduated with a BA bachelor's degree. Even as a young artist, Hussein's mastery was clear. His expressive and virtuoso use of colour – whether he paints with oils or acrylics –, his surrealistic compositions and unusual motifs are all evidence of his very individual, unmistakable style. Sinan Hussein is a member of the Iraqi Fine Arts Artist Society and of the Union of Iraqi Artists.

The unfathomable turmoil of the bloody civil war, the terrible violence of sectarian communities and finally also the experience of the Iraq wars, forced the artist to flee to Jordan 2005 -2007 immediately after his graduation and seek refuge there. Before taking this step he had come close to losing his life in several extremely threatening confrontations.

From Amman he left to Kuwait in 2007 he then moved in 2010 to the USA, first to Los Angeles, then to the east coast where he today lives and works in Boston. His work is represented by renowned galleries in the Middle East and also shown in exhibitions in America and Europe. Collectors all over the world have now discovered his paintings, their powerful, unmistakable language. Even Arab Gulf royals have bought some of his works and are now watching this exceptional artist's further development with great interest. Sinan Hussein is a much sought-after artist whose success story has only just begun.

There can be no doubt that the painter Sinan Hussein has a sure feeling for tensions and paradoxes, for breaks and contradictions. The artist reacts like a seismograph and casts a visionary eye over the state of our civilization. He draws on his memory and recollections, finds inspiration for overwhelming, irrational and often bizarre images, sometimes in the comforting world of his dreams, sometimes in the horror scenarios of his nightmares. It is hard to imagine what happens in his head at night or even when he just closes his eyes. He is apparently besieged by a never-ending succession of moments and impressions, of stories, fables, myths and fairy tales. Sinan Hussein explains the meaning of dreams for his work as follows: 'Certainly most of my artworks reflect dreams. These are the dreams I dreamt in childhood. I used to see these characters and figures that I now paint in my works. I used to have a dialogue with these

characters. Sometimes I see them as if in heaven, other times as if in hell. It is as if they were falling from a very high place and floating in space.'

In his dream pictures he succeeds in his own inimitable way in drawing on the traditions and ciphers of a once splendid, centuries-old culture and in arriving at statements that are of absolutely existential importance. The paintings go far beyond what is actually represented; they have a timeless surplus of meaning.

Again and again it is the contradictions that open his eyes in a special way. After the experiences of the three wars in Iraq, he had to flee his homeland and now lives on the other side of the Atlantic in the land of turbo-capitalism and seemingly unlimited possibilities. His view of the West and its temptations oscillates between amazement and horror. It is no better for him over here or over there. He translates his visions into iconographic signs, ciphers and symbols. The artist says about his particular liking for this form of encrypted language: 'It all began with my fascination with churches. Since I was young, iconography has captured my imagination; the process of turning ideas into symbols, as well as controlling discourses.' At the beginning of his career, Sinan Hussein worked in churches in Jordan, where he painted icons and murals. A special fascination has developed from this time.

In his paintings, Hussein imagines his personal, cultural and historical roots as a powerful force. They form the basis on which he can rely. From this position he can cope with the challenges of the modern age and modern civilization and, if necessary, settle accounts. In this way, he clings to moments from his past and his love for his family. He would probably be lost without them.

In his pictures he focuses on individual persons and especially couples. The theme of marriage, as a metaphysical 'union for life' and a vision of happiness, is often reflected in his paintings. These are memories of his parents and grandparents, which he takes up in his compositions. At the same time, he is rather sceptical about the chances of happy relationships. Sinan Hussein says: 'Marriage is a beginning of the formation of life. I painted a lot of marriage ceremonies for these characters, however the marriage scenes always stopped short of being completed, because their spirits do not belong to one another or most marriages fail or the partners do not suit each other. And this is one of the

most problematic issues in societies.’ The painter tells a tale with brush and paint like one of those gifted storytellers from his homeland. Dreams are a way of escaping the ugliness and horror of reality. The family is the fiction of an intimate refuge. Present and past have merged into a harmony.

The artist takes up the symbol of the couple and explains: ‘The works are handled differently, some canvases mark the harmony and equilibrium in the marriage of male and female figures accompanied by “all the members of the tribe” ornamented with different elements. Others show one figure positioned vertically in the centre of the painting territory with an empty – but contemplative – plane. This clan has giants and miniatures sharing one eternal choice – being aroused and uplifted. The male figures step with their left foot on their right one – a symbol of the triumph of mind over emotions. The female figures step the opposite way – a symbol of the victory of the senses and emotions over rationalism and the mind. This duality of thinking is the prime concept around which my works centre.’

Sinan Hussein’s paintings are bursting with imagination, they are powerful, often overpowering. Some Western critics and art historians may be reminded of surrealists such as René Magritte, Giorgio de Chirico, Max Ernst and others. However, there is no specific reference to these fellow painters. Hussein has found his own unique surrealistic view of the world, which is playful and caricatural. He would call himself a post-surrealist.

The painter does not want to lecture or convince the observer through his works. For Sinan Hussein, painting is an instrument of understanding. The often crazy imagery stimulates the viewer and in an odd way makes him or her sensitive. They create a vortex that is hard to evade. Amazed the observer experiences a firework of ideas, slivers of thought that flash through his or her mind without the painting being dissolved into simple messages or losing its enchantment.

Many of his compositions are like an artfully interwoven picture puzzle, a kind of rebus, but you will search in vain for a key to its understanding. It is as if the artist had mounted a collage from the scenes of his dreams and forgotten what he wanted to tell us on the way. Or as if he had simply thrown away this key because it is useless. In this way, his paintings will remain mysterious and enigmatic – and that’s a good thing. Each time they challenge the viewer anew to seek their own

associative approach. For the artist himself, too, his own stories, fairy tales and myths, which he prefers to paint on large canvases with acrylics, remain cryptic and mysterious. However, they proclaim a deep inner truth, visions that have to be conquered and revealed anew every time. Understanding them is not a matter of the mind, but of feeling and sensations.

Anyone who is willing to see is rewarded with a fascinating view of the world. In it, apart from the obvious horror, there is also joy and love of life, curiosity and humour. Where the painter Sinan Hussein meets the caricaturist Sinan Hussein, a stunning humour shines through. Even the paintings that may have sprung from his darkest nightmares and remind a Western art historian of Hieronymus Bosch's visions of hell have the provocative freshness and spontaneity of comics.

His paintings use an ambiguous canon of signs and ciphers, which appear time and time again in the same or a very similar way and are varied playfully. I have already mentioned the theme of couples. Fish, birds and strange beings such as a zebra-horse, a frog and dragon-like creatures also appear. 'The animal has been man's friend since the beginning of time and man shares many animalistic traits,' says Sinan Hussein. 'Each animal has a different symbolism or explanation. As for the man who is carrying a dragon, this is about times to come or more specifically the unknown. I also paint my son when he is holding his toy and wishing he could fly with the dragon or befriend the frog when he grows up.'

Then there are the postures and gestures of his protagonists, which remind one of ceremonies or rituals. When depicted from the front with their faces visible, the figures are completely deprived of any individuality or personality. The viewer sees only stylized faces, as if the persons were disguised and hidden behind masks. Some figures are reminiscent of circus clowns, harlequins or actors, wearing strange hats and shrill headgear.

Those depicted in the paintings have their feet crossed in a particular way as if they were trying to give the viewer a sign. The artist explains: 'When the feet are crossed it means that the figure is succumbing to the future and the unknown, as with the crucifixion or travelling to god. Exactly in the same way that when Jesus was on the cross he was resigned and accepted that he would be travelling to the other world. When the right foot lies on top of the left, this denotes that the

mind is in control of the body. When the left foot lies on top of the right foot, this denotes that the heart is in control.'

Sinan Hussein moves with virtuosity in very different genres and uses a range of techniques. He paints precisely with acrylic paints and places his isolated protagonists on a background. He is not interested in the rooms, but in the postures and gestures of his characters and how they surround themselves with surprising, sometimes bizarre props. For example, a washbasin on the wall takes on a special meaning or a scooter rushes suddenly onto the scene or red-and-white-striped traffic cones somehow stand in the way. Sinan Hussein comments on these: 'Traffic cones indicate isolation, either the isolation between people or the persons who themselves are totally isolated from the works, because they are spirits who do not wish to be in touch with any human being, they only want to observe and be critical of the human state of being. So the positioning of the cones has different meanings. For example when a cone is placed over the head, this is meant to be interpreted as the person or spirit having mentally resigned to a specific situation or scene within the painting. On the other hand, if they are standing on top of the cone, they are not enjoying the place they are in and wish to move on to another place.'

In addition to a large number of enigmatic and meticulously crafted acrylic paintings, the artist expresses himself in quick ink sketches and malicious caricatures. They testify to a mind that is as clear as it is belligerent. Representatives of different cultures and religions are shown in telling poses. They are incapable of interacting with each other peacefully. They do not find a way to communicate even though their tongues cross. The statements of these cartoons are direct, provocative and disrespectful. Their mockery is poisoned and like a hard slap in the face.

Sinan Hussein proves that he is a master of the caricature, commenting critically on the signs of the times. The caricatures belong less in a museum or gallery than in the world's major magazines, newspapers and newsletters.

In addition to his surrealistic paintings and caricatures, Sinan Hussein has had great success in recent years with another characteristic genre: portraits. He commits these to canvas with a strong gesture and thick, paste-like oil paint.

Here, too, the artist has found an unmistakable style. His massive portraits of historically important figures such as the artists Frida Kahlo, Paul Gauguin, Rembrandt and Vincent van Gogh as well as the famous Albert Einstein and Che Guevara are evidence of an eruptive passion. His enthusiasm and support for these leading figures and role models are very evident. But here too, eyes are the focus of attention. They look at us and want to encourage us.

Sinan Hussein's art is based on a deep hope: he believes that, despite all adversity, the world can be transformed into a place of peace and freedom. Perhaps, the artist ponders, art is the only medium in order to become aware of this and stand up for it. It is poetry that transcends the horrors of reality – and perhaps only art can soothe our fears and alleviate pain.

Dr Jörg Bockow , March 2018  
For Karim Gallery

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*Dr Bockow published some books on 15 different artists and made numerous introductions for museum openings and galleries. Furthermore, he has published in newspapers and magazines for the past 30 years.*

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