



Ayad Alkadhi

# UMBILICAL

**LEILA HELLER GALLERY.**

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Ayad Alkadhi  
**Umbilical**  
February 2 - February 25, 2012

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Cover image: *Spring*, 2011-2012 (detail)  
Charcoal, acrylic, pen and pencil on canvas  
48 x 216 in / 122 x 549 cm

# UMBILICAL

His emails arrived mostly in the morning, one at night. Each contained the title and dimensions, and most important an attachment with an image of his newest work. They were like birth announcements and just as welcome; the picture files when opened were, at quick glance, a bright burst of energy—new life on old newsprint. Seventeen in all, they form the core of Ayad Alkadhi's latest series "Umbilical."

I was aware of and admired Ayad's work long before we connected electronically. We share an interest in the manifold graphic possibilities of Arabic writing, which he freely employs with his own calligraphy as well with newspaper that often functions as the support for his compositions. The words are not mere decoration but merge with and amplify his emotionally charged images inspired by the dreadful aftermath of the American-led invasion of Iraq, his homeland, and by his quest for identity as an Arab artist living in post-9/11 New York. He has produced a remarkable body of work that is intensely personal, often tinged with anger but never despondent, and deeply compelling. His is the visual testimony of a self-described survivor.

For an American audience there is the expectation that, as a diaspora artist from the Middle East, Ayad's work necessarily should express and clarify the issues of war, destruction, politics, and sectarianism, especially as relates to Iraq. We ask him to tell his story, to interpret his own response to death and devastation, and the annihilation of nearly everything but his memories of home. Because he is an innate story-teller who masterfully constructs his narratives from carefully built layers of charcoal and paint, often on Arabic newspaper, we have his provocative response.

"Umbilical" explores the memories of twenty-five years in the life of the artist, from the time he first left Iraq up to the present, and demonstrates the scope of Ayad's emotional and creative evolution over the past decade. It is both different from his earlier work and stands in a definable relationship to it.

In his 2008 series "Between the Noose and Infinity," the compositions, covered in part by calligraphy and overlaid on Arabic newspaper, depict shapeless, shrouded figures with dangling legs hanging in mid-air that serve as a visual metaphor for the uncertainty of everyday life in Iraq. There is little or no color in these powerful, macabre and uncomfortable images. Elsewhere, Ayad demonstrates his skillful rendering of the human form, often self-portraits, juxtaposing strong draftsmanship, in the western sense, with his mastery of Arabic calligraphy, which makes for both dramatic fusion and visual tension. For example, the series "Ghareeb," from 2006-2008, captures with striking self-images the artist's emotional response to the torture of Iraqi prisoners at Abu Ghareeb. Again, largely monochromatic except for the strategic intrusion of red, Ayad here follows an Islamic calligraphic tradition transforming words into images such as chains, swords and rifles, which he causes to both plausibly and disjunctively interact with the figures.

His most recent series from 2011, "Story Teller," seems in some ways to provide a visual and thematic prelude to "Umbilical." In this earlier series, focusing on memory and the stories that derive from the remembrance of experience, Ayad expands his palette using color to outline his figures, which are covered by a near avalanche of calligraphy as though the words overwhelm the subjects of their own stories.

None of his previous work, however, quite fully prepares for the unexpected color, emotional depth and imaginative scope of "Umbilical." In the composition entitled "Sleeping Beauties," Ayad has not merely stepped up the chromatic intensity but has positively shifted into neon. Here, purple-pink gas pump nozzles hang downward from their hoses—the eponymous umbilicals—which form a link to a writhing mass of disassociated legs and arms sharply outlined in yellow, green and blue. The colors are precisely built up over a darker layer of underdrawing on Arabic newspaper and are as well thought-out as the forms they define and overlay. The cheerfully-colored contorted limbs were inspired by the French Romantic painter Géricault's horrifically powerful "Raft of the Medusa," in which the survivors of a tragic shipwreck are depicted pressed against the dead and dying as they await rescue. Echoing the crooked postures of the nineteenth-century painting, Ayad used his own arms and legs as models. The resulting work is an emotionally chilling tour de force that encapsulates a different and more prolonged tragedy in which the artist is the survivor bearing witness for those who cannot speak.

"Venus-Iraq" is an equally powerful and challenging work. Its bright surface colors, which add to the kinetic intensity and strength of the drawing, belie the mélange of implied turmoil and violence beneath. One is initially taken in by the candy-like hues, which on closer inspection reveal bombs and other monstrosities. In the upper right, like a whispered prayer, is a partially obscured quotation from the Sufi poet Rumi concluding with the words "I want mercy." In the end, much is left up to the viewer; do the fetal figures depicted here, as well as those inscribed under the gas pump hoses in "Sleeping Beauties," represent the persistence of life or lives thwarted?

In the large painting entitled "Spring," Ayad, the consummate story-teller, also leaves open-ended his reaction to the so-called Arab Spring, the revolutionary wave of demonstrations in support of human rights and freedom, which began in late 2010. In this dense composition applied directly on canvas rather than newspaper and set against a spacious background suggestive of spring rain, Ayad seems to repeat some of his earlier images and forms. But these motifs are so tightly compressed and abstracted as merely to suggest a head here or an Arabic letter there, almost as though it is the past (and therefore the future) turning in on itself. Whatever the ultimate outcome of the Arab Spring, Ayad Alkadhi will be there to bear witness.

Dr. Linda Komaroff / Curator of Islamic Art / Los Angeles County Museum of Art (LACMA)



**I USED TO BE KING** 2011-2012  
Charcoal, acrylic, pen and pencil on Arabic newspaper on canvas  
48 x 60 in / 122 x 153 cm



**NATURALLY INORGANIC** 2011-2012  
Charcoal, acrylic, pen and pencil on Arabic newspaper on canvas  
60 x 48 in / 153 x 122 cm



VENUS-IRAQ 2011-2012  
Charcoal, acrylic, pen and pencil on Arabic newspaper on canvas  
72 x 72 in / 183 x 183 cm



SLEEPING BEAUTIES 2011-2012  
Charcoal, acrylic, pen and pencil on Arabic newspaper on canvas  
72 x 72 in / 183 x 183 cm



BRENT CRUDE 2011-2012  
Charcoal, acrylic, pen and pencil on Arabic newspaper on canvas  
36 x 60 in / 92 x 153 cm



THE THINKER 2011-2012  
Charcoal, acrylic, pen and pencil on Arabic newspaper on canvas  
72 x 48 in / 183 x 122 cm



ONE WORLD 2011-2012  
Charcoal, acrylic, pen and pencil on Arabic newspaper on canvas  
72 x 48 in / 183 x 122 cm



SPRING 2011-2012  
Charcoal, acrylic, pen and pencil on canvas  
48 x 216 in / 122 x 549 cm





**BLESSED SUSUAN** 2011-2012  
 Acrylic, pen and charcoal on Arabic newspaper on canvas board  
 20 x 16 in / 51 x 41 cm



**TO KILL A HUMMINGBIRD** 2011-2012  
 Acrylic, pen and charcoal on Arabic newspaper on canvas board  
 20 x 16 in / 51 x 41 cm



**REVOLUTION IN ICE CREAM** 2011-2012  
 Acrylic and pen on Arabic newspaper on canvas board  
 20 x 16 in / 51 x 41 cm



MIGRATORY PATTERN 2011-2012  
Acrylic and pen on Arabic newspaper on canvas board  
20 x 16 in / 51 x 41 cm



DOUBLE DIP 2011-2012  
Acrylic and pen on Arabic newspaper on canvas board  
20 x 16 in / 51 x 41 cm



WHAT COMES AFTER SPRING? 2011-2012  
Acrylic and pen on Arabic newspaper on canvas board  
20 x 16 in / 51 x 41 cm



**MY ERECT MIDDLE FINGER** 2011-2012  
Paper collage, acrylic, pen on Arabic newspaper on canvas board  
20 x 16 in / 51 x 41 cm

**WHO BETRAYED THE REVOLUTION?** 2011-2012  
Acrylic, pen and charcoal on Arabic newspaper on canvas board  
20 x 16 in / 51 x 41 cm

**UMBILICAL** 2011-2012  
Acrylic, pen and charcoal on Arabic newspaper on canvas board  
20 x 16 in / 51 x 41 cm

# AYAD ALKADHI

## EDUCATION

2004

ITP Tisch School of Arts, New York University, New York, NY Masters of Fine Arts

## SELECTED EXHIBITIONS

2011

Abu Dhabi Art Fair, Leila Heller Gallery, Abu Dhabi UAE

Art Platform - Los Angeles, Leila Heller Gallery, Los Angeles, CA

*Navigating the Aftermath*, Quarter Gallery / Regis Centre of the Arts, Minneapolis, MN

Art Dubai, Dubai, UAE

2010

*Islam International*, AB Gallery, Lucerne, Switzerland

*Peripheral Vision*, The Maraya Art Center, Barjeel Art Foundation, Al Qasba-Sharjah, UAE

*Tarjama/Translation*, Hubert F. Johnson Museum of Art, Ithaca, NY

Art Dubai, Dubai, UAE

2009

Solo Exhibition, ArtSpace Gallery Dubai, Dubai, UAE

*Tarjama/Translation*, Queens Museum of Art, New York, NY

*The Seen and the Hidden: (Dis)Covering the Veil*, Austrian Cultural Forum, New York, NY

*Einstein on Witherspoon Street: Expressions for Social Justice*, New York University Bronfman Center Gallery, New York, NY

Art Dubai, Dubai, UAE

*Iraqi Artists in Exile*, Station Museum of Contemporary Art, Houston, TX

2008

*Reorientations*, European Parliament, Brussels, Belgium

Council Juried Exhibition, Palm Springs Museum, Palm Springs, CA

*East-West Dialogues*, Leila Heller Gallery, New York, NY

## LEILA HELLER GALLERY.

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Jessica Davidson, Business Director  
Melissa Barbagallo, Gallery Associate  
Ally Mintz, Gallery Assistant

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canvas

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