

THE DIVISION
A CREATIVE PROJECT
SUBMITTED TO THE GRADUATE SCHOOL
IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS
FOR THE DEGREE
MASTER OF ARTS
BY
RAMIA S. BADRI
(CHAIRPERSON, DAVID HANNON)
BALL STATE UNIVERSITY
MUNCIE, INDIANA
DECEMBER 2011

Abstract

This is about my artistic activity involving my six paintings that were finished in 2008 on which I used oil medium on canvas. Carrying the theme “The Division,” the paintings were reflective of my experiences of struggle. I have had my ample share of life experiences involving dissection. My country was and is tribally divided. I moved to a country, which I expected to be the beacon of equality in the world. I found myself to be proven wrong, as I still stumble across instances of social partitions. It has appeared to me as though everywhere I go division is going to be a fact of life. Division simply alters its form; its pangs are nevertheless as lethal. I could have lost my life in Iraq; I stand to have my spirit crushed in America. I approach my artworks from a feministic perspective that highlights more how my fate is shaped in the patriarchal society. I followed the lead of the symbolist painters, I used symbols to represent my thoughts and colors and lines to make known to the public my emotions that accompany my intellectual concerns. Painting is the political tool that suits my individuality and more effectively brings to the fore my personal struggles which I believe other people, despite our cultural differences, may relate to.

Statement of the problem

This artistic activity intends to accomplish my self-disclosure of my self-identity (Franchi & Duncan, 2007, pp. 150). It is an attempt to communicate and share with others my personal life struggles, or the contents of my personal identity as well as my contextually shifting individuality. I am shaped by my evolving subjectivity. I came from the Middle East; I was born an Iraqi. I am now living in the United States of America, where I am not only politically and legally alien but also – and more significantly – socially and culturally alienated. By the same token, I am formed by my changing environment. Iraq was my original milieu. I knew it before the Americans “freed” us from whom they regarded as our tyrant leader. Life was hard then, but it was my country. The Americans came, and I personally experienced the horrors of war. Then, my first environment was changed. I moved to America, where everything is completely new to me – even my experiences of discrimination by the local population against those who are culturally different from them.

As I reveal my personal identity through my paintings, I would like to study and ascertain how the struggle of one person’s life experiences can unite

different cultures. All human beings have shares of struggles in this life. On account of these struggles, a common bond that transcends the cultural divide forms among us. Human beings are capable of sympathy and empathy. At the core of our being, there is an element that we share with the rest of humanity.

The overriding theme for my artistic activity is aptly captured by the phrase “The Division.” The word *division* tells of my personal experience. But, what the Americans started amidst my people resulted to further division. In fact, not even their presence could deter the ugly head of dissection across the various sectors of Iraqi society from protruding and showing itself in the open (see Dakss, 2006). As I made my way to another country, I still found myself not spared from division. The local people discriminate against me simply on account of my cultural origin.

My theme influenced me in determining a feminist approach to my artwork. Simplistically understood, feminism is an attempt to transcend the great divide in history between the males and the females as a result of misogynist or sexual hierarchy (see Beasley, 1999, pp. 36). Primarily employing oil medium on canvas, my artistic style is unique as it cuts across the divide between symbolism and the serial. The symbols that I use are meant to induce the viewer’s concentration on my artwork. These symbols intensify the meanings that I intend to communicate. Through the lines, colors and forms that I utilize, I suggest

ideas, moods and even psychological states that result from my own experience of division. Nonetheless, the elements of my artwork are arranged systematically. My symbols are simple, uniform, and may even be interchangeable. Further, and more broadly, my individual artwork will be more comprehensible when understood in relation to my other artworks. Each work can communicate a meaning. When taken collectively, my artworks are more powerful and bring across the theme that I pursue in my artistic activities.

My exhibition included a series of ten paintings, with six of the paintings as the main focus dealing with division, using oil medium on canvas. My paintings are medium (2.5' X 4') and large (4' X 6'). As a whole, my paintings reflected the ups and downs that people face in a war torn country and how these forms of human misery impact on men and women who are eventually marginalized by society that primarily uses religious optics in viewing every human and social relationship.

One of my paintings vividly talks about my military service in the Iraqi army. I aptly named it "A Trip Back from Hell." I had always found every combat I participated in to be an experience of going down to Hades. It was tormenting to personally witness how the lives of young men and women soldiers were being wasted by the bullets that militaries fire. The experience was like coming from an inferno, and with every step that I took away from that damned

place, I felt a tinge of happiness. Indeed, we were happy as we made it safe with my integrity intact and my life not lost.

My painting exhibition was of major importance to my underlying theme of the division. The paintings attempted to promote scholarships, showcase new media, indulge in research, and create a greater level of public understanding. It tried to demonstrate how peace and conflict can greatly dampen the creative human spirit. I exhibit my artworks. I make a self-disclosure. I invite the viewers of my exhibition to appreciate my sense of beauty, and know me as a painter and an artist (see Tolstoy, 2009, pp. 47). They will also come to know my personal and collective history – with my people from the Middle East.

I finished the paintings and wrote the first drafts of the research paper in January to March, 2008. I completed the exhibition portion of my creative project on July 19-26, 2008.

Review of influences

I subscribe to Tolstoy's characterization of the arts, a person who did not fully agree to the conventional arts school's line of thought and their differing definitions of what constitutes the artistic craft. Tolstoy held that the metaphysical understanding, which equates arts with aesthetics, confuses the whole matter. How do I understand the arts? In broad strokes, I follow Tolstoy's general description of the arts as a way of intercourse among human beings. I point to the fact that art is one of the conditions of human life. Every work of art induces or makes the viewer enter into a certain kind of relationship both with himself or herself and the artist(s), the art and all those who previously or subsequently view the same artistic impression (Tolstoy, 2009, pp. 47). This intercourse between or among men and women is facilitated by the fact that human beings are capable of sensing and perceiving another man or woman's expression of feelings. We are capable of experiencing the emotion that moved the others to express it. For example, when one person laughs the other person who hears the laugh becomes happy too. This theory works in a similar fashion with all the human emotions. Simply put our emotions are contagious. For, human beings have the capacity to empathize with others. Essentially, this is the basis of artistic activity (Tolstoy, 2009, pp. 47-49).

Movingly, Tolstoy (2009) said of the arts: "(It) is a human activity, consisting in this, that one man consciously, by means of certain external signs,

hands on to others feelings he has lived through, and that other people are infected by these feelings, and also experience them” (pp. 50).

However, I do not mean that arts serve only to solicit sympathy from the viewers. For, arts are able to accomplish more than to make other people feel the feelings and emotions by the artists. Frankly put, my artwork is never bias-free. I admit that I, the artist, and my works of art are permeated with feminist theory. I know that it is not possible to have a singular definition of feminism. This is accounted for by the fact that feminism in general does not have a uniform set of ideas. In fact, the nature and the ends of feminist struggles have been contested ever since the inception of the movement. What is conventionally accepted, though, is that feminism is a kind of politics that aims to intervene in and effect transformation in the uneven or unequal power relations between men and women. From this definition, one comes to know that the task of the feminist movement is to elucidate on the issue of gender inequality and use it as a basis for transformation. Various schools of thought within the feminist realm, however, differ in the explanations that they provide and the forms of political actions that they adopt (Hollows, 2000, pp. 3).

Besides my ideological leaning to feminism, I would admit too my desire for and interest on female sexuality. That is, I am one of those who challenge the idea of asexuality in artworks and its accompanying creed of prudery and

repression. I knew for one that in paintings, fiction literature and even in poetry, the sexuality of women is always highly contested, and that male poets often represent female sexuality through the filtration of a male persona. But, I maintain the complexities of the female desire – particularly, within the politics of the heterosexual (Sutphin, 1998).

Sullivan's (2002) prepared materials on gender in the visual arts would help elucidate my point. In visual arts, as in real life, gender roles are sometimes restrictive and difficult to escape and therefore assigned. As gender is a social construct, so these gender roles are reflections of the ideas and conceptions of the society.

So, how are genders defined in portraits? In Western painting, the earliest representations of actual men and women were in portraits that became a popular form in the 15th and 16th century. Art historians would argue that portrait depictions of real men and women were reserved only for the wealthy and the privileged. Comprehensibly, they were the only ones who can afford to commission artists to paint them and/or their loved ones. Hence, the symbols of their status often have a prominent role in the portrait. One cannot fail to notice the heraldic devices indicating lineage, ornaments and jewelry signifying wealth, or symbolic attributes in the backdrop suggesting particular virtues or accomplishments. In this general sense, these early portraits of men and women

are practically alike. Nevertheless, the differences between men and women in portraits are significantly telling. Women are usually portrayed to be elaborately dressed in expensive fabrics, embellished with gold, and wearing expensive and beautiful jewelry – as in the case of Rembrandt's *Portrait of Maria Trip* (c. 1639) and Memling's *Portrait of Maria Baroncelli* (c. 1470). Are these characterizations an indication of a women's vanity? Renaissance art historians would say no because women may have been privileged but they were usually not empowered. In fact, their portraits were designed for the male viewers. Renaissance women were conditioned to be passive and powerless objects that are subject to the controlling gaze of the males. When the Renaissance men embellished their women in portraits, it was an effort to affirm their own status. Women's clothing and jewelry provided a public demonstration of their fathers' or husbands' wealth. Thus, female bodies displayed nothing but the power and the wealth of the male (Sullivan, 2002).

The artist Fra Filippo Lippi's *Woman with a Man at the Window* (c. 1438/1444), shows the lavishly dressed bride who's wearing both a shoulder brooch and head brooch. These (brooches) are traditional Florentine gifts by the grooms. One art analysis holds that the bride's dress and jewels were meant to mark her. With the wedding wardrobe, the husband introduces his wife into his kinsmen and women and signals his acquisition of her. Lavinia Fontana's *Portrait of a Noblewoman* (c. 1580) on a separate account, shows a woman wearing pearls

and the motto “lealta” spelled out on her sleeve. The woman is also holding a dog in the portrait. This portrait specifically tells of the social identity of woman in the portrait. Pearls, an expensive gem in the 15th century, were known to symbolize purity or chastity. Hence, they were common gifts to the brides who were expected to be virgins on the day of their marriage. Dogs, on the other hand, symbolized marital fidelity. These symbols, then, tell that virtuous sexual behavior was in fact the most important quality in a maiden or a wife (Sullivan, 2002).

These social expectations on women would probably explain the popularity in Western art of the story of Lucretia. She was a married woman, who was raped by the son of a Roman King. As a consequence of being dishonored (depicted by Titian’s *Tarquin and Lucretia* [c. 1571] she committed suicide (given a picture by Artemisia’s *Lucretia* [c. 1611] – an honorable act to address a dishonorable fate.

Likewise, take the case of the depiction of the nude figure. Ordinarily when one thinks of the nude figure, one thinks primarily of the female nude, a continuing obsession of male artists. What explains this is the fact that the male nude has carried a much wider range of meanings – political, religious, and moral than the female. The male nude is typically public that is, he is made to display himself in city squares, or is made to stand guard over public buildings, or is even

worshipped in the church. The male nude is considered a personification of communal pride or aspiration, or a representation of power, virility, courage and sometimes spiritual beauty. *David*, the 14-foot sculpted figure of the Biblical hero in Florence main square, typifies this view of male nudity. Michelangelo's sculptural style of depicting traditional heroes in the nude enforces male virility and communicates strength and fortitude. Canova, for his part, sculpted Napoleon like a nude Greek god (Sullivan, 2002).

Should one look for an eloquent statement on politics of the sexes in arts, the installation of Michelangelo's *David* in the major square in Florence provides graphic illustration. Prior to it, Donatello's *Judith and Holofernes* was standing on the same spot. Donatello's *obra* is about Judith, a Israelite heroine, who was able to sneak into the Assyrian camp and seduced Holofernes by getting him drunk. The story continues that the female protagonist eventually beheaded Holofernes. It is interesting to note that this sculpture of female heroism was removed from the Loggia dei Lanzi and replaced by works that are obviously negative in their attitudes towards women. In its place, other sculptures were erected, Cellini's *Perseus and Medusa* and Giovanni Bologna's *Rape of the Sabine Women* (picture 9) (Sullivan, 2002).

On the other hand, the female nude is justified solely and more frequently by the eroticism of the private consumers. Giorgione painted *Venus* (c. 1510) as

passive (in contradistinction to the active male nude), suggesting that she's available to the male viewer. Velasquez's *Venus at her mirror* (c. 1649-51) and Rembrandt's *Danae* (c. 1636) are but objects of male desire. That is, men are the sex that looks and women are the sex that is looked at. The nude women do not have their own personality; they exist only for contemplation and enjoyment (Sullivan, 2002).

In addition to portrayals of men and women in portraits and the exhibition of their nude figures, depictions of fatherhood and motherhood similarly tell about the socially-sanctioned gender roles. In general note, particularly in the 16th century, motherhood emphasized women's fertility or the ability to provide their husbands heirs. Agnolo Bronzino's *Portrait of Eleanora di Toledo* (c. 156) shows a remarkable absence of the nurturing or loving relationship between the mother and her son emphasizing our earlier point, that is, motherhood is above all else about fecundity. Goya's *Family of the Duke and Duchess of Osuna* (c. 1787-1788) shows how gender roles were being reinforced. In the portrait, the father is pictured standing as if to stress the fact that he is the head of the family. The family in the portrait was well-dressed. However, the portrait was not for fashion. It was meant to show family dynamics that is, the young girls were dressed like their mother, and were even portrayed to be holding fans; and the boys were playing with their toys, with one sitting on the baton of command belonging to the father (Sullivan, 2002).

I have always believed in the rationale to push for a feminist approach with art and artwork analysis. I know that the field of the arts is still skewed to favor the male members of the society. I believe this leads to an opportunity for a feminist approach to have a grander purpose in the arts, and a bigger mission for the female artist.

I have always believed in the sociological contribution of the arts. To me, an artist is not a solitary individual that is bestowed with unique creative spirit but an individual member of definite collectivities. I understand that works of art reflect the social realities of the time in their aesthetics forms and contents. Furthermore, I am convinced that arts carry and proclaim values by particular social groups which they propagate through the works of arts (Harrington, 2005, pp. 17).

The arts perform a social function when these are able to influence a human group. I had my exhibition with the hope of affecting a paradigm shift among my viewers. My paintings are my political tool, and my exhibition was my advocacy venue to challenge the rather comfortable minds by the viewers. Similarly, artworks are sociologically significant when these are made to be seen or used in public situations. My exhibition is “small fry” when compared to Diego Rivera’s murals. But, it intended to accomplish what Rivera’s are able to

accomplish. That is, to be seen by people and very likely to be used in public discourse. Diego Rivera's murals dealt with Mexican society and served to remind the Mexican public of the country's 1910 revolution. Evidently, Rivera's art tells stories (see Lee, 1999, pp. xix). And, in the process, Rivera's artworks are able to influence the public consciousness and color the public discourse. I understand art has sociological potential in terms of it is a description of life to be shared by all and is opposed to a personal kinds of experience. The American artist Norman Rockwell's approach to art illustrates this same point. Norman Rockwell's paintings are famous for the traces of sympathy or understanding that they mirror. This degree of commiseration by Rockwell is explained by how he worked on his art. For instance, when he illustrated Mark Twain's Tom Sawyer, he personally travelled to Hannibal, Missouri the town where Twain had lived. He went on to visit Twain's old schoolhouse, and sat for hours in the little church where Mark Twain had studied for interminable hours. Consequently, Rockwell was able to envision Tom Sawyer climbing out of the upstairs window to join Huck Finn in the dark, or fishing with Sawyer on the river, or putting on Sawyer's over-alls, or found the stone on which Sawyer kept stubbing his toes (Bussacco, pp.299). In this process, Rockwell is able to present not just his personal experience but the collective experience of which he is now a part.

I put forward that artwork's sociological contribution reaps a similarly social benefit. Art viewers are moved to respond with the awareness that they are

members of a group. They laugh with the artist; they cry with the artist; they allow themselves to be affected by the emotion that the artist tries to bring across through the artworks. They, too, are made to accept particular religious, economic and/or social ideologies as advanced by the artist; or, they see the artist's social situation in new and unusual ways.

With this, I feel I am relating to Laszlo Moholy-Nagy, who wrote in *Vision in Motion* (1947):

“Art is the most complex, vitalizing and civilizing of human actions. Thus it is of biological necessity. Art sensitizes man to the best that is imminent in him through an intensified expression involving many layers of experience. Out of them art forms a unified manifestation, like dreams which are composed of the most diverse source material subconsciously crystallized. It tries to produce a balance of the social, intellectual and emotional existence; a synthesis of attitudes and opinions, fears and hopes. *Art has two faces, the biological and the social, the one toward the individual and the other toward the group. By expressing fundamental validities and common problems, art can produce a feeling of coherence* [Emphasis mine]. This is its social function which leads to a cultural synthesis as well as to a continuation of human civilization. Today, lacking the patterning and refinement of emotional repulses through the

arts, uncontrolled, inarticulate and brutally destructive ways of release have become commonplace. Unused energies, subconscious frustrations, create the psychopathic borderline cases of neurosis. Art as expression of the individual can be a remedy of sublimation of aggressive impulses. Art educates the receptive faculties and it revitalizes the creative abilities. In this way, art is rehabilitation therapy through which confidence in one's creative abilities can be restored" (pp. 28).

Even in war, women are disadvantaged (see Chelala, 2004). In Iraq, even with the "freedom" that the Americans were supposed to bring, the prospects for women's rights are not really bright. In fact, before the American occupation, the Iraqi women were enjoying relatively progressive rights. They were allowed to divorce their husbands and inherit property. They, too, were allowed to study, work and move about freely under Saddam Hussein's government. All these were testament that Iraqi women during Saddam Hussein's government were enjoying equity and liberty unmatched in the whole world (Hassan, 2005). In fact, Hussein's political party – the Baath party – even encouraged a secular Arab nationalism that advocated women's full participation in society (Trejos, 2006). After all, Iraq used to have the 1970 provisional constitution that guaranteed unprecedented women rights in the Muslim world (Hassan, 2005). With the advent of the US military in Iraq, there were certain Iraqi women who were hopeful that they would start enjoying greater parity with men. Their hope was

furthered by the pronouncements of President George W. Bush that women empowerment was going to be an essential element of a new Iraq (Trejos, 2006). But, as soon as the US soldiers settled down in the country, they started to befriend different tribal leaders and religious fundamentalists who made sure that Islamic rulings become part of the new constitution of the country (Hassan, 2005). The American occupation has been messy, harmful and destructive. The resulting US-crafted constitution now contains a clause stating that no law can contradict the rulings of Islamic religion. While around 97% of Iraqi population are Muslim believers, there are also Christians, Yazidi, the Yarzan and Alevi Shabaks, the Jews (in the north) and the Mandanean believers. Hence, nationalization of a particular religion brings more problems than relief. It is expected not to work in Iraq, as it may be anticipated to sow more seeds of division among the people. Politics, too, has been increasingly under the control of Muslim conservatives; and, sectarian warfare has been escalating. Consequently, the Iraqi women risk their lives going to work, going to school or simply leaving their homes. They may be beaten for driving a car and for not covering themselves as the conservative leaders were allowing their harassment for not abiding by the strict dress code of long skirts and headscarves. There were even those who are not Muslims who did not wear head scarves and were killed as they were said to resist the dress code for women. It is also very likely that they could be raped by the male members of other tribal factions. In fact, they consistently receive death threats because of their religious sects and careers. I know the feelings of angst

and the fear that go with these experiences following my personal experience of receiving a death threat. Iraqi women, furthermore, are economically threatened when their husbands are put behind bars, held, or killed (Menkedick, 2010; see also Beaumont, 2006; Hassan, 2005). In the US the situation is not much different. Although Middle Eastern women are dodging bombs and bullets, they are nonetheless subjected to equally destructive social ostracism. The American stereotype of a terrorist bears the face and the appearance of a Middle Eastern man or woman (see Pumilia, 2009).

These situations validate the veracity and affirm the significance of feminism. It does not mean Iraqi men's security and rights are not threatened during the war. What it means is that those of the women are threatened more viciously and rendered more precariously. I do not mean that Middle Eastern men are not discriminated against in Western countries; I mean that the Iraqi women are intimidated more. And this is so because they are women. Note that I see no differently what renders women's position and fate in society unsteady and unsafe. It is gender discrimination. It is misogyny, as it is a consequence of sexual hierarchy sanctioning the ruling by the men over women. I share my experience of these situations and the thoughts that I've learned from them and the emotions that they evoke with the use of my paintings. The arts have become my political tool.

Of the many feminist artists that have influenced my work, Georgie O'Keefe (1887-1986) is primary in my list. Her *Sky Above Clouds IV* (1965) was drawn on a twenty-four feet wide canvas. It is a large painting of flower, with just a blossom covering the entire canvas. In the process, her painted flower appears vaginal. And, this seems to be her trademark – that is, to make whatever she painted – such as the *Jack in the Pulpit* (1930) and *Ice Cave* (1950) look vaginal. And while she disdained her critics' observation that they find symbolism in her works – such as the sexual imagery in her *Black Iris* (1926), her botanical subjects indeed begged an interpretation that is focused on their generative capacity. Now it is her subjects' lushness that generates their force and mystery. For undeniably her botanical works are teeming with energy and exalted life (see Moffat, 2005).

Joyce Wieland (1931-1998) is another on my list. Known to be very passionate about sex being the topic of her arts, Wieland's paintings are said to be autobiographical in nature. They show how extremely oriented she was to sex (and romance) and extremely passionate about politics and feminism within the predominantly male art culture of her time. Her artworks, though, do not contain the usual “feminist-ish” elements (Lind, 2001), although she professed to be a cultural activist. In her mind, the landscape of her country, Canada, was female; and, the issues of gender and nationality were interchangeable. Thus, nationalism and gender issues would repeatedly surface in her quilts, films and assemblages

(Lind, 2001). On a personal note, she has provided me with a cue to celebrate womanhood, and take pride in its elements and stories.

Barbara Kruger may not be a painter, but she certainly was a feminist artist. Credited with recognizable slogans such as *I shop therefore I am* and *Your body is a battleground*, Kruger a graphic artist, is known for her style of layering photographs with pithy or terse and belligerent texts that normally engage the viewers in the struggle for power and control about which her captions speak. She normally would engage her viewers on issues such as feminism, classicism, consumerism, corporate greed, religion, sexuality, racial stereotypes, power and individual autonomy. Her artworks are known for using black letters set on red background (Moffat, 2005).

O'Keefe is my strongest influence. It is in her work that I see the utility of feminism as the optic through which I view my experiences and the pattern by which I shape my artworks. Wieland taught me that it is possible to make available to the public my autobiography through my artworks. Kruger influenced me to see that colors are effective in bringing across the message to the viewing public.

Technically my paintings are in between symbolism and serial. Symbolism as a loose organized movement in the visual arts is characterized by

rejection of direct, literal representation in favor of evocation and suggestion. Symbolist painters use metaphors and symbols to suggest a subject and usually favor mystical and occult themes. While the realists and the naturalists seek to capture optical reality in all its objective grittiness, the symbolists seek a deeper reality from within their imagination, their dreams and their unconscious. Their aim is to portray mysterious and ambiguous interpretations of emotions and ideas by using unobvious symbols or, as Jean Moreas has put it, “cloth the idea in sensuous form”. They thought that colors and lines *per se* could express ideas or feelings (Chilvers, 2004, pp. 684-685).

As a partly symbolist, I am influenced by my reading of the history especially that which concerns the role of women and the impact of the war in Iraq on women as well as the negative face of social marginalization in the US against Middle Easterners. My theme is not outside the ambit of the usual symbolist subjects: gender or sexual issues in the over-all context of decadence. My artworks represent my attempt to reject the narrow confines of social conventions (insofar as gender roles are concerned). They stand for my endeavor to bring into the fore the deeper truths on gender roles, especially on how the women are actually disadvantaged in the society. My paintings are my tool to express my intellectual dissent to what transpires against women. The lines and colors express my heightened emotions that I advocate. The message that I

encrypt into my paintings narrates to the viewer the revolutionary ideas that I have in my mind.

I consider the French painter Odilon Redon (1840-1901) to be among the most prominent figures associated with symbolist arts. He once said that his drawings are meant to transport his viewers to the ambiguous world of the indeterminate. Noticeably, his artworks are rich and enigmatic exploring haunted and often macabre themes. His works were also inspired by his emotions and imaginations, as manifested by his use of monsters, severed heads, *femme fatales* and unique representations of mythic subjects (see *Cyclops* [c. 1904]). He was also quoted to have said that he wanted to place the visible to serve the cause of the invisible. So, his paintings are held to be pictorial representations of the ghosts of his own mind.

I believe Gustave Moreau to be another distinctive symbolist artist. He became famous on account of his unusual paintings, which are loaded with bright and enticing colors as well as luxurious effects. Moreau's *Salome Dancing Before Herod* (c. 1876) was greatly admired. He portrayed women in his other paintings as an innocent seductress.

The serial aspect of my artworks refers to the presence of uniform elements or objects in my work. They follow the systems of my thoughts made

apparent by my theme of division. My artworks are serial since they follow a systematic process and outside of which my paintings would not yield their complete meaning (see Sykora, 1983).

It is probably Claude Monet who is the best known serial painter. He experimented with painting the same motif in 1890's a number of times albeit under distinctly different conditions of light and atmosphere. Monet's images were eventually executed and exhibited as a group. Likewise, in painting the Rouen Cathedral, he didn't focus on the complexities of the façade of the church. Rather, he developed a way of painting to convey his sense of transitory light effects. The worthiness of his approach is affirmed when his paintings are viewed next to each other. Monet also painted sets of grain stacks, spring meadows, ice floes, poppies, the city of London, the Creuse Valley and the Seine River (Gurney, 2008).

A current serial artist is Nathan Fowkes (see <http://nathanfowkes.blogspot.com/>). His array of 36 paintings of the same Los Angeles valley scene proudly takes on a limitless range of transformations with the haze and light shimmering and changing. Art critics would agree that no camera could have registered the subtle nuances that the serial paintings provide (Gurney, 2008).

My artworks are both symbolist and serial. My paintings are of the symbolist genre as they express my thoughts couched in symbols and human-like figures and my emotions communicated by my use of lines, colors and texture on the canvas that I used. And are serial as they need to be viewed collectively. While I do not preclude the possibility of each painting being analyzed solitarily, their meanings would be more complete when they are considered collectively.

Description of the artwork

My exhibition included a series of ten paintings using oil paint on canvas. Of the ten paintings, eight were of medium size (2.5' X 4') and the other two large (4' X 6'). Six of these paintings were the main focus of my exhibition. These artworks are entitled "Ambivalence," "A trip back from hell," "Antagonistic females," "On the edge of the relapse," "Defeated," and

“Struggling flame”. These paintings are intentionally made to expound on my experience of division. I grew up in a country that was united before the American invasion. Then, with the coming of foreign “liberators,” my people and I saw a division that was never a part of our collective consciousness. When I moved to the US, I found myself divided by society into a group that is not trusted by the majority of the local people. Division is not a peculiar experience for me. I knew that it is among the perennial struggles of humanity at large. My exhibition of paintings represent my initiative to see how the powerful struggle of one person’s life experiences through this particular form of art can unite different cultures. My theme, the division among humanity is expressed by the different symbolisms depicted on the canvas. Moreover, is most clearly represented by my use of horizontal and vertical stripes of color(s) on the canvas. All of my paintings in the division exhibition were completed in 2008.

1. Ambivalence, oil on canvas, 2008



The first oil painting for analysis is titled *Ambivalence*. It shows elements of dried or dying leaf-less trees, which appear to be swayed by quite a powerful wind blowing from the left side of the canvas. There are two smaller boxes in the canvas, with each containing dissimilar figures. On the left side of the canvas, just above what appears like lifeless tree, is a smaller box with what looks like a dried entity hanging over some dried branches from the lifeless tree. On the right side of the canvas is the second box, with more clearly discernible figures inside it. The figures are discernibly human figures, standing on a white surface. Above the second box and on the right of the first box is a protruding white surface that

is proceeding, if not affixed, on what looks like a wall on the right side of the canvas. The base of the painting is intentionally made to appear like a solid rocky ground. There is a strip of color that is made to run horizontally, as if to induce a break from what is established to what is fluid and moving. There were a couple of set of colors for this painting. The purple, blue and green are made to appear complimentary in the canvas. The maroon and the orange in the canvas provide the contrast, and hence make the figures very visible. The purple and blue colors communicate an impression of stability; the maroon color conveys all things passionate and intense.

Closely fixing one's gaze on Ambivalence, the painting makes one have an ambivalent feeling toward the human figures standing in the boxes. One group in the right box is on good or sterile ground impressed by the color white evokes a positive emotion. This is particularly true when one's attention is shifted to the left box. This box contains lifeless figures e.g., the leafless branches and the hanging and immobile figure. Absence of life evokes negative emotions, both equal but divided.

With this as a background, the passion and intensity that may be discerned from the painting becomes more significant. The painting draws the viewers to consider the different scenarios that it contains, makes them feel the positive and negative emotions that these scenarios (in the small boxes) evoke, and invites

them to break the ambivalence. In fact, breaking the ambivalence is easier than it would appear since the choices are obvious. While a lifeless state is possible or is a standing option, the better state is that with throbs with life and stability. But despite the seemingly obvious choice to make, the decision needs to be made with fervor and strength. For what is at stake is such an utter importance.

2. *A trip back from hell, oil on canvas, 2008*



As if to vividly portray hell, the overwhelming color of *A Trip Back from Hell* is reddish. Such color brings to mind hints of danger, fire, violence and

blood. This painting is in fact done to commemorate the many young men and women soldiers whose blood had watered the sacred soil of Iraq. This painting relates to my personal life as a soldier. To me, every combat mission that I joined in was like being delegated to the inferno. Each combat mission is a hell, literally and figuratively. It was anguishing to see people lose their lives. At the same time, after every combat or military operation, there was always a dash of happiness. It was akin to walking away from hell, from danger to safety, from death to life, or from fighting to peace.

The choice of color(s) is deliberate to match with the title of the painting. At least, twelve figures depicting humans are represented to be moving out of an abyss to a higher ground. Their upward movement is very significant since hell from which they are said to have come from is normally believed to be underground. The painting also has elements of pointed objects that either serve as a fence, as in the right side of the canvas, or are made to mimic a devil's spear, as in the middle of the canvas pointing towards the direction of the human figures. Contrasting blue lines run horizontally, as if to signify a break between the bottom of the canvas and the elevated ground where the upward moving human figures are. Then, there is vertical column of contrasting colors blue and yellow. This vertical column appears to be separating the area where there is a fence from the higher ground where the human-like figures exist. A simple compositional movement from right to the left symbolizes moving away from the hell.

The title evokes negative emotion. It suggests of something tragic, traumatic, dreadful, heartrending and disastrous. It proposes destruction, defeat, ruin and messing up. It is a sorry experience for anyone. No one would have ever wanted to be in hell, or even for a minute of this hellish experience. The red color that is predominant on the canvas communicates certain sense of urgency, strength and power or will of the human figures to get out of that hell or get beyond the hell like experience.

Under more focused scrutiny one might find that this painting articulates hope. The color red similarly conveys love, excitement and energy. The human-like figures may have been in hell. Their energy and willingness to move out of that frightful place is obvious and maybe even inspiring. Their hell is not their permanent place but a momentarily trip. They are now climbing out of the great divide in the middle of the composition into a place that is the direct negation of hell.

3. *Antagonist females, oil on canvas, 2008*



The *Antagonist Females* mainly feature colors of purple, brown, yellow and blue in different shades. The dominant trait of this painting is the presence of myriads of human heads, which on the basis of the hair-do are unmistakably of females. They appear to be leaning on the left side of the canvas. Their posture tells of activity. They appear to be pressing on. They appear to be in an assertive position not leaning back but leaning forward as if to make a point. The shades of

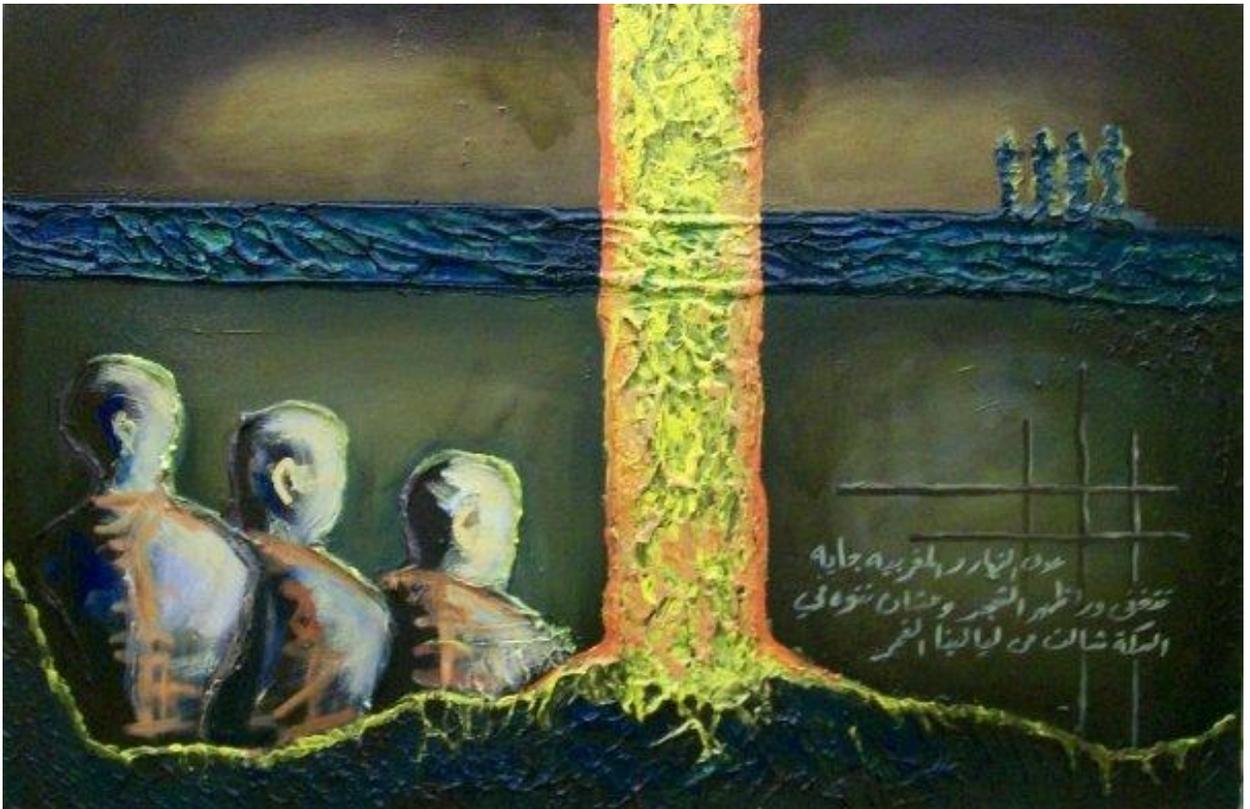
color brown, or earth, give an impression of reliability and endurance. Brown speaks of a womanly element, insofar as the conventional stereotyping of women is concerned. For, this color brings to mind the images of hearth and home, which are by tradition the realm or space reserved for women. The shades of purple, on the other hand, suggest enlightenment and transformation. It is as if the females in this canvas are pressing on because they have become enlightened and are ready to effect transformation. The title of the painting then subtly tells of the females developing roles in society. As they press on to make their contributions beyond what the society has had designated them, they are oftentimes perceived to be antagonistic and hostile. Their contributions are unwelcome. Their points of view are held suspect.

The painting primarily stirs up anxiety, or that unpleasant feeling that is typically associated with uneasiness, apprehension, fear, or worry occurs without an obvious triggering stimulus (Ohman, 2000). The females are pressing on and challenging the status quo. They are antagonistically persistent. They are out to make their contributions, and they want to be heard. In the process, they will be transforming the social landscape. The face of society would no longer be patriarchal but the look is unknown. This is the root of anxious feelings by viewers of this painting. Human as we are, we fear the unknown. We are uncomfortable facing an uncertain future.

This painting is in fact about the women who have influenced me to be who I am today and encouraged me to be a better person and an artist. One of them is my mother, who I have immortalized in this painting. She's in fact the one among the many female faces on the canvas with the biggest and brightest (female) face. She is a great looking and educated Iraqi artist and art historian.

The other emotion that the painting evokes is hope. Seeing how persistent the females are in bringing across their point, one starts to believe in a positive outcome relative to this social development. We cannot be blind to the excesses of a society that is chiefly ruled by the men. Should we need to balance the fulcrum and have more contribution from the members of the disadvantaged gender group to balance the division.

4. *On the edge of the relapse, oil on canvas, 2008*



This painting has the elements of what appears like a tree that vertically divides the canvas into two halves. The tree-like element has its roots that are, although not deep, following the contours of its base. It has two sets of human figures. The first set, nearer to the ground, comprises of three characters. Within their level, the speared fence that is also shown in the painting “A Trip Back From Hell” is shown. As in the other painting, the fence suggests enclosure. The second set of human figures show four characters that are standing above the fence, as if to tell that they were above it and not enclosed by it. The grounds where they stand appear to be as stable as the lower ground, although it is traversed in a similar way by the tree that springs from the ground. Between the

grounds, there is a link suggesting the possibility of relapse or falling back into a former state.

In an interesting way this painting is not permeated with red color or other bright color. The colors blue, gray, yellow, lavender and brown of different shades communicate various ideas. Blue and brown communicates stability; blue speaks of reliability. Yellow, for its part, is ambivalent. It tells of joy and happiness, inasmuch as it conveys deceit, illness and hazard. Thus, the vertically traversing tree in the center of the canvas is colored yellow.

The title of the painting itself connotes downbeat feeling. The human figures that appear to have triumphed over their former ground are likely to slide back from their upper position. That they are already in an elevated position constitutes good news. It gives suggestions to their victory. But this state indicates only their recuperation not total recovery. But they are actually closer to regression. They are about to go back to their former state. And, this fact implies a negative development.

5. *Defeated, oil on canvas, 2008*



Defeated has the elements of human figures, an elevated platform on which the humans are standing, and horizontal yellow strip that divides more the pillar of the platform than the canvas. Focusing on the human figures atop the platform or what appears as plateau, one recognizes that they are with a flag. The flag would have been colored white which normally indicates surrender. The painting uses colors of blue, gray, and yellow in different shades. There is an absence of bright, especially red, color. The choice of colors in this painting is

intended to evoke an atmosphere of gloom and despair – emotions that are normally associated with defeat or losing. The defeat of the human figures is similarly hinted by the horizontal strip of yellow color that cuts the leg of the platform into two pieces. In anticipation, the viewer expects the fall of the upper half of the platform and the human figures into what appears to be bushes on the ground or wavy body of water.

This painting evokes the emotion of despair. It tells of an absence of hope during the very instance of defeat or surrender. Defeat always follows a fight. Normally, we fight hoping that we would win. When the fighting is over, and we are defeated, we lost not only the fight but also our hope of winning. We are crushed both physically and spiritually.

The posture of the human figure on the left most of the group depicts dejection. The figure's spirit is so low that it is made to appear to sit on the ground, and with head bowed. Portraying frozen in frustration or depression, the human figure is a picture of one who suffered utter defeat.

6. *Struggling flame, oil on canvas, 2008*



The *Struggling Flame* has yellow, green and different shades of gray as its predominant colors. Yellow communicates energy, enthusiasm, vibrancy, warmth and expansiveness. Green conveys renewal, youth, spring and fertility. These two colors and the meanings that they try to impress strongly contrast with the murkiness that the different shades of gray try to impart. There are several human figures that stand atop what appears like a burned end of a wick. The wick is not flaming, but there is yellow color that runs through the lining of the wick. These yellow linings are significant, as they tell of the struggling wick.

A picture of a burning flame is warming to the soul. Flame is known as luminous, pure and ethereal. In this way, it is seen as antithesis of what is physical as it stands as a symbol of the spiritual. The direction of the flame is upwards. It appears like it tries to tear free from the wick and strain heavenward. At the same time, there is no doubt that it tightens its grip on the wick and thirstily absorbs its fuel. In this process of vacillating from being to dissolution, the flame produces light. The imagery of flame speaks of transcendence. It vivifies human beings' struggle to achieve a self-nullifying reunion with the Creator, and at the same their struggle to live a physical life and make their imprint on the physical world.

Struggling Flame evokes hope. It maintains that the future is bright, although it does not preclude struggle. It tells of the basic fact of human existence and what is most valuable for a human life is not given on silver platter. There is a strong divide from what is necessary for life and what is excess or trivial.

Collectively, the six major paintings of my exhibition carry some common elements. The first common element is the use of human figures in all six paintings. The genders of most of the human figures in the five paintings are unknown except for the ones in the *Antagonist Females*. This must be an influence of feminism in me. The feminists hold the gender divide

constitutes sexual hierarchy, which works for the men and against the women. In lieu of this, the feminists put forward that men and women share one and the same humanity undivided. In fact, the two genders share similar struggles. When the women are disadvantaged, the men also suffer. And, conversely, when women experience fortune, the men also benefit. This does not mean that the paintings attempt to construct a case against gender classification but that gender classification is merely accidental. What is substantial is that the gender groups share one and the same humanity. As humanity, men and women share the same experience of ambivalence, hellish encounters, antagonistic occurrences, struggles and even defeats. Thus, when viewers analyze the paintings, they are very likely to identify with the figures' messages and heed their call for action.

Another common element that the six paintings have collectively is that they evoke both positive and negative emotions. The positive emotions are induced principally by the bright colors that were painted on the canvas. These emotions are enthusiasm, exuberance, hope, intensity and passion. The negative emotions are conveyed by the dark shades of colors. These are dejection, downbeat feelings, and anxiety among other emotions. These emotions understandably correspond to whether we experience victory or defeat, gain fortune or undergo suffering. More particularly, these were my emotions as I went through my harrowing experiences in Iraq and even when I made my way to

the US. I am sure that all viewers of this exhibition could identify themselves with me and how I have felt.

In these paintings, I put forward my experiences as I woman. In my life I have numerous political options through which I could bring to attention my personal cause. Nevertheless, I have chosen the arts and painting. I hope my exhibition of paintings was effective at transforming ideas and connecting divisions in the human beings that experienced it. I would like to believe they did.

The physical process that I followed in painting consisted of deciding first on the scale in which I did my artworks. This was then followed by building my canvas. At the same time, I gathered my painting materials – such as the oil paints, the brushes, the mediums, the paint palette, painting knives, etc. (Mayer & Sheehan, 1991) as well as my painting clothes. Then I decided on the place where I was to paint. Over-all, the task of producing major six paintings for me was overwhelming. Initially, it seemed like chipping away at Mt. Everest once every year and expecting to flatten it down in my lifetime.

Nevertheless, I started it off by simply covering the canvas with under paint drawing in the idea with paint. After preparing the under painting, I used acrylic medium to collage in and attach canvas cloth in order to build up the texture in the appropriate areas. Sometimes the areas of texture became very

extreme. Then I took my color palette and started to experiment on and with different color combinations. In a way, the mixing of colors was not difficult to decide on for me. In general, the color differentiations that I was in my paintings were made possible by effecting difference shades of color and value. I mixed these acrylic paints for foundation colors and larger under painting areas. After all the paintings were dry I finished by using oil paint. The oil paint allowed me to create bolder more saturated colors and a transparent glaze brought back the rich dark colors. This layering process created a greater depth to the surface of the painting.

Conclusion

In the eighteenth century, the great thinker David Hume (1987) believed that human nature commands general but uniform principles of taste. Clearly, he presumed the existence of a history of human arts and literature that is comprehensible solely within their local contextual ambit. At the same time, he maintained the unchanging core of interests and sentiments that made it possible for men and women to reach outside of their own culture and context (Dutton, 2003). The arts are among the few things in this world that humanity holds at the same par. In fact, cultural anthropologists would strongly argue for oneness of

humanity. At the core of every human being is one and the same humanity. Differences in color of skin, geographical residence, languages that are being spoken, gender that the society has assigned to us are mere accidents. Unsurprisingly, the life struggles that one human individually undergoes is likely to resonate to the hearts and minds of others. We cry with other people's misery; we laugh together with our happy neighbors. We cannot help but be touched by every triumph of human spirit. This accounts for the undeniable common bonding among the members of the human race.

The exhibition of my six paintings was an attempt to see how my struggles in life translate when expressed through paint to people of different cultures and generations. The theme of division is gaudily embodied by the symbolisms depicted by oil on the canvas. My paintings speak to the fact of dissection among human beings – i.e., religious, cultural, economic and gender divisions both in times of war and of peace. The vertical and horizontal bars dividing the surface of my canvas were results of my compositional decision to illustrate that recurring theme of my artworks. I do not relish my personal experiences of social division. Hence, my use of light and bright colors in the horizontal and vertical bars is intended to make a high and unmistakable contrast between the foreground and the background occur. This element alone is expected to result in or generate an uncomfortable feeling in the viewer's mind.

My exhibition does not merely constitute a political statement. It is also indicative of my progress in my artistic skill. As I did my paintings, I made progressing decisions to incorporate new elements and symbols in my artworks such as the resemblance of human figures and other elements from nature such as the clouds, mountains and tree branches. I opted for thicker texture in the application of the elements on the canvas, which has finally created balance and harmony in the composition. Indented to the bottom of the paintings, the thicker texture likewise gives an impression of more heaviness and stability.

My paintings move between my personal experiences and the coded images of my own experiences to more universal symbols that are pertinent to my original Mediterranean culture. In my progressing decisions in my artworks, I knew that my initial tendency was to experiment and try out different means of artistic expression. And, as my artistic style developed further, I chose to concentrate on themes connected with my life and reflecting the struggles that I've known having come from a Middle Eastern region of the globe and having lived a period of my life in a war zone.

I have come to experience at least two major forms of division in my original domicile in Iraq and in my receiving community in America. Division in Iraq meant being kept safe from mortars and other forms of attacks against my life and integrity as human being and those of other people. In America, it is the

social barrier that I encounter as I relate with local people who discriminate against Middle Eastern nationals every day. This ambivalence of the theme of divisions is at the core of my paintings and all of my artistic thoughts.

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Appendices:

(The paintings)