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# Severed heads in Iraqi diasporic visual production: Aleiby, Baldin and Alsoudani

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## ABSTRACT

This essay examines the trope of the decapitated, severed head as it appears in a range of works produced by three emigrant Iraqi artists: Afifa Aleiby, Baldin Ahmad and Ahmed Alsoudani. Drawing on a range of cultural, political and philosophical readings of the severed head by figures such as Adriana Cavarero, Julia Kristeva and Francois Debrix, the essay seeks to map the diverse affects, meanings and contexts the severed head takes on in Aleiby, Baldin and Alsoudani's paintings and sculptures from Saddam's dictatorship to the present. What kind of affects – horror, disgust, pleasure, ecstasy – does the spectacle of the severed head generate? How does the figure of the head detached from the body become a metonymy or synecdoche for the political state of exile, displacement or alienation? Finally, what function does the representation of the severed head play in the production and articulation of loss, trauma and mourning.

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## Introduction

In 2008, Danfung Dennis took a controversial photograph of two American soldiers in Iraq. It showed one soldier smiling at the camera while brandishing the severed head of an Iraqi man beheaded by ISIS on suspicion of being an American collaborator. As the first soldier displays the head, the second soldier looks at it and smiles broadly: the head itself appears with eyes closed and blood-stained face. To be sure, this image is just one of many visual representations of beheadings in contemporary Iraq but it disturbingly captures how the Iraqi severed head has become, in Jessica Aughter's words, both a 'taboo for viewing' and, at the same time, 'a spectacle for our consumption'.<sup>1</sup> we do not gaze upon the head itself so much as upon the American spectators

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themselves gazing upon it. However, according to Auchter, Dennis encountered great difficulty in getting his photograph published. If many outlets deemed it too graphic or obscene, Auchter reports that it finally appeared in *Rolling Stone* magazine but only as a means of illustrating how ‘the violence in Iraq was on the rise again’: ‘The severed head image, then, was published as background to a larger story concerning the psychological excess of war, and its effect on the American soldier.’<sup>2</sup> In decontextualising the image so violently – and turning it into a spectacle of American trauma – the Iraqi head is hermeneutically severed again.<sup>3</sup>

To recall Frances Larson’s cultural history of heads lost and found, the practice of decapitation has existed in various cultures across the globe and through different historical epochs. She notes that, while decapitation and headhunting have often been associated with ‘primitive’ cultures and communities, they remain central to the Western imaginary:

Severed heads have long had a value, or a place, in our society; even if that value is contested or troubling. People’s heads have been, and in some cases continue to be, displayed in the name of science, warfare, religion, art, justice and politics.<sup>4</sup>

Among the examples she cites are European and American scientists collecting skulls to display in museums in the nineteenth century,<sup>5</sup> allied troops sending skulls of their enemies as gifts and souvenirs during the Second World War, inventors of machines claiming to detach the head with record speed, and without pain during the twentieth century and the fixation with cryonics where heads are frozen in thermos masks in Arizona in the twenty-first century.<sup>6</sup> In Larson’s account, these myriad heads all testify to the ‘cultural power of the severed head.’<sup>7</sup>

In this essay, I seek to aesthetically return the Iraqi severed head to its body and, more generally, to the body politic of Iraq itself by exploring neither images of ISIS beheadings nor American images of such images, but rather images of severed heads produced by Iraqi diasporic artists themselves. To introduce my argument, the essay examines the trope of the decapitated, severed head as it appears in a range of works produced by three emigrant Iraqi artists: Afifa Aleiby, Baldin Ahmad and Ahmed Alsoudani.<sup>8</sup> The selection of these artists is informed by the fact that each has produced visual representations of the severed head across different time periods, deploying different aesthetic and visual forms, as well as evoking different thematic tropes. In spite of these differences, all three draw on the trope of the severed head to embody the traumas experienced in their homeland as well as states of voluntary and involuntary exile and displacement.

Drawing on a range of cultural, political and philosophical readings of the severed head by figures such as Adriana Cavarero, Julia Kristeva and Francois Debrix, the essay seeks to map the diverse affects, meanings, and contexts the

severed head takes on in Aleiby, Baldin and Alsoldani's paintings and sculptures from Saddam's dictatorship to the present.<sup>9</sup> What kind of affects – horror, disgust, pleasure, ecstasy – does the spectacle of the severed head generate? How does the figure of the head detached from the body become a metonymy or synecdoche for the political state of exile, displacement or alienation? Finally, what function does the representation of the severed head play in the production and articulation of loss, trauma, and mourning?<sup>10</sup>

### **Horror and the severed head: Cavarero and Kristeva**

In her study of the etymology of the word 'horror', the Italian philosopher Cavarero argues that, whereas terror is 'characterized by the physical experience of fear as manifested in a trembling body,' horror 'denotes primarily a state of paralysis, reinforced by the feeling of growing stiff on the part of someone who is freezing'.<sup>11</sup> To be terrorised, she argues, we must first experience a threat to life and our response is to seek to preserve and protect that life by turning or running away – escaping. However, horror does not perpetuate any instinctive reaction to survive: instead, it paralyses and takes over human life. For Francois Debrix, in an expanded discussion of Cavarero's point, 'horror directly assaults human life including the capacity to die a human death'.<sup>12</sup> If terror threatens but ultimately reinforces the integrity of human life, Cavarero elaborates that horror aims to destroy the uniqueness of the human body, tearing at its constitutive vulnerability: 'the violence that dismembers it offends the ontological dignity that the human figure possess and renders it unattainable'. In Cavarero's verdict, nowhere is the physics of horror more deeply registered than in violence rendered upon the head: the decapitated head is the single most 'repugnant' body part.<sup>13</sup>

To the same degree as Cavarero, Julia Kristeva's *The Severed Head: Capital Visions* (which accompanied an art exhibition at the Louvre in 1998) focuses on the disarming affective power – the horror – of the severed head. It is worth recalling here her earlier seminal essay 'Powers of Horror' where horror famously connotes 'the *fading away* of all meaning and all humanity'.<sup>14</sup> For Kristeva, who gives the same title as the earlier essay to Chapter 9 of *The Severed Head*, the representation of decapitation and severed heads likewise incite 'fascination and abjection, ecstasy and vomit—pain has neither subject nor object: between the two, it corrupts and spreads'.<sup>15</sup> In contrast to Cavarero, who specifically associates terror with the fear of death and the desire to preserve life, Kristeva's psychoanalytic reading connects the representation of the severed head to the death of the maternal body thus conjuring a 'gendered and even matricidal connotation'.<sup>16</sup> Kristeva writes:

The separation and absence cause it [the infant] to suffer; it becomes convinced that it will not have everything, that it is not everything, that it has

been abandoned, that it is alone. Some never recover from this first grief: if it seems as though Mama is dead, mustn't I myself die in turn, die to thought, neither eat nor speak?<sup>17</sup>

If Cavarero and Kristeva both appear to associate decapitation with an affective response that is stripped of 'meaning' – horror or the abject – it is significant that both philosophers still privilege the *visual representation* of the severed head: the Medusa's head, for example, or the head of Louis XVI. It is clear, for instance, that what Cavarero calls 'horrorism' is not simply a non-representational affective or physical response but an act of aesthetic interpretation, reading, or seeing. For the Italian philosopher, 'repugnance for the work of horror comes ... not just from looking but from imagining' what is said and heard.<sup>18</sup> In this sense, Cavarero's project is inextricably associated with 'representation and the imaginary'<sup>19</sup> as well as the raw phenomenology of experience: what puts the '-ism' into *horrorism* is us.

For Kristeva, even more strongly than Cavarero, the visual representation of the severed head not only concretises the affective violence of the abject, but, crucially, offers a way of suturing the psychoanalytic wound caused by the loss of the mother. She argues that art enables us to 'stand up to the void' in the same way that representations of violence can allow us to stand up to violence or even prevent violence.<sup>20</sup> To put it in her words, a 'capital' vision (from the old French *capital* and the Latin *capitus*, of or pertaining to the head) fills the gap left behind by the maternal decapitation:

A body leaves me: her tactile warmth, her music that delights my ear, the view that offers me her head and face, they all are lost. For this capital disappearance I substitute a capital vision: my hallucinations and my words. Imagination, language, beyond the depression: an incarnation? The one that keeps me alive, on the condition that I continue to represent, ceaselessly, never enough, indefinitely, but what? A body that has left me? A lost head?<sup>21</sup>

If horror is about the demise of all 'meaning',<sup>22</sup> Kristeva thus concludes that art and the image can challenge or speak back to this horror and enable us to see it differently: the work of art 'reshapes our vision so that we see it with new eyes'.<sup>23</sup> In the new eyes (or new head?) that it gives to the viewer, the artwork symbolically reassembles the decapitated body if not for the victim then at least for the viewer.

In what follows, I argue that the representation of the severed head in the work of Aleiby, Baldin and Alsoudani similarly attempts to render the 'unrepresentable' horror that permeates Iraq and Iraqi experiences representable. To be clear, Aleiby, Baldin and Alsoudani do not seek to neutralise or domesticate what Cavarero calls the horror (and horrorism) of decapitation, but, like Kristeva, they do seek to aesthetically reassemble or reconstitute the decapitated body in a series of new 'capital visions' of political exile,

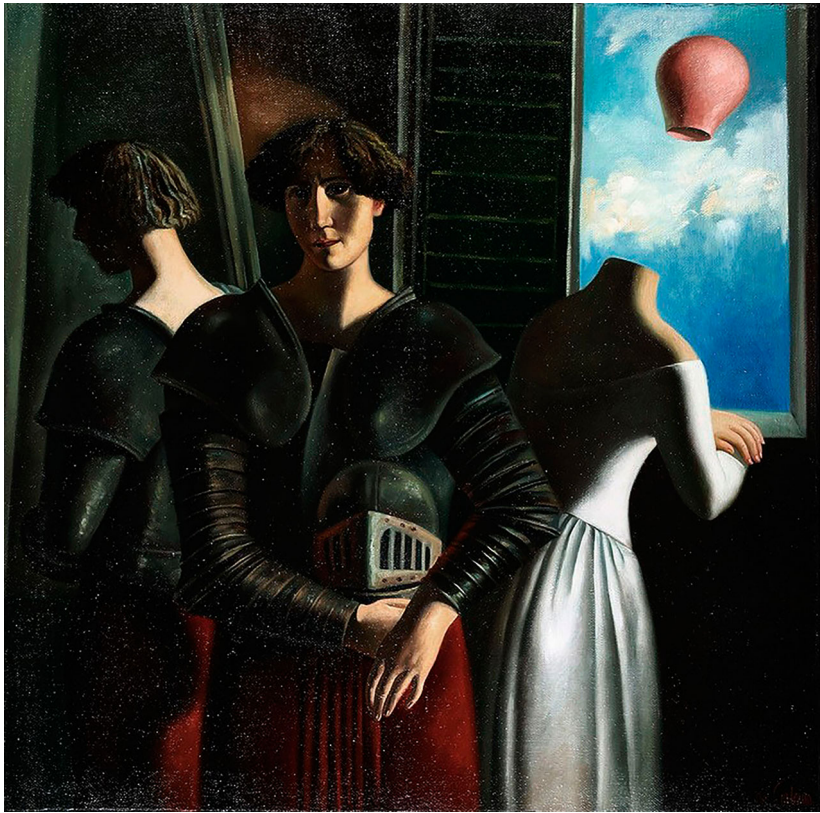
resistance, and mourning. In this respect, I argue that their work comes close to fulfilling the demand of the late Iraqi sculptor and artist Bassem Hamed as recorded in the 2017 documentary *The Survivors of Firdous Square*: 'I don't think there is any kind of art that could explain what's occurring on our streets. What is happening is beyond human imagination. What is happening is inconceivable. If we could come close to the unimaginable I think we would produce something genius'.<sup>24</sup>

### ***Afifa Aleiby: exile, loss and the maternal homeland***

In order to map the severed head in Iraqi diasporic art, I want to begin with female Iraqi artist Afifa Aleiby. Born in Basra in 1953, Aleiby completed her art education in Moscow but found herself unable to return to her native country after her graduation in 1981 because of the political instability that had gripped Iraq at the time. The artist had no choice but to live elsewhere: she moved to Italy then to Yemen before finally settling in the Netherlands in the mid-1990s. Overall, Aleiby's work – which has been exhibited internationally – registers artistic influences ranging from Renaissance and Impressionist paintings to religious icons and social realism. Her body of work is often imbued with strong political and personal undertones: it repeatedly captures the harrowing political landscape of her native homeland at the same time as it depicts the struggle of living in forced exile and the cultural conflicts and ambiguities that ensue. And it is in the recurrent motif of the female figure that she attends to both her politically charged themes and her own personal state of displacement. The female figure in her paintings is at times sensual, poetic, and enticing and at others presented in a strong sculptural form, expressionless, and detached. In yet other instances, maternal subjectivity and the bonds between a mother and child take centre stage. Nevertheless, one notable aspect of Aleiby's portrayal of the female figure is the image of decapitation and the severed head.

To take just one example, Aleiby's *To be a Woman* (1989) features a dark-haired female figure standing regally in the foreground of the painting (Figure 1). The figure is dressed in what resembles an ancient Mesopotamian military outfit of black and brownish red and is depicted staring sorrowfully beyond the viewer while part of her upper body is reflected in a side mirror. Behind the dark-haired woman is a headless female form clad in a greyish-white gown reminiscent of a historical European style of fashion: the gown is marked by a low round neckline fitted to the waist while a fuller skirt extends from the waist downward. The headless female figure – whose back is to us – is depicted looking out the window while a red balloon-like head stripped of facial features floats up in the air amongst the blue sky.

At first sight, it is difficult to gauge the nature of the relationship between the dark-haired woman and the headless female figure. The stark contrast



**Figure 1.** *To be a Woman*, 1989, oil on canvas, 100 × 100 cm. Copyright Afifa Aleiby. Courtesy of Afifa Aleiby website.

between the intense and tragic expression of the dark-haired woman and the headless figure create an uncanny, mysterious atmosphere. Yet, other elements in the painting appear to suggest that the two women are somehow connected. For example, the positions of the dark-haired woman and the headless female's hands appear identical while the colour of the dark red head-like balloon matches the colour of the outfit the dark-haired woman is wearing. This aspect of mirroring, reflecting, and signalling subtle similarities between the dark-haired woman and the headless female form suggest that they may be one and the same person. The presence of two female figures instead of one, thus, alludes to the ambiguity of identity and divided selfhood. In this painting, each self becomes represented and contained in a singular human form, be it the dark-haired woman or the headless one. And it is in the trope of the severed head, especially, that this doubling is captured. It is striking, for instance, that the headless female form does not appear in the mirror reflection positioned behind



the woman in the Mesopotamian output. The latter's absent reflection attests to a possible state of disintegration whereby one's self or image can no longer be distinguished or identified. In this respect, the floating, featureless severed head becomes an embodiment of a condition of exile and displacement where one is no longer able to recognise oneself and selfhood.

In highlighting these different tensions and contradictions within the painting itself, it is necessary to point out that *To be a Woman* was produced in the late 1980s and while the artist was living in exile from Iraq. It was a period marked by the artist's experience of trauma at her own exile and the suffering she encountered both inside and outside of Iraq. This sense of dissociation and separation – which is underscored through the severed, floating head in relation to the two female figures – ultimately points to the artist's own state of conflicted identity as she attempts to come to terms with the loss of a homeland and the encounter with a new culture. As Olga Nefedova points out: 'Having left Iraq, Aleiby is constantly faced with the fact that she is not in the country of her origin and that while she is living in the safety of Europe, her countrymen and women suffer unspeakable horrors and injustice'.<sup>25</sup> It is no coincidence, then, that the dark-haired woman in the painting bears a resemblance to Aleiby, who often uses herself as model.

So, in *To be a Woman*, Aleiby effectively splits her head from her body and divides the parts of herself into two separate physical entities: one is Mesopotamian in identity and the other is European; one has a head and the other is headless; one is tragic and the other is stripped of features and emotions. Through this interplay and opposition, the painting ultimately embodies the very condition of exile where one is no longer able to recognise oneself and one's selfhood on the one hand, and where one experiences a severing of the body(head) from the body politic of the native homeland (Iraq) on the other. In short, what we encounter is an expression of a social, cultural, and political dismemberment.

While other paintings by Aleiby – such as *Dreaming* (1985), *Waiting For Carnival* (1987) and *Antiquarian* (2003) – also feature headless female forms and severed heads, it is in *The Flood* (Gulf War) (1991) that we find the ultimate expression of the personal and political undercurrents that have marked her earlier body of work (Figure 2). According to Aleiby, the work was completed during the Gulf War and sought to express her opposition to the 'occupation of Kuwait' and 'against the war on Iraq':<sup>26</sup> the painting embodies the artist's pain for her native homeland and its people. Just as she introduces Mesopotamian elements in *To be a Woman*, *The Flood* again draws on her native culture by integrating iconography and symbols that are common to the collective history of the Iraqi people.

The painting itself features the 'Twisted minaret' – which is the minaret of the mosques of Samarra – drowning in a ruthless and uncontrolled ocean. In





**Figure 2.** *The Flood*, 1991, oil on canvas, 70 × 90 cm. Copyright Afifa Aleiby. Courtesy of Afifa Aleiby website.

front of the minaret, and surrounded by large clouds and violent waves, an angel sits on the shore with her legs wide apart. Between the angel's feet rests a severed head. The angel is depicted weeping while the serene-looking head rests on one side and in the direction of the viewer. For Aleiby, the angel embodies purity and nobility even as she weeps over the tragedy of her people while the presence of the severed head becomes the extreme expression of these tragedies. As the artist notes in an interview, the painting 'reflects my pain, in the image of this agonised angel crying on the civilisation

of a country that suffered suppression and persecution.<sup>27</sup> The centrality of the severed head in the visual narrative of *The Flood* is, then, a way to meditate on loss: the loss of a homeland, a country, and a people.

In the first chapter of her book *Strangers to Ourselves*, 'Tocatto and Fugue for the Foreigner', Kristeva ruminates on the position of the foreigner. She points out that what drives the foreigner to leave is 'the secret wound, often unknown to [herself]', adding that the foreigner pursues 'the invisible and promised territory, that country that does not exist but that [she] bears in [her] dreams, and that must indeed be called a beyond'.<sup>28</sup> To this end, the foreigner departs from the home in search of a romantic and idealised homeland that does not necessarily exist. It is through this separation that the foreigner loses the mother. Evoking Albert Camus's *The Stranger* (1942), Kristeva suggests that the state of being a stranger and strangeness itself is perpetuated by the death of the mother: the loss of mother, mother-land, and mother tongue. The loss of the homeland thus becomes intricately linked to a matricide. Kristeva goes on to add that the foreigner 'survive[s] with a tearful face turned towards the lost homeland' where 'the lost paradise is a mirage of the past he will never be able to recover.' Consequently, the foreigner channels the rage against those who led to her exile towards the self: "How could I have abandoned them?— I have abandoned myself," adding that 'always elsewhere, the foreigner belongs nowhere'.<sup>29</sup> He/she is neither here nor there, neither part of the past nor the present. In all this, the foreigner begins to exist without a self: 'I do what *they* want *me* to, but it is not "me" – "me" is elsewhere, "me" belongs to no one, "me" does not belong to "me," ... does "me" exist?' Kristeva poignantly summarises.<sup>30</sup>

Building on the trope of motherhood and the loss of the mother, we have seen how Kristeva's more recent work also argues that the representation of severed heads and skulls throughout history connote the lost head of the mother who, in the pre-Oedipal stage, is both the locus of gratification and fear. Yet the separation from the mother is also a crucial stage for the child's attainment of individuality. For Kristeva, this separation process brings about mourning and loss and it is these affects that are embodied in the separation of the head from its body and in representations of severed heads more generally. In other words, Kristeva's main argument is that representations of skulls and severed heads stir up and even channel our fear of death, especially in relation to the maternal body.<sup>31</sup>

In the context of Kristeva's reflections on these various maternal configurations of foreigner, infant separation and loss, the representation of the severed head in Aleiby's two paintings, thus, can be read as an allegorical embodiment of the motherland, Iraq, its predicament, and the separation from it. Through the visual idiom of the severed head, Aleiby returns the viewer to the extreme violence that has marked her own separation (and other Iraqis) from the homeland as well as the trauma of exile and the

subsequent reconfiguration of a new self and identity. This separation from the point of origin is one that cannot be made whole again, nor can it be found again. In short, the severed heads in both paintings – despite their particular configurations – become a mode of meditating on loss: the loss of a homeland, country, people and, through it all, the loss of self and selfhood. Indeed, Aleiby herself often refers to Iraq through maternal configurations: ‘For the Iraqi diaspora, an umbilical cord links us to our homeland, just as it once had done to our mothers. This also meant we were not cut off from fearing for our country, or shielded from any pain. It had repercussions for everything we were doing or accomplishing in our daily lives outside the borders of our homeland,’ she explains in one interview.<sup>32</sup>

### ***Baldin Ahmad: defiance, triumph, and political power***

Another artist who draws on the trope of the severed head to capture both personal and political affects is Iraqi-Kurdish artist Baldin Ahmad, who lives in Utrecht, the Netherlands. Born in 1954, Baldin is part of an older generation of very well-established artists who has participated in numerous international exhibitions. In terms of his artistic outputs, Baldin is renowned for his use of a range of art forms and genres from installation and video to paintings and sculptures. His work repeatedly explores personal and political conflicts and the intense pain they engender. But perhaps it is in the sculpture of his brother, the late political activist Ahmad Al-Hallak [better known by his Kurdish name Ahmadi Dalak] (1928–1969) – or rather the sculpture of the severed head of this revolutionary figure – that his experiences of pain, torture, loss and revolution are transmitted.

Erected in 2016, the sculpture of Baldin’s brother is located in the west side of Sulaymaniyah city, in the east of the Kurdistan region of Iraq (Figure 3). The sculpture itself features a severed head with a thick mop of hair and moustache, resting atop a large metal chair. The right cheek is depicted touching the chair’s metal directly. The head is serene looking, staring into the distance with a kind, gentle smile. For any average observer, there is nothing about the sculpture that reflects its tragic history: it is ‘as if nothing had happened, no one had been harmed, no tragedy had occurred’.<sup>33</sup>

Yet, behind this serene-looking head is the story of a revolutionary who joined the Iraqi Communist party at a young age and who was a fugitive from the Iraqi secret police intelligence because of his political activities for the liberation of the state of Kurdistan and for oppressed and disenfranchised groups in the country more generally. Throughout his life, Dalak was imprisoned and tortured on many occasions. In the wake of the split in the Iraqi Communist party in 1967 and the secret police’s crackdown on its members (by orders from Saddam), Dalak was captured and tortured to make him confess the names of his comrades.<sup>34</sup> According to Ismail



**Figure 3.** Ahmadi Dalak Statue in Sulaymaniyah, 2016, Bronze and Stone, 500 × 130 × 120 cm. Copyright Baldin Ahmad. Courtesy of Baldin Ahmad.

Hamalaw's account, Dalak's torture was extensive and brutal: his eye was removed, he was left to bleed for days on end, and was even placed on the torture chair as a gruesome display for the other prisoners. Finally, Dalak was transferred to the acid room on his torture-bloodied chair in the hope

that he would confess. Except he did not. Witness accounts claim Dalak only smiled and said: 'As a communist, I fought all my life for equity and liberation. Even if I were to be born again, I would relish being born as a communist to continue the fight for liberation. Gentleman, this is my first and last confession'.<sup>35</sup> And it is this moment of idealist defiance that is expressed in Baldin's sculpture. The artist's rendition of the last moment of his brother's life neither shrouds it in hagiographical glorification nor tragic victimhood. Instead, the sculpture and its visual characteristics seek to revive this last moment prior to Dalak's death in 1969. It is the moment when Dalak's body is said to have melted onto the torture chair leaving only his head with its intact smile.

If Dalak's corpse was never returned to his family, nor a proper burial carried out, Baldin's sculpture ensures the commemoration of the absent corpse decades after its disappearance, through the very synecdoche of the head. Here, Lorna Clymer's 'corpse theory' allows for a deeper understanding of Baldin's sculpture and the manner in which the severed head itself is cast. Clymer – who focuses on body parts in the context of the eighteenth-century – proposes a theory of the corpse as a mode of unpacking the set of meanings attributed to human 'remains'.<sup>36</sup> The critic first notes that 'a corpse's status as an object is ambivalent: it exists simultaneously and uncannily as both human and as gross matter: as both itself and as an unsettling image of the once living entity.' Secondly, 'in order to receive any type of treatment, a corpse and its parts must be reconstituted in narrative; that is, they must be made literary.' Thirdly, 'the corpse itself and its body parts, like their textual counterpart, the quotation, are made significant through the rhetorical figure of synecdoche: a quantitative substitution (typically of part to whole).' Fourthly, 'when they are narrated and troped, dead bodies and their parts can circulate like stories being passed down'.<sup>37</sup>

In examining the meanings embedded in Baldin's sculpture, what takes on significance is not the absence of his brother's corpse, its representation, or even its dismemberment, but the construction of a public, visible narrative that the head itself embodies and expresses. This narrative or 'quotation' – as Clymer puts it – is facilitated both by the visual characteristics of the sculpture itself and the place in which it resides. The serene-looking head, its cynical smile, and its resting position atop the chair that once held traces of DNA invite the viewer to witness and experience the story of the last moments of a revolutionary figure: not his torture, his pain, his melting body, just the story of his defiance of his executioners and the political system they represent.

If the triumphant story of Dalak's final moments are embodied in the sculpture of his severed head, then the manner of its display is no less significant to the narrative that the viewer is invited to unpack: the head resides on the top of a hill not far from the city's main, crowded streets. On top of this

hill sits a hotel called *Shari Jwan* ('Beautiful City'), which is considered the tallest hotel in Iraq and is a tourist site for many visiting the city. The surrounding landscape and building appear to complement the characteristics expressed through the sculpture itself: like the tall hill and the majestic looking hotel, Baldin's sculpture is formidable, dignified, open, and visible to the whole city.

While the corpse of Dalak was destroyed, and the violent history he endured is subdued or contained in the construction of the sculpture, what is made visible and celebrated is the force of Dalak's revolutionary spirit and his idealist defiance. It is in this sense that the sculpture of the severed head is synecdochal, allowing for the circulation of the story of the body it once belonged to, through a dismembered part.

In his own personal take on the creation of the sculpture of his brother, Baldin notes: '[...] I endeavored in my sculpture not to personify any kind of heroism, though Ahmadi Dalak is a universal, revolutionary hero who fought against chauvinism and fascism. I wished, instead to convey this vital energy of life, which emanated from his death. I didn't want to push any kind of heroism on the surface, no, I wanted to represent his optimistic energy, his warm conversations about the best future for a human being, his exuberant dedication to equality. I wanted to bring to life his conversation from death, which gave me hope and helped me through my darkest moments'.<sup>38</sup> In short, while Baldin's sculpture subdues the violent history his brother endured, the depiction of the sculptured, severed head energises its force as an icon of political force and inspiration to the inhabitants of Sulaimaniyah and beyond.

### ***Ahmed Alsoudani – the sovereign's many heads***

To turn to the work of Iraqi-American Ahmed Alsoudani, who belongs to a younger generation of internationally celebrated artists, we once again find that the trope of dismemberment in general, and of the severed head more specifically, haunts a number of his paintings. His work reflects a similar interplay between personal and political trauma to that found in Aleiby and Baldin's works. Commenting on Alsoudani's overall body of work, Shamim M. Momin notes that what is particularly striking about the artist's paintings are their evocation of a sense of 'helplessness' in the face of the suffering unfolding in Iraq as well as 'the odd sense of "in-betweenness" that accompanies the nomadic globalism', adding that 'the [...] war in Iraq, and Alsoudani's particular experience of both intimacy with and distance from it, have created the sociopolitical complexities of his multifaceted life, thereby generating his peculiarly piercing but bizarrely nonpartisan canvases'.<sup>39</sup>



Born in Baghdad in 1975, Alsoudani was forced to flee to Syria in his early twenties because of the political conditions in his country: Alsoudani left Iraq for fear of severe punishment following his defacement of Saddam's image in a mural displayed in a nearby neighbourhood.<sup>40</sup> Unable to acquire citizenship in Syria and feeling trapped in his 'refugee' status, the artist applied for asylum to the United States, where he currently resides. Yet, his personal experiences of growing up in war-torn Iraq and with the omnipresence of a dictator are clearly registered in his overall work. Alsoudani's body of paintings grapple with states of violence, dismemberment, and terror. His work persistently portrays large, graphic, and detailed representations of violence and horror in a manner reminiscent of Caravaggio, Francisco Goya, and Pablo Picasso, whom he cites as major influences in his artistic practice. In order to capture the harrowing experiences of war and terror in Iraq, Alsoudani turns to the trope of dismemberment, especially the decapitated head: works such as the series of *Untitled* paintings dated 2008, all feature dismembered bodies, parts, and forms despite their abstraction. Yet it is Alsoudani's re-appropriation of the symbolic decapitation of Saddam's statue that offers the most complex account of the power relations between the sovereign, or rather dictator, and his people.

To be sure, perhaps the singular most iconic image of a severed head in the context of Iraq remains that of the decapitation of Saddam's large statue in Firduous Square following the American invasion of Iraq in 2013. In what can only be seen as a symbolic attempt to destroy, humiliate, and annihilate the power of the sovereign, Iraqi citizens – with the help of American troops – tied a robe around the neck of Saddam's statue and broke it. They then sat atop the severed head and dragged it across the streets of the capital, all the while kicking it with their feet. This very symbolic decapitation of the statue's head was widely circulated and repackaged across various mass media, both regionally and internationally, as the signifier of the 'fall of Saddam'.

In contrast to this excessive circulation, Alsoudani seeks to reappropriate the severed head of Saddam's statue as a site and locus of what Margaret E. Owens calls 'containment and closure'.<sup>41</sup> In his painting *Baghdad II* (2008), for example, the decapitated head of what appears to be Saddam (or rather his statue) is depicted locked behind bars, albeit in an abstract manner (Figure 4). The painting itself follows an earlier work entitled *Baghdad I* (2008) in which the artist captures the complex events surrounding the fall of Saddam and the toppling of his statue, the latter appearing in the painting in 'monumental form'.<sup>42</sup> In *Baghdad II*, Alsoudani continues to capture, process, and reflect on the events that led to the fall of Saddam. Like in *Baghdad I*, the act of toppling Saddam's statue features in this painting – only this time the focus is on the image of the decapitated head. This image is situated in the bottom right hand corner of the painting while elsewhere the





**Figure 4.** Ahmed Alsoudani *Baghdad II*, 2008 Acrylic on canvas 250 × 380 cm © Ahmed Alsoudani Photo: Saatchi Gallery, London.

scene depicted is reminiscent of a standard day in the life of Baghdad citizens: a car has crashed into an American security zone, red flames are seen rising from the ground in a stylised and dramatic manner and an eyeball sits in the centre of the painting. In this complex composition, a female figure is also drawn into the scene rather than painted on it like the rest of the visual elements.

In his reading of this painting, which was produced five years after the fall of Saddam, Robert Goff suggests that one way to interpret the decapitated head behind bars is in terms of censorship: ‘Under Saddam’s dictatorship art was constricted and imprisoned and this idea of censorship is continually evoked through a layered approach in this work’.<sup>43</sup> Certainly, art censorship was one of the pervading practices during Saddam’s reign impacting on venues, production, and the overall work of artists (and writers) more generally. Nevertheless, one can unpack other meanings in this representation of the severed head. To clarify, the severed head of the statue in this painting still underscores the defeat of the sovereign and the transfer of political power away from him. Yet, as Michael Rogin argues in another context, ‘the severed head still signifies power’ here largely because of the fetish status it has acquired through its circulation and re-circulation on various media platforms.<sup>44</sup> In many ways, this circulation of the image of the sovereign’s head ironically re-enforced a visual mechanism that Saddam himself had propagated during his dictatorship: the severed head ‘points not to the

forces that prop it up but to its own power to stand in for the body politic as a whole'.<sup>45</sup>

Writing on the production of Saddam's hyper-masculine image in Iraqi visual media, Hazem Saghieh notes that following his ascension to power, the leader's image had 'come to fill every space in Iraqi society' to the extent that it soon became an 'embodiment of the nation'.<sup>46</sup> The photographs, paintings, and statues of Saddam that proliferated in the city, on TV and in the press created an image of an invincible leader who typified patriarchal ideals. These 'monolithic' images clearly were intended to inspire fear and respect amongst the Iraqi people while professing to the world at large that the leader was a force to reckon with.<sup>47</sup> In a sense, Saddam transformed the Iraqi nation state into his own larger-than-life persona, portraying it as a domineering masculine entity capable of restraining all internal and external forces. During his dictatorship, no man was allowed to occupy the public sphere but him. It is no surprise, then, that with the fall of Saddam, one of the first things to ensue was the destruction and decapitation of this domineering image, through the very statue itself. According to Paul Rutherford, what took place was 'a ritual castration' of Saddam and his regime, be it through American forces or Iraqi citizens themselves,<sup>48</sup> in a political echo of Sigmund Freud's polemic view in his essay on 'Medusa's Head' that to decapitate = to castrate.<sup>49</sup> Nevertheless, what was originally an attempt to destroy one image (Saddam's statue) has ironically led to the creation of another powerful image, the decapitated statue.

In view of the different power dynamics at play with the decapitated statue of Saddam, Alsoudani's representation of the severed head behind bars could be read as an attempt to restrict or suppress the symbolic potential of the decapitated image: note, for example, its marginal position at the lower end of the canvas rather than in the centre. Just as years earlier, Alsoudani attempted to deface a mural image of Saddam near his neighbourhood in Iraq, in 'Baghdad II' he undertakes a similar exercise in iconoclasm while in the diaspora.

But, in a deeper sense, the representation of the severed head behind bars and the overall scene of violence and terror across the canvas *demystify* the glorified spectacle of decapitation witnessed during Saddam's fall. The severed head here is not symbolic of the demise of the monstrous sovereign nor the site and spectacle of a new political order beginning to be born. Rather, the decapitated head becomes connected to the Hydra-like *proliferation* of monstrosity in the country, hence its suppression behind bars. The severed head in this painting attests to the uncontrollable wave of violence that has gripped Iraq and the spectre of monstrosity that continues to haunt its body-politic. The image of the female figure holding what looks

like a large broken egg on her back as she hunches forward only attests to a world of pain and suffering that permeates the canvas.

Finally, however, there is still space for hope in Alsoudani's painting and this is subtly registered through the use of the medium of drawing to depict the female figure. In the opening chapter of *The Severed Head*, entitled 'On Drawing: Or, The Speed of Thought', Kristeva argues that the drawing of the head bespeaks of a human desire to make visible that which is not, mainly death. Evoking the memory of a drawing her mother had once made, Kristeva makes clear that her reflections are intended to 'make apparent the power of drawing, on the border dividing the visible from the invisible'.<sup>50</sup> She adds that drawing is 'the spontaneous ellipsis when conception and execution merge'.<sup>51</sup> Analysing Kristeva's thoughts on drawing in light of her previous writings on abjection, Kathryn Lloyd argues that drawing becomes 'the opposite moment of abjection, where meaning stems from a breakdown of distinction between inner and outer.' To clarify her point, Lloyd gives the example of bodily processes that become chaotic when one is ill: 'All physical manifestations of illness provide the potential for abjection. Our systematic order is the continued containment of our interiority. When this is challenged, this is chaos.' Yet, this state of chaos carries it with 'the possibility of a new order' and, as Lloyd concludes, 'by extension of our interiority, drawing can become the agent for defining this new order'.<sup>52</sup>

In line with this reading of Kristeva, I want to propose that the drawing of the woman in Alsoudani's painting becomes, despite the pain and suffering that her physical demeanour embodies, a manifestation of the possibility of a new political and social order for Iraq. The very fact of her appearance as a drawing – rather than being painted directly onto the canvas with oil like the rest of the visual elements – provides a degree of visual relief or distraction from the otherwise animated, intense, and stylised mis-en-scene. In other words, if Alsoudani's painting features signs and states of abjection from the severed head behind bars, to the rolling eyeball and the overall breakdown of meaning, the choice of the art form through which to depict the female figure ultimately symbolises something different from the setting and mood of the painting: change and a new order. This change can be interpreted as taking multiple forms and shape: change from the hyper-masculinized power of the sovereign, change in the existing political order that has led to further violence and chaos within Iraq and perhaps a departure from the overall configurations of human suffering and experience in the country.

## Conclusion

In drawing this essay to a close, I want to ask what we, as critics, can reconstruct or subtract from Aleiby, Baldin and Alsoudani's severed heads? To be

sure, it is neither strange nor surprising that the severed head is a recurrent trope in Iraqi visual art. As Helaine Posner argues, the preponderance of themes of dismemberment in twentieth century art outputs 'is no accident': 'It is the result of living in a world in which violence, oppression, social injustice, and physical and psychological stress predominate,' she writes, 'We may long for the secure ideal of beauty and wholeness embraced by past generations but experience tells us that this worldview is obsolete ... Wholeness is compromised; the fragment is all.'<sup>53</sup> In a similar vein, Regina Janes notes that decapitation and severed heads 'horrify the rest of us, populating our prisons, our films, and our fictions. Horror or comedy: decapitation owes its characteristic shudder to the placement of violence within the modern ideology of the body'.<sup>54</sup>

To Aleiby, Ahmad and Alsoudani, however, this abstract or metaphorical violence also takes on a horrifying literality in a political culture where the severed head is not simply a theoretical proposition but a biopolitical reality. If the disembodied head is undoubtedly a metaphor for states of exile, loss and longing for the home-land, the monstrosity of the figure of the sovereign and so on, it is also a historical and political testament to real acts of physical violence exerted upon the body as well as real acts of bodily resistance. In the case of Baldin's representation of his brother's martyrdom – a head sitting on top of a real torture chair – we clearly move beyond representation into a biopolitical realism.

In the end, though, what Aleiby, Baldin and Alsoudani's disembodied heads really embody is an account of a 'violence that still cares about humanity or, at least, about human bodily integrity to a violence that [now] thrives in fragmentation'.<sup>55</sup> To this extent, they stage or dramatise the dialectic of representation and the unrepresentable at work in Cavarero and Kristeva's philosophical discussions of the severed head. As Cavarero writes of the Medusa, the 'severed head is the symbol of that which extreme violence has chosen for its object. The specifically human being is filled with repugnance for this violence which aims primarily not to fill it but to destroy its humanity, to inflict wounds on it that will undo and dismember it'.<sup>56</sup> Yet, despite or because of this ontological horror, Larson reminds us that severed heads 'embody great [...] injustice' and 'demand our attention in complicated and conflicting ways.' For Larson, 'We may not like what we see, but that in itself is no reason to turn away'.<sup>57</sup> Finally, then, Aleiby, Baldin and Alsoudani's persistent evocation of the severed head is about – to borrow Debrix's words – 'making horror [...] into something that [...] should be represented'.<sup>58</sup> To repeat the words of the late Iraqi sculptor and artist Bassem Hamad: 'What is happening is beyond human imagination', but the image of the Iraqi severed head becomes an attempt to make the unimaginable visible and representable.

## Notes

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4. Frances Larson, *Severed: A History of Heads Lost and Heads Found* (London: Granta, 2014), p. 2.
5. Ibid., pp. 193–4.
6. Ibid, p. 58, pp. 255–9.
7. Ibid., p. 7.
8. I present all Arabic names and titles of people, places and texts in the form most familiar to an English-speaking audience and/or the form used by the artists and the works under discussion. I also use the authors' own preferred spelling of their name.
9. I refer to Baldin Ahmed by his first name as this is the name he goes by.
10. It bears stressing that the theme of bodily dismemberment and wounds permeates Iraqi cultural production both inside and outside of Iraq. See, for example, the literary texts of Iraqi writers Ahmad Sa'dawi and Hassan Blasim. For visual outputs that focus on bodily dismemberment see, for example, the work of artists Sadik Kwaish Al-Fragi and Wafaa Bilal.
11. Adriana Cavarero, *Horrorism: Naming Contemporary Violence* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2009), p. 4 & p.7.
12. Francois Debrix, *Global Powers of Horror: Security, Politics and the Body in Pieces* (London and New York: Routledge, 2017), p. 5.
13. Cavarero, *Horrorism*, p. 8 & p. 9.
14. Julia Kristeva, 'Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection', trans. Leon S. Roudiez (New York: Columbia University Press, 1982) p. 18.
15. Julia Kristeva, *The Severed Head: Capital Visions*, trans. Jody Gladding (New York: Columbia University Press, 2014), p. 103.
16. Elaine P. Miller, *Head Cases: Julia Kristeva on Philosophy and Art in Depressed Times* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2014), p. 2.
17. Kristeva, *The Severed Head*, p. 6.
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22. Kristeva, 'Powers of Horror', p. 18.
23. Kristeva, *The Severed Head*, 2014, p. 108.
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55. Debrix, *Global Powers of Horror*, p. 5.
56. Cavarero, *Horrorism*, p. 16.
57. Larson, *Severed*, p. 275.
58. Debrix, *Global Powers of Horror*, p. 88.

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