

Yousif Naser: Unique Iraqi Art In An Old Town Hall

By: Karen Dabrowska



Black rain

There is no shortage of art galleries and studios in West London's borough of Ealing. Among the artists is Iraqi-born Yousif Naser whose gallery the ARK in the Old Town Hall in Acton attracts both local and foreign visitors.

Yousif's art is the art of emotions. One constant theme evident in his numerous, paintings and drawings

is the suffering of Iraq and the pain of exile. His largest project Black Rain is an ongoing undertaking,





which began as a painting project during the build up to the 2003 invasion of Iraq. It quickly acquired momentum and generated much local media coverage. Gradually it evolved into a series of paintings comprising of multi-and-single media works, ranging from gigantic canvases to small drawings, collages and paintings, all inspired by the horrors of war.

Yousif has exhibited his work in Iraq, Lebanon, Norway, Belgium, Germany, France, Italy,

Cyprus, Syria and the United Kingdom and participated in group exhibitions in Europe, Asia, the Middle East and North Africa.

He was born in Amara, Iraq in 1952 and has been painting and drawing from an early age. Despite a totally non-supportive environment, he was producing artwork, including portraits, of well know local personalities.

His early years were a mixture of education and menial labour including work on buiding sites. In intermediate school he wanted to

play music but his family could not afford an instrument. They encouraged him to carry on with art as it did not cost them anything. Nearly every evening Yousif went to the school's art studio, which was opened by a friendly teacher. He became proficient at copying

pictures, especially classical statues. During the entrance exam to the Academy of Fine Arts in Baghdad he was the first one to finish - copying a statue was easy for him. Out of 116 candidates only five passed. He was among the five. In 1975 he graduated from





the academy with a BA in Fine Arts and worked as a designer for the Iraqi Communist Party's daily newspaper Tariq Al Shaab (The road of the people). When he became an art teacher the government gave him a hard time because he was a communist and kept changing his place of employment. The life of exile began on 5th February 1979 when he fled to Lebanon after the Baathist regime began persecuting all political activists. He started working as an art designer for

magazines produced by the Palestine Liberation Organisation (PLO). The 1982 Israeli invasion of Lebanon prompted him to leave for Syria where he continued his work for the PLO.

In 1984 Yousif decided to move to Cyprus in search of greener pastures. His job as art director for the Palestinian Red Crescent Society lasted until 1990 when Saddam's armies invaded Kuwait. The Palestinians supported the invasion, the Iraqis in exile did not and the PLO refused to renew his

residency visa. His final move was to London, with the assistance of friends. He settled in Ealing, West London, attended a number of English language courses and enrolled in adult education art workshops so he could have a place to paint. Yousif also established himself as an art critic for London-based Arab dailies. In 1993 he set up the Iraqi Artists Union (IAU) for exiled artists. His life and career changed dramatically in 1997 when a friend

told him about a vacant building, belonging to West London's Churches in South Ealing. Soon after acquiring the premises, Yousif was joined by fellow artist Dalal Mufti who worked tirelessly to establish a community arts project.

The ARK was named after the ark in the epic of Gilgamesh dating back 4,700 years ago. It has always been a non-profit making, voluntary organisation depending solely on the generosity and good





will of its members.
«We were trying to provide a «safe-haven», a platform for innovative artists, who could not easily find a venue to display their unique work. They exchanged views, shared experiences, motivated and assisted one another in a supportive environment. The first project in 1998 was called «DDD» (draw, dance and drink). Later we added another «D» for «discuss». DDD became a monthly event, artists would display their work, musicians performed, poets read their compositions. It was an arts»

bazaar (souk),» Yousif explained. During the past thirteen years it show-cased neglected aspects of cultural diversity, hosted hundreds of events, ranging from art exhibitions and classes, musical and film evenings and lectures. Thousands benefited from its activities.

Until 2004, it was growing from strength to strength as Ealing's only voluntary arts» venue. Then disaster struck. Ealing Council did not sign a 25-year lease they initially offered, the ARK was evicted and the building was sold.

As meagre compensation alternative premises were provided in «The Stables» once a fire station, later transformed into an office block.

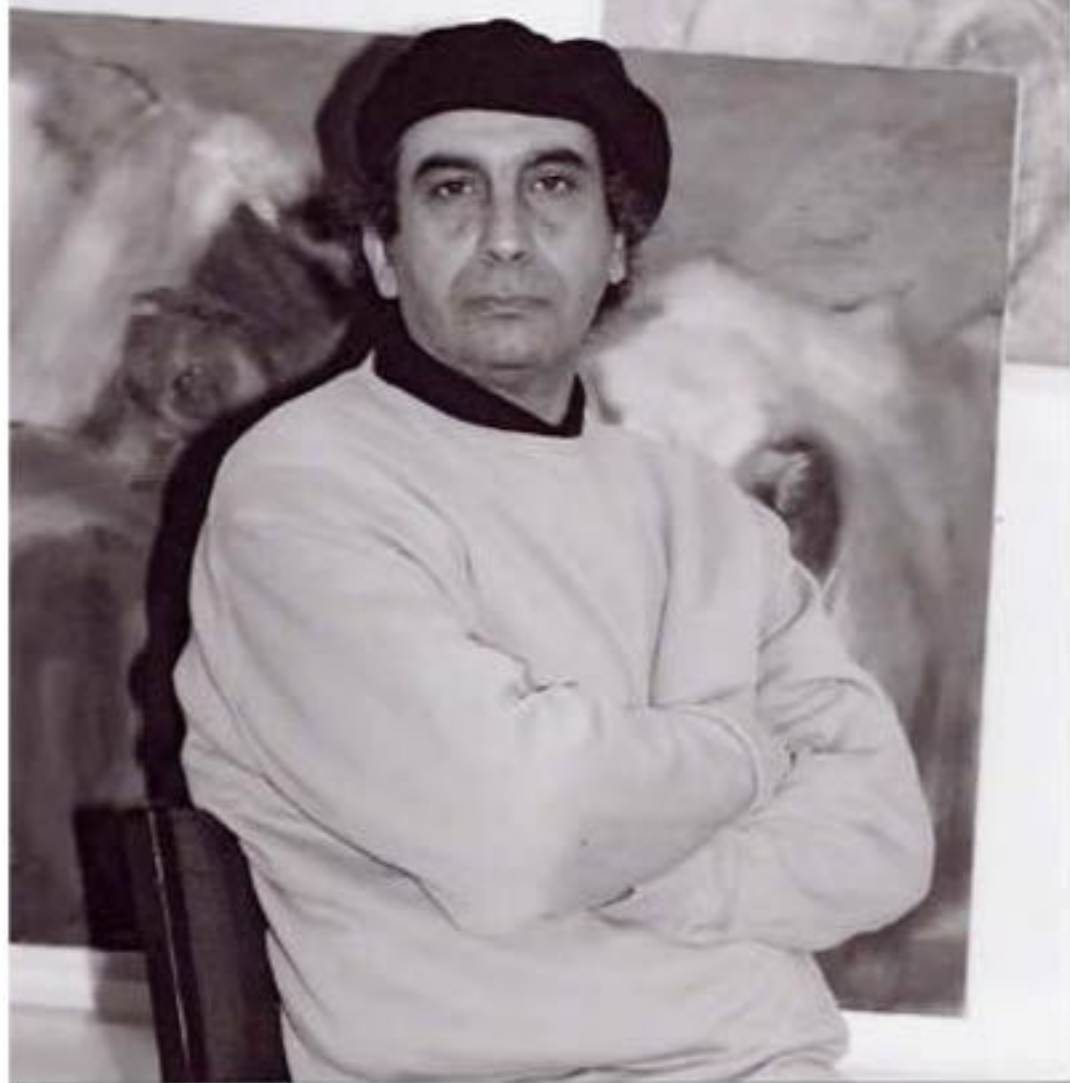
The ARK continued its activities. Sadly Dalal passed away in 2004. There was a steady turnover of voluntary members of the steering committee but Yousif has always been the mainstay of the project. In February 2007, 'poem in a studio» became a weekly event. It is one of his most successful projects and Yousif became

London's «Mr Iraqi Culture». The meetings, characterised by a homely, cordial atmosphere, have moved from an informal get together, where friends sit, talk and read poems to screenings of rare and contemporary Iraqi films and philosophical lectures.

But Ealing Council rained on his parade once again. Yousif had to vacate the premises in December 2008 as the area will be re-developed into a shopping centre. The council has offered alternative premises in the Old Acton Town



Yousif Naser



Hall and the ARK is continuing its activities until December 2010. Ealing Council is once again taking back the premises and may not provide an alternative venue so the future is very uncertain.