

# On the Matter of Destruction

THEATER OF OPERATIONS: THE GULF WARS  
1991–2011 // MOMA PS1

By Elliot J. Reichert



[ THE SEEN ]



graphics. Just as well, the show interrogates Western media's complicity in producing dangerously oversimplified broadcast images of the Gulf Wars. A large installation by Thomas Hirschhorn, *Necklace CNN* (2002), exhibits a gold chain with a CNN logo as its pendant, alluding to the media corporation's profit-driven complicity in the Department of State's propaganda campaign to sell these wars to the American public. The materials of the work—cardboard, foil, plastic, golden wrapping paper, and tape—constitute an unobvious rebuke of the cheap and shiny, and yet mesmerizing and profitable, nature of the cable news coverage of the Gulf Wars.

But for every distant Western view on the conflict within the show, there is an on-the-ground riposte. Monira Al Qadiri's large-scale video projection, *Behind the Sun* (2013), chronicles the wanton burning of oil fields in Kuwait by Iraqi forces withdrawing

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The term ‘theater of operations’ refers to the totality of land, air, and sea contained by a discreet military operation within a larger ‘theater of war’ waged between opposing forces. There is an implied hermeticism to these words, a total spatial and martial enclosure that reaffirms the Western forays into the Gulf Wars as a series of “surgical” strikes specifically targeting only “legitimate” combatants, largely sparing civilian bystanders and avoiding endless conflicts. Of course, as *Theater of Operations: The Gulf Wars*, an exhibition at MoMA PS1 utilizing this terminology shows, the Gulf Wars were everything but contained.

The word ‘theater’ implies actors, but also an audience. The exhibition signals the bipartite nature of the spectator—first in its critique of the American military's detached and voyeuristic approach to warfare, aptly conveyed by Harun Farocki's documentary film *War at a Distance* (2003), an hour-long video that traces the twentieth-century military-industrial complex through camera-enabled missiles and 3D computer images. The work drifts effortlessly from military training models to illustrative CNN



[ TENSIONS OF ACCESS | 7 ]



*He has created this magnificent world*



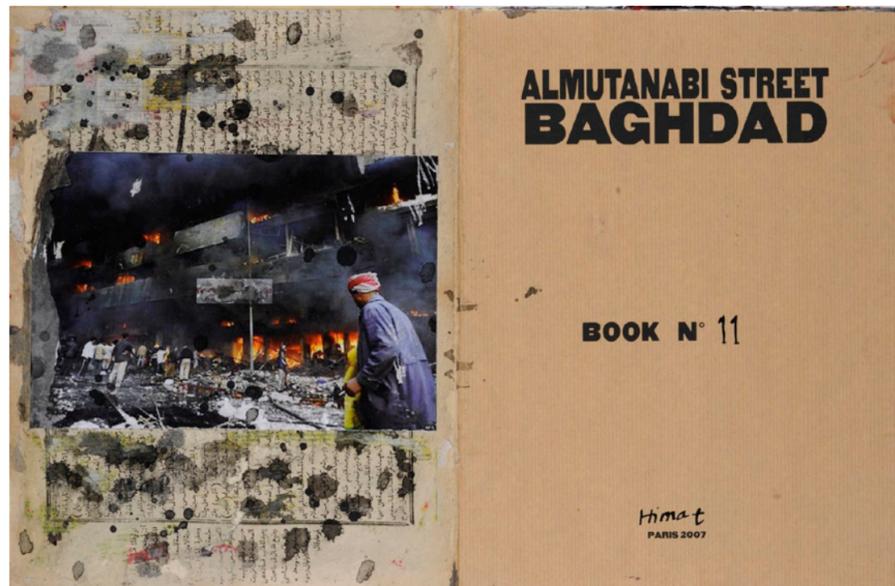
Al-Azzawi, *Victim's Portrait* (1991), renders a large and colorfully abstracted face of an Iraqi soldier immolated by the allied aerial bombing during the Iraqi retreat from Kuwait. The work is hung next to an archival copy of the British *Observer*, which published a controversial frontpage image of the burned corpse after American outlets refused to circulate it.

For a war documented with such a profusion of photography and video, the exhibition's most compelling images are made by hand. Myriad paintings and drawings, mostly by Iraqi and other Arab artists, impart the abstract horror of decades of ceaseless conflict. A suite of Kuwaiti artist Khalifa Qattan's surrealist oil paintings from the seventies and eighties eerily foretell the humanitarian and environmental ravages of the armed struggles to come. *Kuwait is Burning* (1971) comprises a fireball hovering over an engulfed city while a horrified self-portrait looks over the disaster. *Desert Storm* (1979), painted twelve years before the military campaign of the same name, roils with chaos as faces and bodies appear to melt in a

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from the advancing American-led coalition in 1991. Filmed by a local Kuwaiti, overlaid with spoken Arabic poetry from daytime television programs, unseen poets praise the heavenly beauty of nature in stark contrast to the hellscape blazing before their eyes. These dueling fields of vision—one aerial, the other landscape—broadly evoke the disparity between the American view of the wars and its lived experience in the Gulf.

Often, the emotive and evocative works by Iraqi and other Gulf artists are at odds with the more conceptual approaches to the occupation authored by American and European forces. A photograph by Jean-Luc Moulène, entitled *La Guerre – 17 Janvier 1991* (1991/2019) shows a sunny morning on a street in Paris taken on the day allied forces begin bombing Iraq at the start of Operation Desert Storm—a nod to just how far away, geographically and psychologically, the war felt from Europe. Meanwhile, a 1991 painting by Dia



vortex of frantic brushstrokes. How could an artist foretell the decades of strife yet to come? If there is a diluted messianic quality to the American invasion of the Middle East, Qattan's paintings suggest a competing prophecy—unknownable to the United States military—of the abject moral failure of such hubris.

There is lightness, if not levity, to Kuwaiti Thuraya Al-Baqsami's drawings, paintings, and etchings. Many are figurative and all are more or less abstracted. We are told the artist's early political works—*No to the Occupation* (1990), a linocut poster made to protest the Iraqi invasion of his country—gave way to more abstract and allegorical works as the occupying regime cracked down on open dissent. Al-Baqsami was prolific in those seven months, making hauntingly beautiful works like *The Last Shot* (1991), a composition of two faces that might be read as an allegory of romance, if not for the crosshairs on one of its craniums.

An entire sub-genre of the exhibition holds *dafatir*—an Arabic word for notebooks, *dafatir* in the singular—drawn, written, and painted in by artists in Iraq and the diaspora. Discreet, portable, and inexpensive, *dafatir* became a medium of choice for Gulf artists as UN sanctions slowed the flow of art supplies and censorship tightened over the years. Al-Azzawi's *War Diary No. 1* (1991) opens to charcoal-smudged figures seemingly flailing in horror as crude, arrow-shaped missiles rain down from above. Rafa Nasiri's *War Diary 2 (No, It's a Dirty War)* (1991) is streaked with red and black handprints and splatters, a visceral response to the bloodshed and immolation around him. Kareem Risan's *Al Mutanabbi Street* (2007) mourns the destruction of Baghdad's famous literary hub, named after a tenth-century Iraqi poet, and home to many of the city's booksellers. In 2007, a car bomb exploded at the site, killing twenty-six people and causing the market to shut down for more than a year. This *dafatir*, a mix of printed matter and pigment, bears the pockmarks and burns of a brutalized book—a metonymy for the humans who similarly perished in the blast. More than most other works in the exhibition, the *dafatir* powerfully exude the pain and misery of the lived experience of the wars.

A number of artists take up ancient Mesopotamian motifs to various effects. A series of figurative sculptures by Nuha Al-Radi—combining paint, ceramics, rocks, and sometimes metal canisters—produce deliberately crude works with titles referring to the scarcity of

proper artistic materials in the region, which in ancient times, produced the finest examples of early sculpture. To that end, a painting on wood by Al-Radi features the face of the Lady of Uruk, among the world's first veristic depictions of a human visage. Two arresting paintings by Afifa Aleiby, *Gulf War* (1991) and *War Painting (The Destruction of Iraq)* (1991) merge the figure of a woman with ancient Assyrian sculptural reliefs to associate the empathy for modern Iraq with its ancient cultural heritage. *Gulf War* has little depth—the folds of the woman's dress flowing directly into the striated wings of the guardian behind her, both figures pierced by bullet holes. In *War Painting*, the dress becomes a fluted column, while both the woman and the stone face behind her weep at the ruins strewn about. Decades before the Islamic State made it a media spectacle to destroy history, Iraqi artists understood the intertwined nature of the human and cultural toll of war.

On the matter of destruction, the show follows recent trends in contemporary art with its share of protests and artist withdrawals. Before the show opened, Phil Collins removed his *baghdad screentests* (2002) in solidarity with a prison divestment campaign targeting MoMA and its trustee Larry Fink, CEO of BlackRock. Michael Rakowitz, whose withdrawal from the 2019 Whitney Biennial sparked a wave of protests by other artists in the show, requested that the video portion of his project *RETURN* (2004–) be paused for the same cause, which the institution reportedly denied several times before the artist visited the exhibition and turned off the video himself. On its closing day, Ali Yass offered permission to a group of activists to tear down an installation of his drawings. When the protesters arrived, they found his works had been preemptively removed. After negotiations with MoMA PS1, the group tore up facsimiles of the drawings in the museum's lobby, with Yass addressing the group from Berlin via videocall. There is an inescapable irony that the gestures of these artists were met with such protective institutional resistance, while the destruction of artifacts in Iraq was permitted by the world by way of willful neglect. By accident, these protesting artists demonstrated the disproportionate presence of care that is chief among the theses of the exhibition.

At times, one is overwhelmed and fatigued by the sheer vastness of the exhibition. But *Theater of Operations*, in all of its excess, demands careful consideration at every moment.

In this sense, it channels the Gulf Wars aptly, at least from a Western view—long, complex, sometimes boring and inscrutable, and often abstractly horrifying. The quagmire of the conflict is telegraphed in the proliferation of artists whose presence seems obligatory yet superfluous—Jenny Holzer's textual pronunciations, the Guerilla Girls posters condemning patriarchal Saudi society, Michel Auder's *Gulf War TV War* (1991), are among these works, to name just a few. The Gulf Wars profoundly influenced Western culture, this much is clear. And now, we have a better sense of how it impacted the art and thinking of the Gulf. No work in the exhibition conveys this better than an unfinished painting by Layla Al-Attar, the first female graduate of Baghdad's Institute of Fine Arts, and later the director of the Iraqi National Art Museum. In it, a nude woman crouches forward, her hair whisked forward over her face as a fiery, white light emanates from her. Al-Attar never finished the painting. She was killed in her home in a missile attack authorized by US President Bill Clinton.

**Theater of Operations: The Gulf Wars 1991–2011, at MoMA PS1 ran from November 3, 2019– March 1, 2020.**

### IMAGE CAPTIONS:

Moma1.jpg  
Installation view of Thomas Hirschhorn, *Necklace CNN* (2002) on view in the exhibition *Theater of Operations: The Gulf Wars 1991–2011*, MoMA PS1, New York, November 3, 2019–March 1, 2020. Photo by Matthew Septimus.

Moma2.jpg  
Monira Al Qadiri, *Behind the Sun*, 2013. Video (color, sound). 10:00 minutes. Courtesy of the artist.

Moma3.jpg  
Dia al-Azzawi, *War Diary No. 1*, 1991. Gouache and charcoal on paper, 28 pages, 12 x 9.5 inches. Courtesy of the artist.

Moma4.jpg  
Thuraya Al-Baqsami, *The Last Shot*, 1991. Pastel and acrylic on paper, 19 x 23 inches. Courtesy of the artist.

Moma5.jpg  
Afifa Aleiby, *Gulf War*, 1991. Oil on canvas, 39 x 27.5 inches. Courtesy of the artist.

Moma6.jpg  
Himat M. Ali, *Al Mutanabbi Street Baghdad*, 2007. Mixed media on paper; 12 bound books in wooden slipcase, each: 13 x 9 inches. Courtesy of the artist and Azzawi Collection, London. Photo: Anthony Dawton.

Moma7.jpg  
Harun Farocki, *War at a Distance*, 2003. Video (color, sound). 58:00 minutes. Museum of Modern Art. Committee on Film Funds. © 2019 Harun Farocki Filmproduktion.