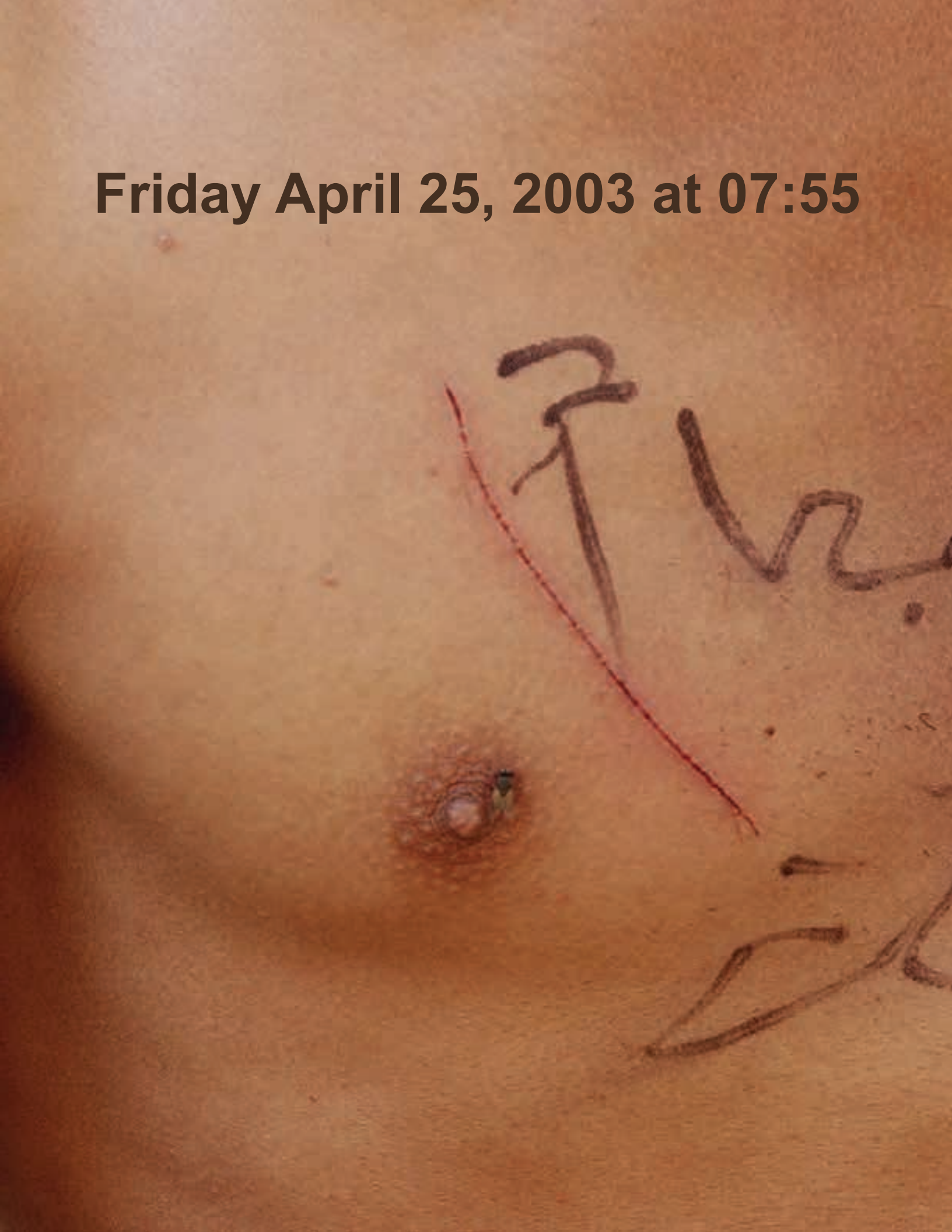


**Friday April 25, 2003 at 07:55**

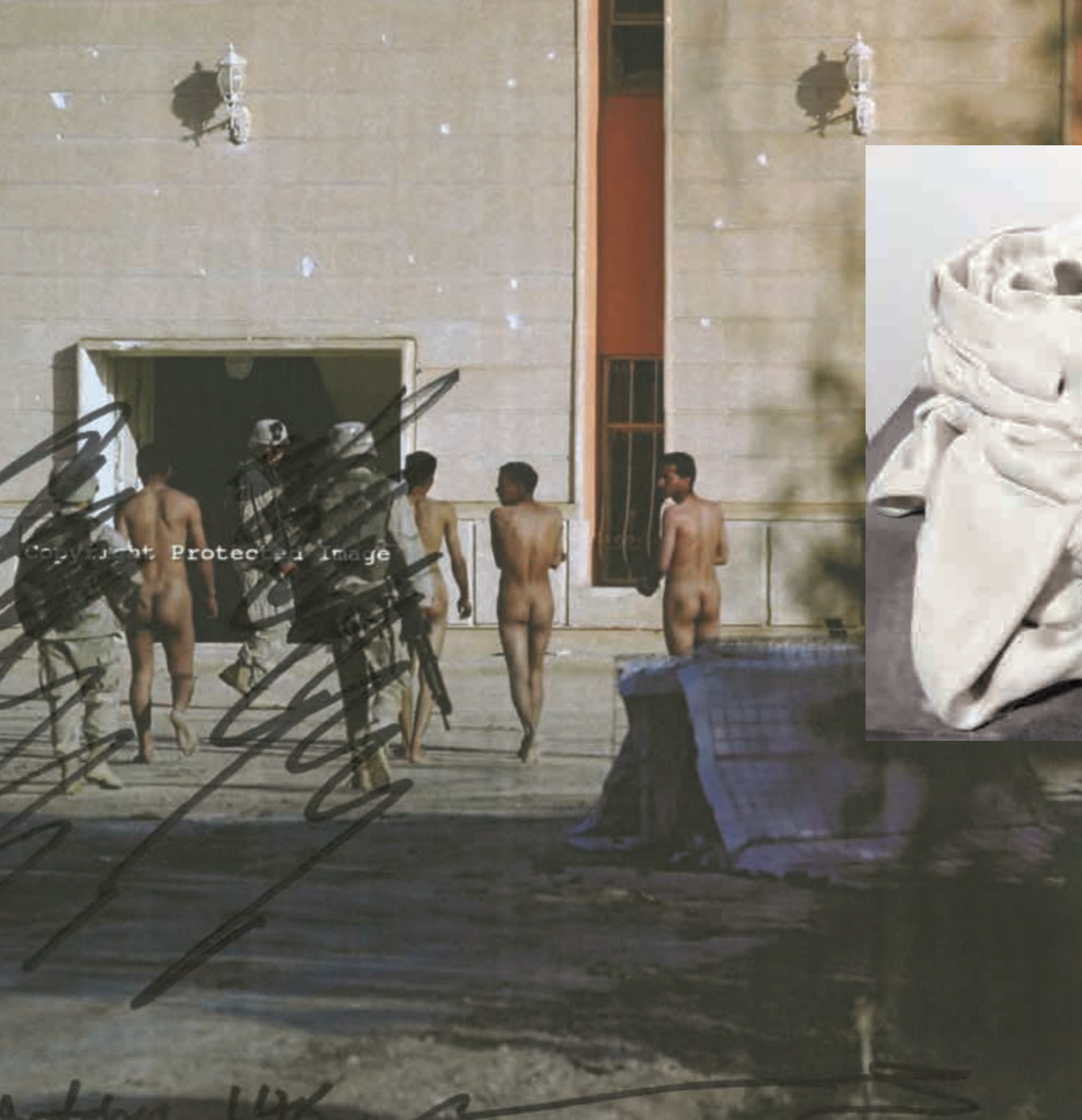


**Reza Aramesh**











**Run, naked, run**

It is early morning in Baghdad, and Tomm and I are on our way to one of the palaces of Saddam Hussein, where he used to have his friends; the lions and the cheetahs. A team of South African vets were going to save the animals from their captivity, and we wanted to cover the transfer. While passing the Zawra-park in Baghdad, we suddenly see an absurd group of men moving.

-Stop! Stop! Stop the car!

Both of us scream, and run out of the car as soon as possible. Behind the fences of the park, we see four naked young men walking slowly in between what used to be a children’s playground, with old iron swings, slides and benches for parents to sit and relax under the enormous trees. The naked tall and thin men move in complete silence. Just behind them follow four soldiers in full uniform, with guns in their arms. What is this?

Tomm clicks the camera. Again and again. Naked guys in front, soldiers after: Walking, without talking. They are moving from the playground and out into the sun. It is not even eight in the morning, but strong rays come from above and light up the surreal little gang of eight men.

What is happening here in Zawra park, also known as Baghdad zoo? We are also silent, afraid of being chased away. Following as close as we can, searching for ways we can get inside the fenced park. The group disappears inside a cement house. -A prison?, we wonder, fearing we will never see them again. We try desperately to see if we can enter the park – or if there is more people coming

into this area where children used to play before the war started, less than a month ago. Seconds after, a door is being opened just meters down the street. The naked men are being pushed out of the door, followed by the soldiers.

-Ali Baba, haram, Ali Baba, haram, shout the men in uniforms.

«Ali Baba» is a well known expression in Baghdad in 2003, where museums, offices and houses are being constantly looted in the chaos that has occurred after the Americans attacked Iraq to help the Iraqis get rid of Saddam Hussein. The name refers to the story about Ali Baba and the forty thieves. Ali Baba is the chief-looter, because he stole everything from the other thieves. The four naked guys are quiet. Standing bewildered and confused, looking at each other, not understanding what is going on.

-Ali Baba, haram, Ali Baba haram, the soldiers repeat, and push them further down the stairs. The naked Iraqis see their chance, start to run and don’t look back. I run after.

-As fast as I have ever seen a woman running after naked men, Tomm laughs later on.

The four naked men and a confused western journalist-woman run as fast as they can, traversing a big road and continuing down another street and inside an alley, between abandoned old one story cement houses. After some hundred meters, the men manage to escape into the tiny alleys.

-Hallo, hallo, please come back. I want to talk to you, please, I say in broken Arabic.

One of the naked men is kind enough to respond to a woman in need. He has found a pair of grey shorts somewhere in the not so clean streets. His head is bent and he is not comfortable: If you ask any Iraqi man, he will tell you there is not much worse that can happen than to be sent naked out in the streets of Iraq by armed American soldiers. The worst humiliation there is.

-The American soldiers told us to undress. I thought they would ransack us, but they burned our clothes in front of us, even though we said it was an enormous shame to send us naked out in the streets, says 20 year old Zian Djumma. On his naked chest we see that something is written with black marker pen: «Ali Baba. Haram». Haram means «bastard» in Arabic.

-Awful. Now I want to go home, find a hand grenade and throw it at the soldiers. Not just to those that did this to us, but everyone. I hate the Americans for this, says Ziad Djumma. He continues:

-We did nothing wrong. We went through an open gate and inside the park to search for our 15 year old brother. He has been missing for three days, says Djumma.

Then he asks if he can leave us. He turns around, walks away. His shoulders are bowed and he is clearly not comfortable being many kilometers away from his home in Sadr City. Half naked, only with a pair of borrowed and dusty grey shorts.







Tomm and I drove to the American military base in Bagdad. We had the names of the soldiers, since they were written on their uniforms. What were their answers?

-We took their clothes and burnt them, before we pushed them out with «thief» written on their chests, explains Eric Canaday, platoon leader.

-I think our mission is to keep people out of the park to prevent them from stealing weapons. We have implemented several measures, and I don't think what you saw is too much. We have talked with Iraqi residents, and some of them gave us the idea.

-I think it was quite successful, he concludes.

-Will you continue with this method? We ask.

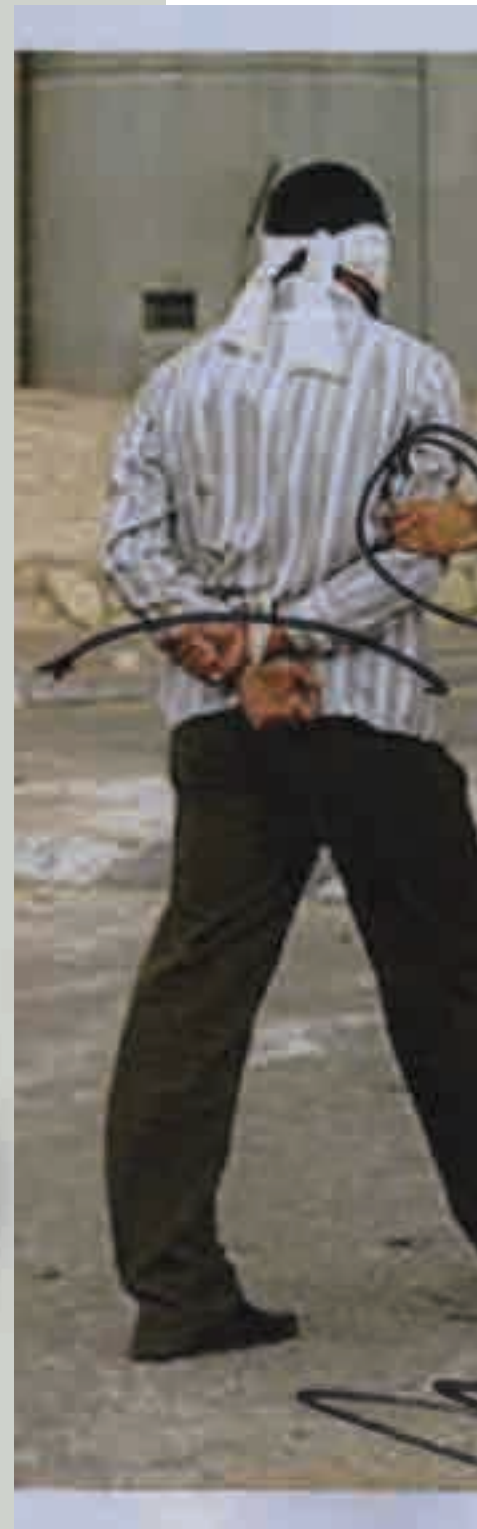
-Yes, he answers.

It is only noon. And we have an insane story to send back home.

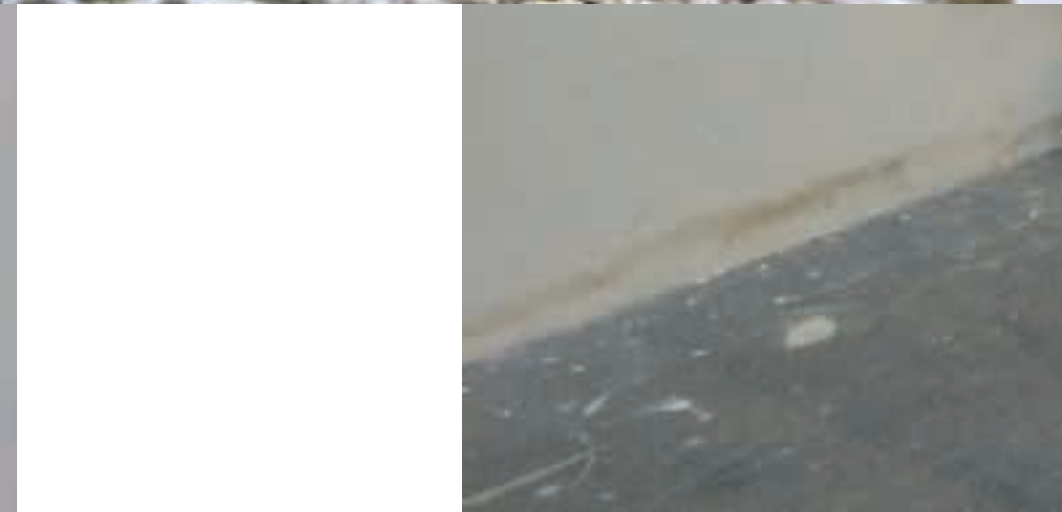










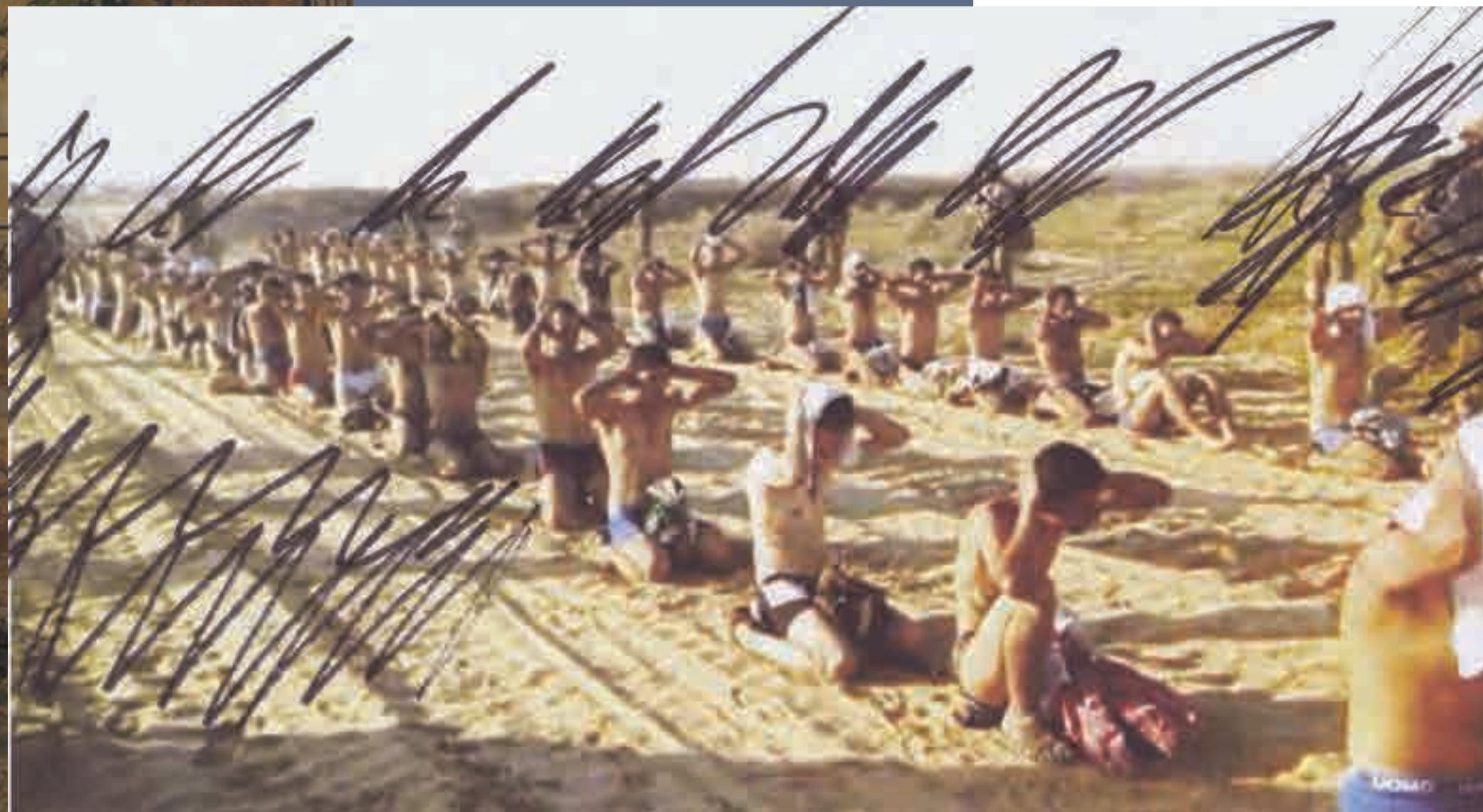






Study for









18 p  
ave  
aB  
'99



var amerikanerne som skrev ordene på Zian Djummas brystkasse.  
Baba» etter dem. Det betyr tjuv i Bagdad.



ev ordene på Zian Djummas  
r jeg bare lyst til å gå hjem  
aste den mot soldatene. Ikke  
et mot oss, men mot alle. Jeg  
, sier Ziad Djumma.

e kompisene inn i parken  
ar på leting etter vår 15-årige  
rte i tre dager,» er Djummas

adil Fawas, betviler 20-  
ikke trist nok,» sier han.

ert stasjonert i parken i over  
t. Det er mye som tyder på  
or å se om det var noe å

førte operasjonen, sier at de  
dag med våpendeler.

nting, sier Ziad Djumma, som  
len Sadr-byon, tidligere kalt

inna fordi soldatene også  
ed penger og identitetspapirer. På bildene som Dagbladet har  
med seg lommebøkene ut.

g ga dem klokker, sigaretter, lightere, lommebøker og penge  
Canaday (25), til Dagbladet.

rtodokse operasjonen i Bagdad-parken i går.

til å brenne tyvers klær og sende dem nakne ut i gata?

å holde folk ute av parken for å forhindre tjuveri av våpen. Vi  
ette er for drøyt, fortsetter Canaday.

nye våpen lagret i Zawra parken. Våpnene skal leveres tilbake  
gynner å styre landet.

rsøkt å komme seg inn i parken for å stjele den siste tida. G  
Til ingen nytte.

ke innbyggere. Noen av dem ga oss ideen. Så vi tok klær  
ned «tjuv» skrevet på brystet. Det var faktisk ganske volly



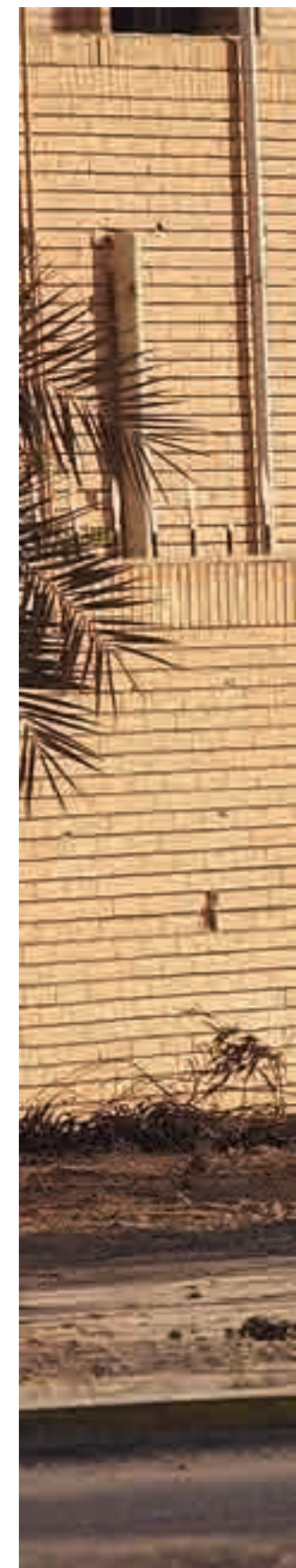
YDMYKET. På brystet til 20-årig  
står det «Ali Baba. Haram» på a  
amerikanerne skrevet, og det b

sk

«Vi tok klærne og prente dem

ano tidligere. Da var det bare én person, melder tronssief









slap her action collage



slap her action collage















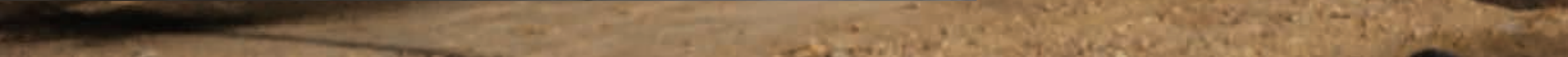




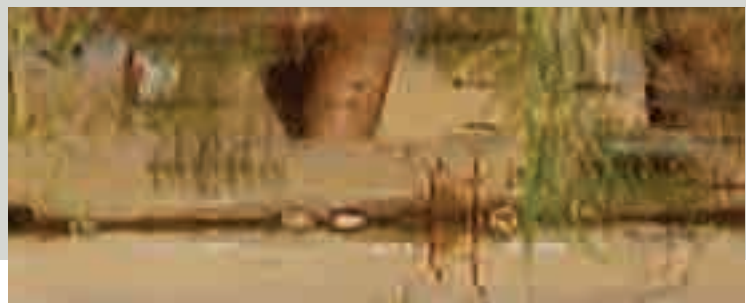
















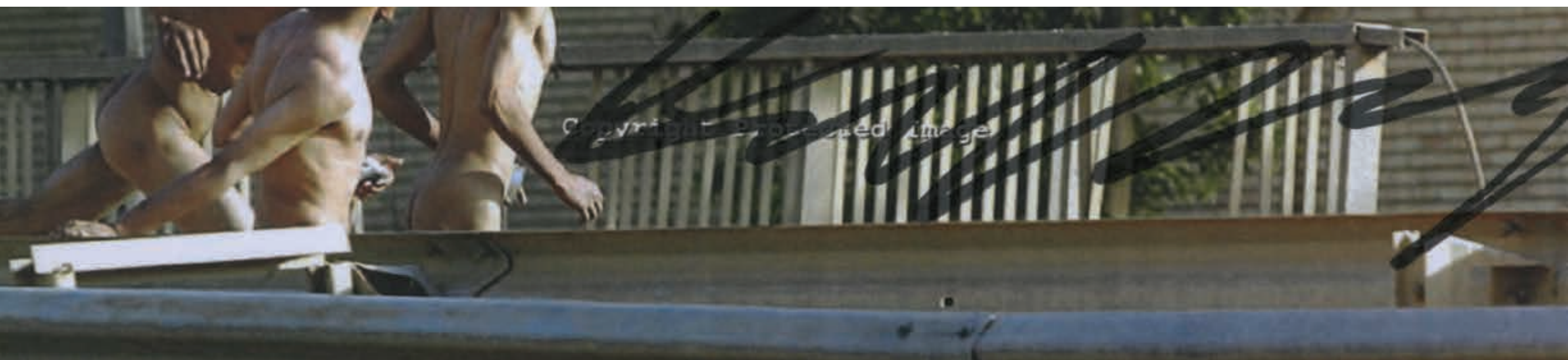


























## By Fire

The male body, often partially naked, in a moment of pain, suffering, submission and humiliation has long been a preoccupation of Reza Aramesh’s ongoing investigations into the impact that images of war and conflict, and their ongoing circulation and consumption after their immediate historical context has passed, have on our collective consciousness. Drawing from his extensive archive of media images of wartime atrocities, Aramesh represents such bodies through works of theater –collectively called ‘actions’ and numbered sequentially– that have taken the form of performances, large-scale black and white photographs, and, most recently, sculptures. Focusing on the victims, Aramesh extracts their poses, gestures and expressions from such documentary images and then enlists amateurs –young, fit and dressed in everyday street wear– to reenact them. For the performances and photographs, these reenactments –carefully choreographed tableaux that include numerous actors and poses derived from multiple sources– were staged in stately mansions and art-filled museums introducing a jarring dissonance between abject body and opulent setting, between the fact of history and the artifice of art history. Aramesh’s polychrome lime wood and white marble sculptures, which isolate single figures, achieve a similar tension through material, uncannily assimilating specific poses and expressions of pain and suffering derived from the media with important precedents from the history of Western, and specifically Christian, art, transfiguring profanities of the real through sacred iconography. The end results of a complex process that involves many distillations and translations, these sculptures feel both refined and dense with reference.

Throughout his extensive oeuvre Aramesh has consciously combined Eros with Thanatos, recasting images of war and conflict into a complicated and conflicted matrix of wealth, art, beauty and desire, through his use of lavish settings, luscious materials, exacting technique and an understated homoeroticism. His practice seeks to critique our insatiable appetite for representations of violence by subtly amplifying precisely those qualities and details that are easy to desire, that give us pleasure, making the problematic ethics of our encounters with such images less uncertain but certainly more uncomfortable. This exhibition, which includes experiments in new formats and materials, marks a significant departure for Aramesh. The male body in distress does not visually dominate these recent works, appearing in some as a minimal outline or a mere repository for other images. And in a series of delicate porcelain sculptures the body disappears completely, its physical presence simply indexed through material traces that are not real but imagined.

*Action 143* consists of a series of slightly larger than life-size silhouettes of a crouching man, possibly blindfolded, with his hands tied behind his back. Each one of these forms is filled in with fragments of one or more black and white photographs. Emptied of all specific reference, the repeated profile of a distressed figure serves as a vessel for a larger image universe, a medium for channeling experiences of human suffering, from both past and present. Drawn from various sources, the exact subject matter of these found image fragments is nearly impossible to work out.

Many show groups of people moving through desolate landscapes in a manner that suggests refugees fleeing conflict or famine. Others suggest wartime scenes through almost incidental and easily missed details – guns and helmets, dusty men in uniform, a group of prisoners huddled together on the other side of a barbed wire fence. One shows a half naked African woman, her hands extended up over her head as if in mid-stretch. A picturesque detail of a larger landscape –a small flock of birds flying through the mist next to the silhouetted branches of a tree– completely fills another, confusing the commonly held distinction between figure and ground, turning this atmospheric scene into an interior landscape, a traumatic memory or a precious but fleeting dream of freedom.

*Action 143 neon* goes a step further, reducing the silhouette to its bare minimum: a simple outline. Presented in a darkened room, the contour is crafted out of white neon, its front carefully blacked out so that it appears like a soft luminous halo on the wall with a sharp line floating in front of it. The image of the body in pain is made universal, abstracted into a near mystical symbol, a ghostly afterimage inscribed into our vision that continually haunts our collective memory, its blank interior soliciting our darkest projections.

The exhibition’s title –*Friday April 25, 2003 at 07:55*– refers to a seemingly unremarkable but also somewhat absurd event that occurred early on during the recent war in Iraq, accidentally witnessed and documented by Norwegian journalists Line Fransson and Tømm

Christiansen. While out following a lead to a different story, the journalists encountered an unexpected sight: four naked young Iraqi men running through the streets of Baghdad. Accused of robbery by American soldiers, the men had been forced at gunpoint to strip and were being paraded naked through the city.

Their clothes and shoes were burned and the words “Ali Baba” were scribbled clumsily in Arabic on their chests, temporarily branding their bodies with a demeaning Orientalist stereotype. Their report, first published in the Norwegian tabloid *Dagbladet*, initially gathered little attention from global media outlets. However, in retrospect, it documented how common and widespread tactics of forced nudity and sexual humiliation were among American soldiers in Iraq, foreshadowing the startling revelations of the use of similar techniques in the State-sanctioned torture and abuse of Iraqi prisoners at the notorious Abu Ghraib prison that came to light later that same year.

Aramesh is fascinated by the almost accidental chain of events that led to the documentation of this act of wartime atrocity. Rather than using details gleaned from the available photographs to restage the episode, Aramesh chose to represent it through a series of sculptures, titled *Action 144 – Action 148*, that are wholly imagined. While previously the pose, gesture and expression of suffering male bodies were the focus, here Aramesh simply presents metonyms of those bodies: their discarded clothes and shoes sculpted out of ghostly white porcelain. The bodies that these objects once covered seem to have mysteriously, and



miraculously, vanished, vaporized through spontaneous combustion or abducted by a divine or alien entity. By refusing to produce images of one more humiliated male body, Arab or otherwise, these objects seem to side step the complex politics of representation surrounding the impact, reception and circulation of media images of war and conflict that Aramesh's previous work had taken head on.

Rather than referencing art historical precedents, Aramesh's choice of medium for these sculptures is symbolic. Rendered in delicate porcelain, the soft overlapping folds of these piles of clothing resemble the tender petals of a flower, and the medium's inherent fragility indexes the vulnerability of the forcibly disrobed young men. Also, the production of porcelain requires the use of fire, linking it to a key moment in the original series of events, when the American soldiers incinerated the young men's clothing, effectively sealing their humiliation through forced nudity. In contrast, Aramesh uses fire to materially resurrect the past, reversing a destructive gesture through a creative one. Through these sculptures Aramesh seems to want to resuscitate a part of history that is immaterial and evanescent, something that is of and from the human body but not reducible to or representable by a simple image of it, an ineffable, experiential quality that lies beyond mimesis. Image and reenactment are insufficient tools to convey the affect of this degradation; it must be retrieved materially, excavated, as if it were a bodily secretion, physical but invisible, that had deposited itself onto their clothes.

Like Aramesh's polychrome lime wood and white marble sculptures these works hover ambiguously between elegy

and monument. Though detached in ways from the reality of the events that inspired them, they testify all the same to the sheer indignity and shame suffered by the young Iraqi men. But, as material reconstitutions of the destroyed clothing, they also function as modest, bittersweet monuments to those banal everyday objects that once bore, and continue to bear, the last vestiges of a dignity and self-respect now lost.



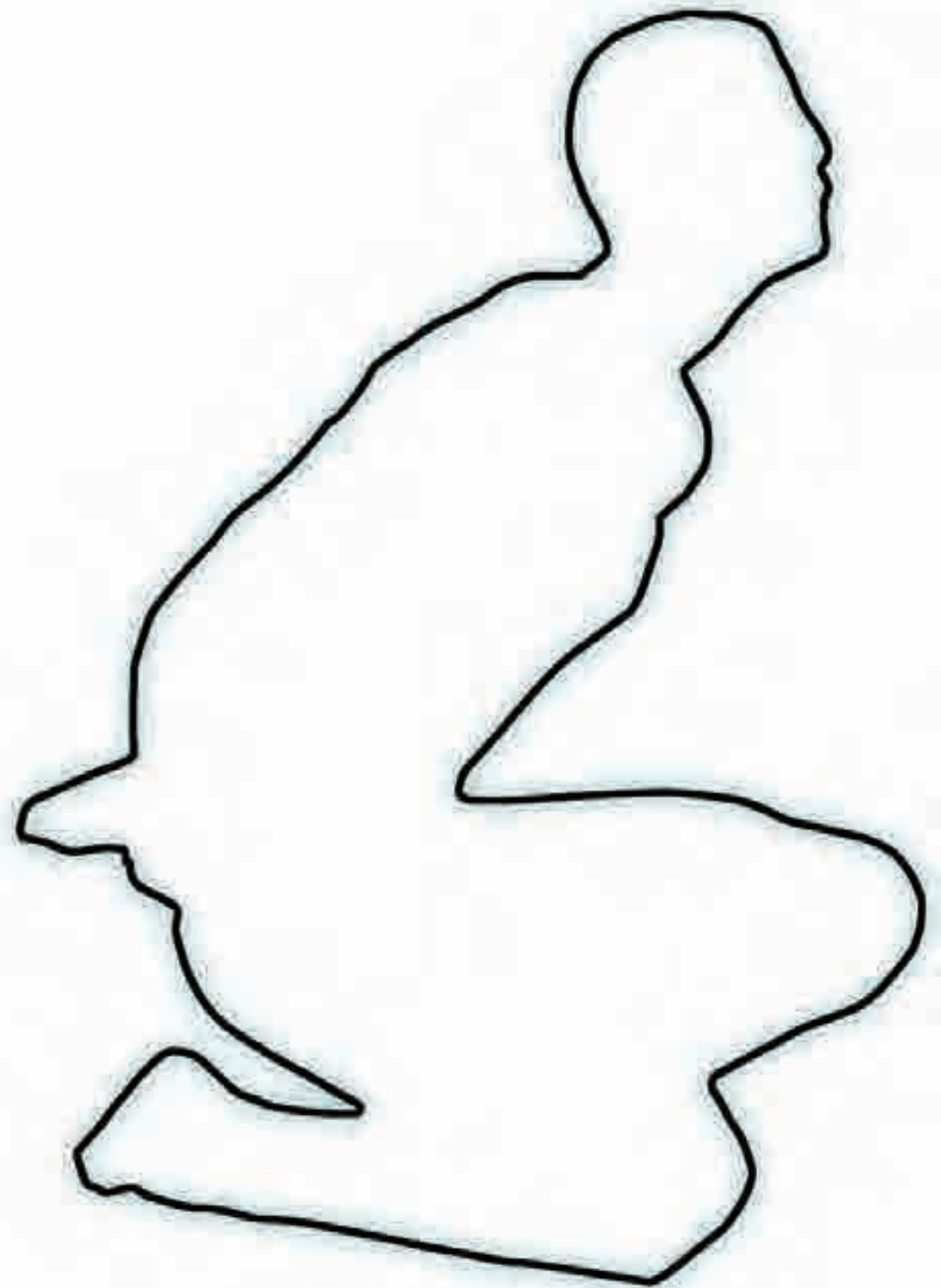












Published on the occasion of the  
exhibition:

**Friday April 25, 2003 at 07:55**

“Run, naked, Run”  
by Line Fransson

“By Fire”  
by Murtaza Vali

Reportage photographs  
taken 25/04 2003, Baghdad  
by Tomm W. Christiansen

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