

THE   
GRIFFIS ART CENTER

INTERNATIONAL ARTIST-in-RESIDENCE PROGRAM – MAISON des ARTISTES  
NEW LONDON, CONNECTICUT USA

# ESAM AL-AZIZAWY PASHA

2005 – 2006 International Artist-in-Residence  
Bagdad, Republic of Iraq



## *"The Throne"*

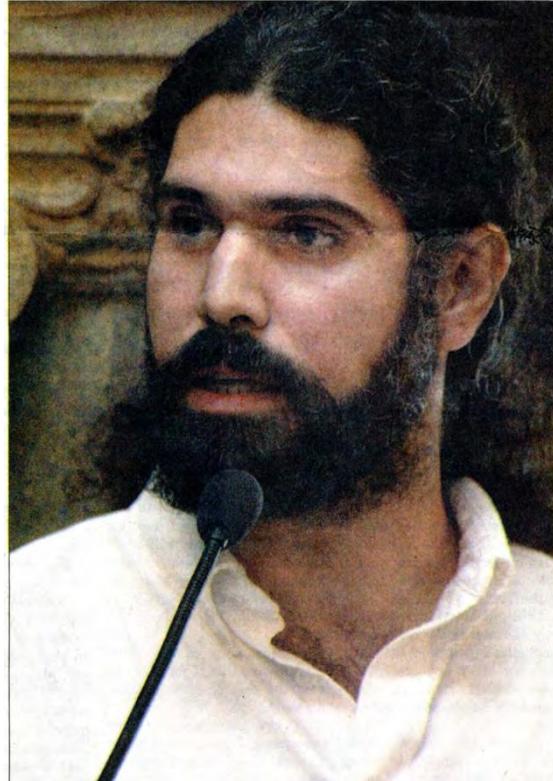
Date Acquired: 10/21/2005, Date Created: 2005  
Framed Dimensions: Not Framed, Picture Dimensions: 30 x 24"  
Medium: Oil on Canvas

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2005 – 2006 International  
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## Iraq's art hero

Through dictatorship, war, occupation, insurgency, and counterinsurgency, Esam Pasha kept painting.

BY GEOFFREY CRAIG / BROOKLYN, NEW YORK  
TUESDAY, AUGUST 8, 2006

On a warm afternoon in early March, I went to New London, Connecticut to visit Esam Pasha, a 30-year-old Iraqi artist. At the time, Esam lived in an apartment at the Sapphire House, a renovated mansion, owned by the Griffis Art Center, where he was an artist-in-residence. I had met Esam in January at a gallery in New York's SoHo district, which had opened an exhibit featuring Esam and five others, billed as the first opportunity for Americans to view works by leading contemporary Iraqi artists.

Only six months prior to the exhibit opening, Esam was still living in Iraq. The juxtaposition raised several questions. How did Esam become an artist in the first place? How did he end up in the United States? I also wondered how Esam's experiences could serve as a window to view and understand Iraq's past and present.



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Sitting in the living room of the Sapphire House, over coffee and countless cigarettes, we began talking. A former national judo champion and discus thrower, Esam has an imposing presence that is offset by a calm demeanor. Flecks of grey in his beard make him look older than he is. Born in Baghdad in 1976, he is one of seven children. His parents divorced in the 1980s. His grandfather, Nuri al-Said, was prime minister until he was assassinated in 1958 as part of the coup that toppled the Iraqi monarchy.

Growing up, Esam studied English at school, which he perfected by watching American movies, and then taught himself three other languages. On weekends, he prowled a book market on Mutanabi Street. It was there that he caught his first glimpses of Western art. He devoured a wide range of art books, but was particularly drawn to Klimt, Miro, Rembrandt, and Durer.

Esam lived through the 1980-1988 Iran-Iraq War, the 1991 Gulf War, and the ensuing sanctions. He worked odd jobs as a teenager in construction, carpentry, and commercial painting before becoming a full-time artist in 1999.

During this period, Iraq suffered years of economic hardship and isolation, and as such, only two art galleries in Baghdad remained open. The only patrons were United Nations and NGO workers who typically requested works depicting scenes of “exotic Arabia.” Even these pieces fetched prices so low it was hardly worth the time and expense of artistry, Esam said. “You would get more money if you just broke a bronze sculpture down and instead sold the bronze.”

The intelligence service, or *mukhabarat*, kept a watchful eye on Iraqi artists for any sign of dissent. Being seen with foreigners raised suspicions. When Esam got a commission from the U.N’s Baghdad office for a panorama, the *mukhabarat* made it clear that he should not paint anything political. Stick to landscapes or abstracts, they said.

A sense of paranoia became widespread. Some friends warned Esam about a painting he had lying around his apartment of an eagle soaring down. Government censors could interpret the eagle as symbol of the regime’s demise, they said.

Any remnants of an authoritarian state quickly dissolved as the American military moved into Baghdad. In its place emerged a bonanza of opportunity, particularly for an English-speaker, like Esam.

Esam remembers the early days after the U.S. invasion. After the fall of Baghdad, the Americans set up a base near his home. Officials began recruiting local Iraqis for hire. Esam waited in a separate queue for English-speakers. “I thought I’d have to fill out a lot of paperwork and would hear back from them in a few days or weeks,” he recalls. In less than an hour, though, he was shaking hands with an army captain who hired him on the spot.

After the war, people’s spirits were lifted, Esam said. His fellow Iraqis could express opinions, go to cafés, talk politics, and publish newspapers and magazines. In September, Esam landed a commission to paint the first public mural in post-Saddam Iraq.



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But before he could paint anything, he had to rip down a portrait of the former leader. “I kept peeling back layers,” Esam said, shaking his head. “But each time I did, I discovered another portrait. It took me days before I got to the bottom.”

His thirteen-foot tall mural, described by one critic as “yellow, orange, and purple paint swirling around images of doves, traditional Baghdadi architecture, and the sun rising over a sky-blue mosque,” came to symbolize a crystalline break between past and present, despair and hope. He purposely avoided black paint in this piece because “we needed color, after all those years of suffering.” He named the mural “Resilience.”

However, as security deteriorated by early 2004, Esam was getting nervous. Unlike some translators, he chose not to wear a mask. “My face was well-known,” Esam says. At that point, he began thinking of coming to America.

A Connecticut art dealer, Peter Hastings Falk, read about Esam’s mural and took notice. “I had to find out who this guy was,” Falk recalls now. He began emailing Esam about organizing an exhibit of Iraqi artists.

Esam applied for and was selected as an artist-in-residence at the Griffis Art Center, which he had learned about from Falk. In June 2005, Esam flew to JFK. He initially stayed with Steve Mumford, a New York artist who had worked in Iraq. Falk recalls first meeting Esam, who was carrying a traditional rug he had brought from Iraq as a gift for a friend. “Steve has a walk-up apartment, and we had to lug that rug up those flights of stairs. It weighed a ton.”

When asked if he had experienced any culture shock, Esam said no, but then apologized, sensing his answer was disappointing. “I knew all about Dunkin’ Donuts and Waffle House. I even had Starbucks,” he says, alluding to the time he spent on U.S. army bases in Iraq.

Since coming to the U.S., he has visited many of the soldiers he worked with at their homes around the country. “We are real friends,” Esam says. “We’re not just polite to each other. When we call each other, it’s not a courtesy call. It’s to discuss real things.”

In his studio behind the Sapphire House, Esam discusses the practical difficulties of being an artist in Iraq. “During the embargo, I had to paint with whatever materials were available, mostly industrial oil paint. It wasn’t the best quality,” he says matter-of-factly. “Paint knives were hard to find, so I just started making my own, but even then, I used them sparingly.”

During the war, Esam was unable to buy oils or acrylics. After scouring his apartment for supplies, he noticed a box of crayons. So he heated a few and began applying the hot wax to a canvas. Pleasantly surprised by the results, he continued working until he produced a triptych, “Tears of Wax.” Falk later told Esam that the technique he employed, using molten wax, has a long history. Known as “encaustic painting” — the ancient technique was actually used by artists in what is present-day Iraq, among other places.



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What stands out in Esam’s works is the swirling of color, conveying a sense of unease that runs through his repertoire. The images he employs form a discomfiting tableau: waiting vultures, floating coffins, faceless women, thrashing whales.

The dark mood is a stark reminder that the young artist’s lifetime spans the rule of Saddam Hussein. While Esam is adamant that he does not infuse politics into his art, he does not shy away from contemporary themes either. In one painting, he includes references to Iraq’s three distinct regions—marshes and reed homes for the south; minarets for the center; and mountains for the north. It is an attempt to stress that while differences exist, a national identity binds everyone.

Esam says the question he gets asked most often is whether conditions in Iraq are better or worse than portrayed by the media. Skirting the question, he prefers to talk about Iraqi culture—a topic he says is unfamiliar to most Americans. “It’s not surprising. For thirty years, we were pretty much cut off from everyone. And they were cut off from us. We didn’t have magazines, or satellite dishes, or Internet.”

The government no longer censors its artists, but limited exposure and security concerns make conditions tough, Esam says. The Internet has provided some relief. After the U.S. invasion, for instance, Esam sold several pieces to foreign clients on [artvitae.com](http://artvitae.com), a website for artists.

While Esam wants to return to Iraq, he has decided to stay in the U.S. as long as possible because he feels it is best for his career. At the same time, his decision to remain in the U.S. comes at a steep personal price. Esam says he greatly misses his family, all of whom remain in Iraq. Thinking about home, Esam sounds a bit homesick. “I miss just walking down the Tigris,” he says.

Esam has started building a new life. He has a girlfriend and travels to New York frequently to visit friends and museums. He likes New London and the people there, whom he says are “very friendly, kind of like Iraqis.” In July, Esam emailed me to let me know about an upcoming solo exhibition and talk he was giving at the University of Connecticut. He is also working on a memoir, which he hopes to get published.

In an essay written when he was still in Iraq, Esam summarized his defiant spirit. “I have come to accept the daily electrical blackouts in Baghdad. On a good day, we would have one hour of electricity on and seven or more hours off. I have even come to accept the ever-present dangers of simply getting around Baghdad.” Concluding, he writes: “But I could not accept running out of pigments to create my art.”

Esam’s future, much like his country’s, is uncertain. If he has to return to Iraq, there will be much danger waiting and difficult conditions in which to work. But Iraqis, Esam says, are resilient. He has, after all, been through it before.

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### ***Tears of Wax***

I have come to accept the daily electrical blackouts in Baghdad. On a good day, we would have one hour of electricity on and seven or more hours off. I have even come to accept the ever-present dangers of simply getting around Baghdad. But I could not accept running out of pigments to create my art.

Throughout the embargo of the 1990s and two Gulf Wars, many Iraqis suffered. And, even though suffering continues today, the bright side is that Iraqis are resilient and persevere. That is why I gave the title, “Resilience,” to the huge mural I painted over a portrait of Saddam Hussein after Baghdad fell.

Many Iraqi artists received their training in Europe, using traditional art materials. But when the embargo shut them off from the rest of the world, and art supplies were hard to find, many started to look inside their own culture. Gradually, a truly indigenous form of Iraqi art began to emerge, created

with whatever materials could be scavenged. And it was in this spirit of creative resilience that I discovered painting with wax. I learned one must be able to create art with whatever materials could be found. Everything is an art material if one knows how to employ it. It depends on dedicating one’s heart and soul, on really feeling each touch to the artwork. And it depends on how much the artist believes in what he’s doing.

During the war in 2003, neither acrylics nor oils could be bought anywhere. Soon, I ran out of supplies. I looked about my studio and I noticed several boxes of color crayons. I began to experiment melting the crayons. I noticed that when a crayon begins to melt, its head gradually starts to glow. And it is at this point, I discovered, that it’s most ready to be applied. The process required special tools, so I created my own, constantly experimenting and adjusting them as I proceeded.



Painting with hot wax is absolutely unlike any other media. It is like leaving marks of fire. Burning and melting. On hot nights Baghdad was bombed and burning. Tears ran down many faces. And in my studio, tears of wax ran in different directions, making lines and filling spaces. I would crush the melted wax bar onto paper, pressing out the soul of the

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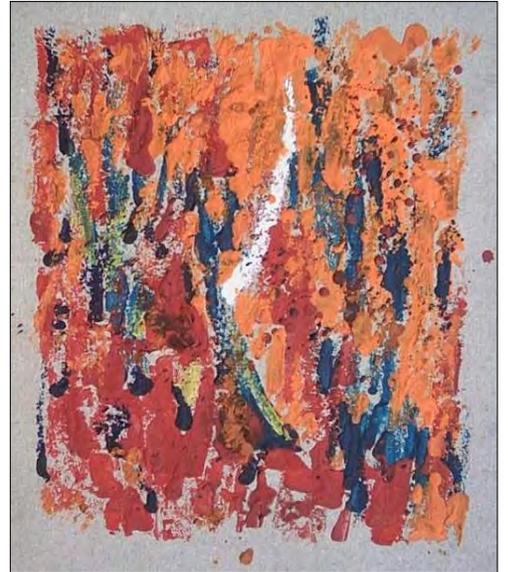
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color to be embraced by the paper fibers. And when the paper was black, I felt as if the molten wax colors were lighting the darkness of the paper in a different way.

Unlike diluted colors that die when liquids are added to them, wax is so rich and robust that other meanings and feelings can emerge. As the wax melts it is turned into another shape, another identity. I felt like a sculptor working in wet plaster, highly aware that I must be fast and sharp before it dries. It is like painting and sculpting simultaneously. The image develops incrementally but very quickly, thereby creating a confident unity.

My experience with wax opened a new horizon by changing the way I now paint oil and watercolors. Those boxes of crayons were the catalyst that made me challenge the embargo and feel victory for creating such satisfying results.

It was only after creating these paintings that I discovered that painting in wax had a name: encaustic. I also came to realize that Modern Iraqi artists have never painted in wax. My wax paintings are the first to have been produced in Iraq since ancient times.





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## The Translator

Iraqis making Coalition work possible.

By Steven Vincent

BAGHDAD, IRAQ — Drop into Baghdad's popular Shabandar teahouse and you may discover, among the crowds of men drinking chai and smoking aromatic water pipes, an imperious figure whose thick black hair and beard resemble a Sumerian king come to life. He is Esam Pasha Azizawy, a 29-year-old painter, linguist, and devout Muslim whose fluent English, Spanish, and French make him a favorite of foreign journalists seeking insights into postwar Iraq. But more than just another teahouse intellectual, Pasha — he prefers his grandfather's title for his last name — is part of a new generation of young Baghdadis willing to place their faith in the U.S. and their future in a reconstructed nation.

"I keep telling journalists how grateful we are that the Coalition removed Saddam, but the media — especially European media — only wants anti-American views," says Pasha, whose grandfather, Nuri al-Said, was prime minister of Iraq until he was deposed and murdered in 1958. Like many of Baghdad's English-speaking artists, Pasha is often confused by the animosity shown by much of the world toward Iraqi's liberation. "Don't they understand what freedom means to us? Don't they see many of us cooperating with the Americans to rebuild our country?"

That last question has particular significance for Pasha. Despite his air of bohemianism — and his religious views — the young man is engaged in one of present-day Iraq's most crucial tasks: translating for the U.S. military. Working at night, Pasha accompanies American soldiers on an array of missions — from standard patrols to raids on fedayeen hideouts. Over the months he has developed a close relationship with GIs, whom he tends to call "my guys." (The soldiers, in turn, have chided Pasha for being "too perfect" and jokingly call him their "Wahhabi spy.") Part of this bond is Pasha's belief that America is bringing democracy to Iraq; part is the nature of the GIs themselves. "At first I was amazed when soldiers called me 'sir,'" he recalls. "Having lived for years in a police state, I couldn't imagine someone in uniform treating me with respect."

This respect, however, is well deserved. With his nimble, nearly colloquial English, Pasha plays an important role in America's efforts to win Iraqi hearts and minds. "I've eased explosive situations at checkpoints when we've stopped cars containing men's sisters and wives," he relates. "When we search neighborhoods for weapons, I've helped keep tensions low between my guys and local residents."

Pasha's experiences are not unique, of course. Translators (or "linguists," as they're also called) have participated in nearly every major incident in the war — from the initial battles to the rescue of Jessica Lynch to the shootouts with Uday and Qusay. Today, with Americans occupying Iraq, linguists spend much of their time insuring that they don't violate cultural taboos. "GIs are nice, but naïve," says 25-year-old translator Ahmed Altaie. "I've had to tell them not to chat up girls or to play loud music near a mosque." And with the Muslim holiday of Ramadan beginning October 25, "the Americans are going to have to be even more sensitive," cautions linguist Omar Alrahmani, 33. "People's tempers get very short because of fasting."

Translating is dangerous work. Of the 2,500 native Iraqis employed in this task, 25 have been killed since the fall of Saddam — eight by assassination. Five or six have fallen prey to extortion rackets run by corrupt policemen who threatened to reveal their occupation. And fedayeen have hurled grenades at the homes of at least three others, killing their families. "After the war, Saddam announced that guerillas should kill Iraqis working with the Americans before targeting the troops," comments Pasha, who, like most translators, receives \$15 a day for his work. So far, he



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adds, he has not been threatened — although his father urges him to quit his job, or at least wear a flak jacket and helmet. (Most translators in Baghdad forgo the army's offers of such protective gear.)

So what motivates these linguists? Some seek to hone their English skills for future employment. Others, like Altaei and Alrahmani, see themselves as serving the Iraqi people. In Pasha's case, he combines these reasons with a third interest: personal risk. "I like danger and I fear only two things: failing my guys — and Allah." He has certainly experienced hazard: From 2000 to 2001, he served in the Iraqi army as a sniper in the violence-prone Kurdish regions — and last August was nearly hacked to death by a mob in Najaf, infuriated by the presence of an American journalist he was accompanying as a translator.

Still, despite the youthful bravado, the possibility of death or injury has begun to wear on the young man. Seated in his small apartment, his Kandinsky-like paintings leaning against the walls, he lights a cigarette and exhales slowly. "I think soon I may just concentrate on my artwork and perfect my Russian and German" — and possibly, should Uncle Sam see fit to reward his translating services with a visa, travel to America. "But who knows about the future?" he adds, adopting the stoicism so characteristic among the Iraqi people. "Right now, it's enough to think about the present." Glancing at his watch, he stubs out the cigarette and stands up. Time to go, he nods. Night shift with the U.S. army is about to begin.

— *Steven Vincent is a freelance writer currently in Iraq*