

*Symphony I, Symphony II, Al-Warqaa & Mass by Adel Abidin*

Baghdad, March 2012, several young emos, women and men, are brutally [stoned to death](http://www.nytimes.com/2012/03/12/world/middleeast/killings-strike-fear-in-iraqi-gay-and-emo-youth.html?pagewanted=all&_r=0)[[1]](#footnote-1). Extremist groups, as well as the Iraqi government, blame them of having drifting behaviors or wearing clothes and hairstyles non conform to the usual traditions of the society. Being part of an emo movement is for the time being not accepted by the most conservative parts of Iraqi society, as their appearance is often mingled with homosexuality. And indeed, even though it is not considered as illegal by the law, homosexuality is still a [taboo subject and regarded as blasphemy or sexual perversion in the Iraqi society in general](http://www.hrw.org/node/85050)[[2]](#footnote-2). Further, emo culture is also someway rejected as a form of representation of western influence or decadence.

At that same period, the Iraqi government was about to host an Arab league summit. Thus to preserve a certain image and not let this tremendous scandal divert foreign medias’ and guests’ attention, Iraqi politicians and government’s spokespersons tried to deny any campaign targeting gay men or emo teenagers and were rather denouncing them as media fabrication stories designed to drum up hysteria and embarrass Iraq. A propagandist rhetoric far too often used by authoritarian regimes in the region to be credible. Especially as official statements on the Interior Ministry’s website were still openly condemning the “phenomenon of emo” as Satanic[[3]](#footnote-3) and calling for interventions in schools to eradicate this danger or even specifying the measures taken in the northern neighborhood of Baghdad (Khadimiya) against this phenomenon "[*incompatible with the habits of the Iraqi society and its negative effects on the structure of communities*](http://www.moi.gov.iq/ArticleShow.aspx?ID=2151)*"[[4]](#footnote-4).*

In Helsinki, Iraqi visual artist Adel Abidin was profoundly chocked when he heard about the killings. It led him to create a powerful combination of animation and installations, partly as a tribute to the victims and at the same time as what he felt an urgent necessity to do something to universally denounce discriminations.

**Symphony of the Iraqi youth**

The introductory video and sound installation “[*Symphony I*](http://www.lawrieshabibi.com/usr/library/video/main/symphony_short_clip.mp4)” appears at first, from a remote perspective, as a poetic and soft landscape in shades of light blue to grey. But once you enter into this seemingly serene scenery, you discover that the eventually [white silence is one of death](http://www.ultraextra.org/articles/2013/3/27/the-white-sound-of-death-symphony-by-adel-abidin)[[5]](#footnote-5) and despair. It is ultimately a macabre look at a scene of savagery that awaits the viewer. Meanwhile doves are discontinuously and frenetically fluttering, tempting an impossible escape above the myriad of juxtaposed corpses. Attached to the lifeless bodies, they are condemned to stay in this never ending Sisyphean cycle. Inspired by Ibn Sina’s *(Avicenna)* vision of the soul as white doves, Abidin articulates the quest of liberation of the eternal soul from the terrestrial body; the endless pain of victims of unjust discriminations.

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| *There descended upon you from that lofty realm,*  *A dove, glorious and inaccessible.*  *Concealed from the eye of the seeker,*  *Although openly disclosed and unveiled,*  *Reluctantly she came to you,*  *And reluctant, in her affliction, will she depart.*  *She resisted, untamed; then upon her arrival*  *She grew accustomed to this desolate waste.* | *She forgot, I think, promises of sanctuary and*  *Abodes from which she had been unwilling to leave.*  *She became attached to the D od her Descend, moving from the C of her Center down to these sandy dunes,*  *Until the W of Weightiness clung to her, and she fell prostrate*  *Among their signposts and deserted campsites.*  *Ibn Sina – The Ode in the Soul* |

When does the soul completely detach itself from our human envelop on earth? In this case, maybe in the autopsy room depicted by “*Symphony II*” where the young bodies are now lying, separated from each other in cold uniformity. The sculpture-based installation features at its maximum 90 small white doors in the wall, some of them being closed, while some others can be opened, letting appear small white statues of these young people on sliding beds. The morgue, as a transition and waiting place for the dead before the transfer into the grave or cremation, reduces them to simple bodies and negates their previous existence as individuals. The identity of those Iraqi emos, which they are accused to have dared to question, will now definitely vanish; a further step into discrimination after the death itself.

In a second step, Abidin then decided to add an extra installation and video. A giant and luminous skeletal quasi paleontological bird “*Al-Warqaa*”[[6]](#footnote-6) - eventually seizing the esthetics of emo culture as well - further underlines the idea of the difficult quest for liberation of the soul. Attached with a thread to a rock on the floor, the bird is again in the impossibility to escape. *Al-Warqaa*, the skeleton of the dove itself, “*is the soul of the soul*”[[7]](#footnote-7) and thus, according to Adel Abidin, the ultimate stage of discrimination.

Finally, the video “[*Mass*](http://www.lawrieshabibi.com/usr/library/video/main/mass-adel-abidin.m4v)” closes this set of art work. Immerged in the whirlwind of a mass of doves and its white noise, we are confronted to a *“*[*visual illusion and the misleading information or the ‘none’ information* [of a] ‘Dead TV](http://www.adelabidin.com/animation/mass)’”[[8]](#footnote-8).

Then, how to possibly get out of this infernal cycle? How to step back of what could materialize the deficit of preoccupation and confrontation with the own identity of the Iraqi society, to work on reasons and remembrance of violent episodes?

***When questioning the constituency of identity leads to moral panic***

Abidin wanted his artwork to be a universal representation of discrimination, thereby sending back to the necessary debate about otherness and its rejection in most societies. Nevertheless, time for reflection on the own constituency and reconstruction has not yet come for Iraq. As a state turned apart by war and still in an unstable situation, for now any kind of external influence, western culture or modernism might be considered as a source of negative influence or even blasphemy. A source of hardship for the Iraqi youth, which is burning to benefit and enjoy an increased form of social freedom and waiting to open up to the rest of the world. But for the government, militias or religious conservatives, emo culture is provoking a severe moral panic. As sociologist Stanley Cohen already defined it in the 60’s[[9]](#footnote-9), moral panic captures moments when social change grows so intense that it can no longer be addressed in debate or through the political process, threatening the traditional social values of a particular society. Thus, anxiety, panic and at worst extreme violence towards the source of change can erupt. The “deviant people” become perfect scape goats or folks devils, however occasionally with the intention to divert collectivity’s attention from fundamental societal or democratic improvements.

In the Arab world youth represents the largest bulk of the population. In Iraq it is more than half of the total population that is under 25. And, as indeed it is youth that represents the future but also the deviance, challenging and mistrust of conservative societal norms, new fashions are feared by conservative regime and seen as unmanageable phenomenon. Unfortunately it can lead to strong reprehension and violent clashes.

Nevertheless the right to mourn all kinds of victims, to not let them be forgotten, is a base for seeking and guaranteeing truth, justice and in the end actually a certain form of stability through appeasement. Else, a circle of violence could establish itself with additional crimes and further doves being imprisoned.

***Memory A(r)t Work[[10]](#footnote-10)***

Even though the purpose of Abidin’s work wasn’t to be a specific memorial for those murdered young people, inevitably it still leaves a material trace of what happened at that time in Iraq. For the future it is a possible reference, an eventual proof. Upheavals or violent acts mark the minds and if not the society in general, art can lead the way of memorial confrontation and testimonies. Artists are observers and witnesses of our societies. Sometimes simply by capturing and keeping track of for example human rights abuses, they contribute to a resilient stance. Art is also occasionally at the avant-garde of societal change and takes over the encounter with traumatisms and memory that the State is not willing or capable to do. It is for example [significantly the case for Lebanese art production in all forms](http://www.google.fr/url?sa=t&rct=j&q=&esrc=s&source=web&cd=1&ved=0CDAQFjAA&url=http%3A%2F%2Fhalshs.archives-ouvertes.fr%2Fdocs%2F00%2F63%2F90%2F15%2FDOC%2FLa_fabrique_artistique_de_la_memoire_Arnaud_Chabrol.doc&ei=A1pBU7vCJ5KT0QXTh4CoAQ&usg=AFQjCNHAhx3u0pNmTUV0tmGzzX0pQgEkFw&bvm=bv.64125504,d.d2k&cad=rja)[[11]](#footnote-11). The new generation is aware that in the on-going context of Lebanese post-war amnesia, their work can help on the path of the continuous efforts to pursue the research for answers about the incomprehensible triggers of the civil war, as well as the complex Lebanese identity question.

Memory can sometimes be seen as a supplemental instrument of violence - symbolically, when death and suffering are expelled from recall, or socially via its exploitation in the service of a program of domination - it inevitably rings a bell for numerous cases of violations of human rights or forgotten cases of mass violence in the Middle East and world wide.

Of Abidin’s white symphony we can still keep a note of hope. After all, if maybe not a memorial, it is in its own way a message that the rebirth or new start could happen in a future Iraq, liberated from violence and ready to face the crucial questions and phases of a post-conflict State. As the rebirth of a phoenix from its ashes, Iraq could then end this Sisyphean cycle and liberate the trapped doves or wandering souls.

Lucile Gasber

[**Adel Abidin**](http://www.adelabidin.com)

Born in 1973, Adel Abidin originates from Iraq. He has lived and worked in Helsinki since 2001. After studying at Baghdad’s Academy of Fine Art and afterwards in Helsinki, he has exhibited his work at some of the great international events and institutions. He notably represented Finland at the 52nd Venice Biennale and showed his work in the Iraqi pavilion at the 54th edition of the event. In the last few years, he has directed projects in Finland at the KIASMA (Helsinki), in France at the MAC/VAL (Vitry-sur-Seine), for the opening of the Museum of Contemporary Art of Doha and most recently in the United States in residence at Location One (New York).

Focusing on installation, interactive installations, videos and photography, his multi-media practice explores the complex relationship between culture, politics, and identity. Using a sharp palette of irony and humor, Abidin gravitates towards social situations dealing with elusive experiences and cultural alienation. Abidin uses his cross-cultural background to create a distinct visual language often entwined with sarcasm and paradox, while maintaining his ultimately humanistic approach. Adel Abidin’s projects twist elements of reality, creating poetic shifts in context.

**Executive summary**

Baghdad, March 2012, several young emos, women and men, are brutally stoned to death. In Helsinki, Iraqi visual artist Adel Abidin is profoundly shocked by the news of the killings. Creating a powerful combination of animation and installations, his poetic white symphony pays tribute to the young victims and grabs audiences’ attention on the more universal issue of discriminations against marginalized groups. His reflection about the absurdity and the coldness of those violent acts, invites us first to a philosophical approach and contemplation of the conflictual separation of the body and the soul. Inspired by Ibn Sina’s thoughts, Abidin chose to depict the wandering and wounded souls as frenetically and desperately flattering doves. Their quasi impossible liberation underlines the necessity of recognition of the harm that has been committed for the peace and relief of the society at large. In other words the work on memory and reconciliation after manifestations of mass violence is imperative to retrieve durable peace. Building a sort of memorial or artistic trace of the human rights abuses, Abidin finally contributes to encounter the more deep and linked issues of traumatisms, memory and questioning of the own identity through otherness that the Iraqi State is for the time being not willing or capable to do; thus eventually emphasizing at the same time the endless identity crisis of the Arab world.

1. “Threats and Killings Striking Fear Among Young Iraqis, Including Gays”; The New York Times, Jack Healy (published: March 11, 2012) [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Human Rights Watch: “They Want Us Exterminated: Murder, Torture, Sexual Orientation and Gender in Iraq”; August 2009 [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Interior Minister Statement on Feb. 13, that was quoted in numerous credible news articles (see New York Times article quoted above) or by Amnesty International (<https://www.amnesty.org/fr/node/30298>) is today non retrievable. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Interior Minister statement on Feb. 29; <http://www.moi.gov.iq/ArticleShow.aspx?ID=2151>

   "الظاهرة تتنافى مع عادات المجتمع العراقي ولها تأثيرات سلبية على بنية المجتمعات". [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. “The white sound of death: "Symphony" By Adel Abidin” by Nat Muller from the essay in the publication 'Symphony' edited by Basak Senova and published by Lawrie Shabibi. Ultra:Extra; March 27, 2013. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Ancient Arabic word for dove [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. SEAMAN, Anna: “What we loved at Dubai's Lawrie Shabibi, Isabelle van den Eynde, Green Art and Grey Noise”; The National (March 2013) http://www.thenational.ae/arts-culture/art/what-we-loved-at-dubais-lawrie-shabibi-isabelle-van-den-eynde-green-art-and-grey-noise [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Description of « Mass » by Adel Abidin, <http://www.adelabidin.com/animation/mass>. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. COHEN Stanley : « Folk Devils and Moral Panics »; St Albans: Paladin (first publication in 1973). [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Also the title of a project by the UMAM Documentation and Research Center http://www.memoryatwork.org/ [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. CHABROL Arnaud : La fabrique artistique de la mémoire : effet de génération et entreprises artistiques dans le Liban contemporain article publié dans Mémoires de guerres au Liban (MERMIER Franck et VARIN Christophe (dir.)), Arles, Sindbad/Actes Sud/Ifpo, 2010, pp. 485-509. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)