Douglas Tallack, “Interview with Dr Ala Bashir”, Embrace Arts, University of Leicester, May 2010

Douglas Tallack: May I welcome you to “Embrace Arts at the Richard Attenborough Centre” and thank you for exhibiting your new paintings here.

Ala Bashir: Thank you for introducing me to the Richard Attenborough Centre, and I should like to extend my thanks to the Director, Ms Louisa Milburn, and the Curator, Ms Stella Couloutbanis, who were a great help to me during the preparation of this exhibition.

DT: I should like to start with a work of art which, for two reasons, cannot be exhibited here or in any gallery. I am referring to the public monument entitled *The Union*, which was seven storeys high and located on a traffic island in Baghdad (see figure 1).

![Image of The Union](image1.png)

Figure 1, Ala Bashir, *The Union*, Baghdad, 2001

Could you describe how *The Union* came to be designed and constructed, during the presidency of Saddam Hussein?

AB: In 1999 I was asked to choose one of my sculptures to be a monument in Baghdad. I chose an abstract form of a man and a woman to represent love and peace, and to glorify life. I called it *The Union*. As most sculptures in Baghdad were about war or power, I thought *The Union* monument may inspire the new generation to think of love in an attempt to diminish the power of hate, which is widespread in the country, and is a source of sad events. It took a year to build it, and it officially opened on 12th December, 2001. It is 73 feet high (higher than a seven storey building) and weighing 940 tons. 1640 stone slabs were used to cover the cement structure, each slab weighing 400 pounds. I used the same stones used by the Assyrians to build the winged bull.

DT: Did Saddam Hussein like *The Union*?

AB: When Saddam saw the prototype, he was not happy, because he did not like abstract art work. When I tried to explain the idea of the sculpture, he said no need, if it is your choice let them do it. This is how it was decided.

DT: From what I have heard, this giant monument was popular with people in Baghdad and it was not a piece of propaganda for the regime. Yet, in February of this year, the Iraqi army demolished it (see figure 2)
What was your reaction when you heard this news?

AB: Indeed, The Union was a meeting place for families living in that part of Baghdad and for children to play around.

Well, I could not believe what I heard until I saw it on television. The Deputy Minister of Culture called me to say neither he nor the Minister knew about the decision to pull down The Union. Later on, a statement from the Prime Minister’s Office was released denying knowing who gave the order. Anyway, I was not surprised by this action because destruction is easier than reconstruction in a country overwhelmed by hate. This monument – a work which represents Love -- was destroyed by the government on 2nd February 2010.

DT: Another of your public monuments is still standing in Baghdad. This is The Cry, a much smaller monument and featured in The New Yorker magazine, May 5th, 2003 (see figure 3).

Could you describe how you came to design this piece of sculpture?
AB: The Governor of Baghdad failed to choose a sculpture from many presented to him and Saddam in a competition. They then chose one of my sculptures which represents the Amiryia shelter tragedy where 420 women and children were killed in 1991, when American fighters bombed the shelter. I was living not far from the shelter and witnessed how charred bodies of women and children were removed from under the rubble of tons of cement.

The Cry is 27 feet high and made of bronze. It represents echoes of the cries of people trapped inside to those they love outside the shelter.

DT: I should like, now, to turn to one of your paintings, and, again, it is not a work that is included in this exhibition. It is entitled Suppression – Predicament of Man (figure 4).

Figure 4, Ala Bashir, Suppression – Predicament of Man (1980).

I would describe this as a painting influenced by Surrealism. However, I know that you do not like labels, so could you describe it and help me and our audience to see it differently?

AB: My art is reflection of reality not of dreams. It is an attempt to see the surface from inside. I would say my work is like a rainbow. It shows all colours in a rainy day.

DT: Your description of Suppression – Predicament of Man helps me better to understand your paintings in their own terms. Still, when I look at this work, Suppression – Predicament of Man (1980), I am, frankly, amazed that you were able to paint it and, having painted it, that you survived: to me it is an image of imprisonment and torture. We know, from many sources, including your own account in your book, The Insider, that the regime imprisoned and tortured its own people.

AB: I lived in country where power is misused and the people were trapped by manifestations of power. I learned that mental torture is more painful than physical torture. Iraqis have been products of this phenomenon for decades. This, and the frustration of having no satisfactory answer to questions deriving from the Sumerian and Babylonian views of life and creation and sufferings was, and still is, behind most of my art work.

I was fortunate. Saddam did not think the tortured and tormented figures in my paintings were products of his regime. I believe in God and I think God has moved in mysterious way.
DT: You have made a comment which is full of tragic irony that Saddam Hussein continues to be your PR agent! For that reason, we are pleased to be exhibiting some of your line drawings and recent Key paintings that are, at most, only indirectly connected with your experiences in Iraq.

Could you say something about what keys symbolise for you?

AB: The meaning of home was my concern for many years, and became the prominent subject after I left Iraq. The search for a universal symbol or metaphor for home took me through the biological, social, ethnic, economic, historical, and psychological aspects of human life. I found that the key might be used more as a metaphor, rather than as a symbol, for home with all its controversies.

DT: Although I can see the key in the way you describe, keys are also the means to imprison people. Is this an aspect of the key paintings?

AB: Yes indeed. The key is like our legs. They carry our bodies to where our will, desire and intention want them to. The difference is that the key might be used by others too. Therefore, keys could be used to imprison others as one manifestation of power.

DT: You are also exhibiting a number of single line drawings, and these are very different from all of your other work (see figure 5).

Figure 5, Ala Bashir, untitled line-drawing, 2009.

What interests you about this minimalist style?

AB: Drawing is like the first kiss. It carries within it the deepest emotion and the challenge of the first step. It is the first cry after birth. Visitors are invited to see the essence of things without make up.

The single line drawings are an attempt to show that a simple and meaningless thing – a line -- has the potential to develop by the will of a person’s mind into a very complicated and complex state of existence with profound meanings. Likewise, complicated things could be traced back to the basic element of existence.

DT: Reading your account of the Saddam years in Iraq, it is quite remarkable that you had two high-profile careers, as an artist and as a surgeon. I read that during the Iran-Iraq years (1980-1988), your hospital conducted twenty-two thousand operations. Did that experience directly influence your painting and sculpture?
AB: War has put me at the line between life and death, fully conscious of this fact without being distracted by other daily needs. Dealing with patients having extensive injuries, deformities and tissue loss forced me not only to compete with death to save lives, but to realize how the potential power of hate inside ourselves could destroy our life of peace and love. Certainly images of suffering and death and eagerness for missing love were reflected in my work of art.

DT: May I quote from your book, *The Insider*:

> When the other doctors had left Saddam extolled my paintings and sculptures. He was more interested in them than in the progress we had made within orthopaedic and plastic surgery, the operating techniques we had pioneered since the start of the war, or the fact that our scientific articles had been accepted and published by leading international medical journals.

What was the occasion of this meeting with Saddam?

AB: In 1983 Saddam asked ministers to present him with twenty-five names from each ministry, those who were known for creative achievements in their profession. I was one of twenty-five doctors to meet with Saddam. After the meeting was over, we were introduced to him by the Minister of Health. When the Minister mentioned my name, Saddam said, there is an artist by this name and I like his art work very much. The Minister replied that this is the same man sir. Saddam asked me to stay beside him. He took me to his office and started to talk about the art and history of Iraq. He did not mention anything of what I have done in surgery. At that time I performed the first successful re implantation of a severed hand in the Middle East and had introduced a few new techniques in plastic surgery which were published in the British Journal of Plastic Surgery. At the end he said any one could become a doctor and trained to do things but no one could become a real artist or writer or poet.

This is how I met with Saddam.

DT: Did the Ba’ath Party officials like your art?

AB: They admired my art but did not like it.

DT: You were very fortunate to have survived. May I ask what do think of Saddam, now?

AB: He was a knife with two edges.
DT: Coming back to this exhibition, I know that you work in your garage in a Nottingham suburb (see figure 6). It must be the most productive garage in the region! Could you say something about how you work: do you prepare the canvas first? Do you draw and then paint?

AB: I used to have a studio as big as our current house. Now I work in the garage which does not allow me to produce large scale paintings which I like to paint. But once I start painting, I forget the space and concentrate on what I am doing.

Sometime I prepare canvases and if I have no time I use ready made ones. Most of the time, images of the paintings come into my mind like coloured slides with all fine details and I just copy them after I choose what I want. On few occasions I make some modifications. Only very rarely, do I draw on canvas. I just paint straight away.

DT: And a final question: have you plans for new paintings or sculptures?

AB: At the moment I am, once again, painting pictures of chairs.

DT: Dr Bashir, Thank you for these insights into your work and career. I should also like to thank you, in advance, for your willingness to talk with our students and community groups during the period of the exhibition.

AB: Thank you for giving me this opportunity and it is my pleasure and delight to meet with and talk with the students and community groups.