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'Waraq' exhibition highlights struggles of Iraqi diaspora

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On May 6, internationally renowned Iraqi artist, Hayv Kahraman, will be exhibiting her paintings for her American debut solo exhibition at the Frey Norris Gallery in San Francisco, California. Her exhibition, titled "Waraq" (meaning paper cards), highlights the struggles of the Iraqi diaspora. An immigrant herself, Kahraman knows what it's like to leave one's homeland and move to a different country to start a new a life — she first lived in Baghdad then moved to Sweden, Italy and now currently resides in the US.

"Born in a land that is ironically the cradle of civilization and presently the ultimate embodiment of human degradation, Iraq, I have of necessity inherited a host of issues that find expression in my work. Female oppression, honor killings and war continue to claim my attention. Filled with desire, I paint for redemption and salvation, hoping one day humanity will witness a profound change," Kahraman writes on her website.

The title "Waraq" refers to the common pastime of many Iraqis on the streets of Baghdad that she used to encounter when living there. She has 10 large paintings on display that illustrate the struggles of the people from assimilation, alienation and discovery.

Each of these large paintings on panel will then be reduced and reproduced as a set of cards and will consequently be sewn with a thread onto an 18-foot hanging installation. This project, titled "Project Al-Malwiya," resembles an upside-down hanging version of the 9th-century spiraling minaret — the Al-Malwiya tower in Iraq. Even though it is partially destroyed by war for the last 18 years, the 52-meter tall tower still is a cultural landmark. The reference of the tower with the project is well-suited since a deck of cards has 52 cards just like the height of the tower.

The basis of this project isn't new, however. In 2007, Kahraman had printed and sent 40,000 decks of cards to American troops in Iraq and Afghanistan in what she referred to as "Archaeology Awareness Playing Cards." The purpose of the decks was to make the troops aware of the damage they can cause to sites and to discourage the illegal trade of artifacts.

"Sweeping the audience into the eyes of my characters while simultaneously inverting the scene into a celebration of the various cultures in our world, I endeavor to refocus the felt pain into an investment in the human capability to overcome and prevail," says Kahraman.

Kahraman is a rising star in the art world and her work has been displayed in some of the top international art magazines in the past year. The exhibition will continue to run until June 12.

For more information on Kahraman and her exhibition, please visit her website at www.hayvkahraman.com

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