



TRUTH
BE TOLD

HALIM AL-KARIM



Halim Al-Karim has come a long way since his turbulent youth in politically unstable Iraq, yet the impact of his traumatic experiences lingers in his works. **Tala Chukri** meets Al-Karim and discusses his works, which are replete with constant reminders of a past better left forgotten.



alim Al-Karim moves restlessly in his chair.

Clad in black jeans and a black shirt, he is visibly dreading this interview. His tired and beady eyes seem to be watching me; his fingers twirling around the same lock from his helmet of black curly hair. "I am a very fragile man," he says, minutes after the interview has started. He speaks slowly, often retracting words and rephrasing sentences, almost afraid of laying himself bare. It seems clear to me that his somewhat dishevelled appearance is akin to his natural state of vulnerability.

His is a dark past and one which has resulted in a continuous struggle in terms of distinguishing between reality and fantasy. Yet it is this very disturbance in perception which forms the crux of Al-Karim's art. "When dreams are your only means of escape, they become part of your being and consciousness," he explains. Forced to flee his native Iraq in 1991 for political reasons, Al-Karim's life thus far has been plagued by a desire to avert the world's realities with him often seeking solace in his labyrinthine imagination. Best known for his photographic abstraction, which sheds light on the ramifications of war, Al-Karim's *oeuvre* perpetually straddles the line between photographic reality and optical illusion and strongly reflects a psychological desire to escape.

SHOCK AND AWE

Despite coming from a large family – 10 siblings – Al-Karim's childhood was lonely; he doesn't seem particularly close to any of his brothers and sisters and the notion of family remains distant to him. From an early age, he would spend time searching for tools to practice art, haphazardly using everyday objects such as wood, fabric and paper to make kites and sculptures. Born in Najaf, Iraq in 1963, Al-Karim spent his first decade in Lebanon, where his father taught history and politics at the American University of Beirut. Iraq was never far from the family's thoughts and as a young boy, Al-Karim spent countless hours listening to his father nostalgically recount tales of Baghdad. When the family returned to their homeland in 1973, the country was in the midst of a military offensive against Kuwait, leaving

Opening spread: (Detail)
Untitled One from the *Hidden Love* series. 2009. Lambda print. 170 x 122 cm. Edition of five plus two artist proofs.

Facing page: *Hidden Passion*. 1987. Lambda print. Triptych. 200 x 300 cm each. Edition of three plus two artist proofs.





Left:

Above: *Goddess of Rome*. 2006. Lambda print. 90 x 60 cm. Edition of three plus two artist proofs. Below: *Goddess of Venice*. 2006. Lambda print. 90 x 60 cm. Edition of three plus two artist proofs.

Facing page: *Goddess of Beirut*. 1985. Lambda print. 208 x 118 cm. Edition of three plus two artist proofs.



the young Al-Karim in disbelief: this was a jarring contrast to his father's rather rosy portrayal. "From Beirut, Iraq was paradise to me. It took me some time to realise how radically different the Iraq of my imagination was from the truth," he explains. "I was unable to reconcile both." Al-Karim describes his time in Iraq in a troubled tone, often trailing off, unable to keep pace with the numerous flashbacks. His permanently agitated body language reflects that of someone who has been in the throes of death and back. Things worsened after Saddam Hussein rose to power in 1979 in the lead-up to the Iran-Iraq war.

It is said that Al-Karim's father and a brother had political ties to the Islamic Da'wa party, which supported Iran's Islamic Revolution, though Al-Karim refuses to confirm this directly. This political affiliation resulted in a raid on the family home, sibling separations and a few years spent in hiding. He is reticent to discuss specific details pertaining to the violence encountered by his family, strongly insistent that "my entire life story can be understood through my work". Despite this, his rhetoric suddenly becomes demure and tranquil when he speaks of his father, an amateur photographer who often took him along on his projects. "I still remember how the smell of my mother's cooking in the kitchen would merge with the smell of the chemicals from our dark room," recalls Al-Karim. "Sometimes his photographs would be out of focus, but I never knew if this was accidental or deliberate. When I accompanied him, I would imagine that we were creating art together."

THE ART OF RESISTANCE

Encouraged to pursue the arts by his father, Al-Karim studied ceramics at Baghdad's Insti-

tute of Fine Arts from 1983–88. What seemed like a mere professional endeavour marked the beginning of a much greater pursuit of truth. “I chose to study art because it was the only language that the government could not understand,” he smiles. “My father told me it was the only way that I could speak the truth. It is a slow but efficient process to change society and survive.”

It was while obtaining his Bachelor’s degree that Al-Karim first began creating the out-of-focus photographic works which have now become his signature style. In 1985 he started producing the *Hidden* series of lambda prints, which depict human silhouettes and blurred faces wearing masks. Resembling sharp black-and-white photographs that have been obscured and smeared over, the works radiate an eerie aura of confusion, paranoia and fear. “My father was hiding from the government all of his life, so I feel like this theme has been somewhat encrypted in my genes,” explains Al-Karim. “The blurriness in my work reflects the uncertainty that has surrounded my life from the very beginning. It is an uncertainty of context, place and time.” In *Hidden Passion*, a 1987 black-and-white triptych lambda print, Al-Karim portrays three statue-like human silhouettes against a dark background. The figure in the centre appears

to be a marble sculpture, while the other two’s physical demeanours can be likened to human corpses fading into the darkness of death. “This piece illustrates how politicians aim to divide society through religion, culture and education,” he explains. “Here, I show how they want us to feel isolated and trust no one, rather than come together. The man in the middle falls in love with Sumerian statues out of fear of trusting another human being and being ousted from the regime for resisting.”

Topics of resistance and Sumerian civilisation continuously emerge in Al-Karim’s works; the latter a nod to a people the artist very much reveres. He had been exposed to works from the Sumerian era from an early age when visiting his uncle, who was the curator of the National Museum of Iraq. “The Sumerians resisted, fought and never surrendered. This is our history,” he says. “I want Iraqis to know they don’t have to stay silent.” Al-Karim’s *Hidden* series is still ongoing and includes the works *Hidden War*, *Hidden Face* and *Hidden Prisoner*, all of which reference the propaganda carried out by politicians to satisfy their concealed agendas in times of war. By distorting a photograph, generally viewed as a mirror of truth, Al-Karim is challenging the viewer’s acceptance of reality, further encouraging self-reflective narration.



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LIFE AFTER BAGHDAD

After graduating from university, Al-Karim was drafted into the Iraqi army. Unable to comply with the use of violence required by the military regime, he escaped, seeking shelter in a two-metre deep hole dug in the southern Iraqi desert. For the next three years, he was cared for by an elderly Bedouin woman. The harrowing experience stimulated his creative thought, forcing him to fantasise about life beyond isolation. He eventually sought political asylum in The Netherlands and continued his studies at Amsterdam’s Gerrit Reitveld Academie of Fine Arts. After living in Iraq, The Netherlands, Kuwait and Saudi Arabia, Al-Karim, who vows to never return to his homeland, now resides between Denver, Colorado in the USA, and Dubai, UAE.

Al-Karim’s actual body of work offers a gamut of media, including metal structures, lace-like clay figures, mixed-media works on canvas, large-scale fibreglass sculptures and lambda prints. However, he only discusses the latter. Although his other works have been exhibited in various venues, including Dubai’s XVA Gallery and the Denver Art Museum, Al-Karim recently took a conscious decision to primarily showcase

his photographic works, all of which are shot in film using a medium format camera. “In my sculptures and paintings, I express my dreams, fantasies and imagination, whereas my photographs present my political statements,” he says. “The more I share my dreams with the public, the more I feel like I am losing touch with myself.” To date, he has held over 20 solo exhibitions around the world. His works are in institutions such as Darat Al-Funun, The George Bush Presidential Library and Museum, the Saatchi Gallery and the V&A. Al-Karim is currently working on a monograph to be published by Skira Rizzoli and scheduled for release in 2012.

HAUNTING BEAUTY

In 2002 Al-Karim began incorporating sharply displayed eyes to his blurred lambda prints. The untitled works from the *Urban Witnesses* series depict child-like faces with glaring oversized blue eyes, combed-back blonde hair and duct-taped mouths. These pieces draw attention to the repression of expression experienced by individuals who have lived through war. “In *Urban Witnesses*, I am pushing people to resist and never close their eyes to protect themselves,”





Facing page: *Untitled* from the *Urban Witness* series. 2002. Lambda print. Triptych. 138 x 300 cm each. Edition of three plus two artist proofs.

Left: *Untitled Three* from the *Hidden Love* series. 2009. Lambda print. 170 x 122 cm. Edition of five plus two artist proofs.

he says. For Al-Karim, this series also harks back to the Sumerian era, as statues from that period have withstood the test of time, with their engraved eyes often remaining the most intact feature.


Love, he says, "is the only true emotion that can help us protect our human values". In fact, when the conversation leads to matters of intimacy, Al-Karim becomes noticeably enlivened, no longer held back by barriers of self-expression. In the 2009 *Hidden Love* series, Al-Karim introduced colour to the faces. Lining the sharply focused blue eyes with a thick layer of black and continuing to cover the mouth with tape, Al-Karim explores the depth of devotion through this series, maintaining that, "to reach the ultimate love, you need to discover numerous layers. The different colours in the works illustrate those layers." In the ongoing *Goddess* series which debuted in 1985, Al-Karim pays homage to women, encouraging them to "find their inner goddesses".

ART AS A TOOL FOR CHANGE

Al-Karim also produces prints informed by specific events, such as his 2001 *Wall Street Two* piece, created in response to the financial crisis in the late 1980s. In blaming the powerful financiers responsible for the crisis, he mocks the situation to convey his strong discontent. "The people responsible are walking free, but I believe that what happened is a form of war," says Al-Karim. "At least territorial wars are fought by soldiers at the frontiers, but this one affected children having homes to go back to." The sorrows of others are a sensitive subject for Al-Karim, who often speaks of "healing others by healing oneself", and reiterates that "the whole of humanity can only evolve by telling the truth".

For his participation in the Iraqi Pavilion at this year's Venice Biennale, Al-Karim claims he didn't adhere to the theme of *Wounded Water*, opting to shed light on the current political situation in Iraq instead. His installation piece comprised a one-

channel video featuring an untitled photograph and a five-channel video work, *Hidden Revolution*, which centres on "deceiving policies, corruption and beastly inhuman behaviour". How did it feel to represent Iraq? "Although I was happy to show people that Iraq is still very much alive, I view my work as universal," he insists.

Al-Karim's artistic appeal lies in his ability to overcome mental strain by transcending his own suffering for what he believes is the greater good of mankind. "I am documenting what has happened, and is still happening, for the next generation to avoid making the same mistakes," he says. Staying true to his father's wise words, Al-Karim uses art in his quest for truth, in his road to salvation and as a political game. "Through my works, I want to push people to change themselves in order to change the realities of the world," he adds. "Art, for me, is the language of the hopeless." 

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