

Paintings with a shock

Baghdad, by Dunya Mikhail

Photos by Ala' Flayeh

An eight-year war brought a new sense of life. It might be forgotten in the joy of victory but is there none the less. War scenes and visions has not gone to sleep in the mind of artists.

Abdul Kareem Saifou, 37, was among those soldiers who defended the country at the front during the Gulf war. His war-time experience was advantageous as such that he has drawn inspiration from it.

In his first one-man show (Riwaq Gallery), more than 50 acrylic, graphic, oil and water paintings and sketches were put on show. Anyway, he hesitated many times before holding his exhibition because "I feel that my experience is not that rich," says Saifou.

Viewers might feel as if at a clinic, because they find themselves surrounded by paintings that involve ana-

tomy and medical-like atmospheres.

His canvases depict physical objects and scientific equipment, on one level, and spiritual human nature, on another.

Almost of the same model or style, the paintings require a great deal of concentration. "Such canvases leave no impression but that of error," says one of the show's visitors.

Muwafaq al-Khateeb, a realist painter, was among the viewers. "Although Saifou's talent in painting is remarkable, looking at his canvases makes me feel very nervous. His paintings' world is not soft at all," Al-Khateeb comments.

Isma'il al-Sheikhli, veteran painter, says that history and the private imagination run parallel in Saifou's works.

They link between ancient civilizations in a contemporary style. The colours are

compact and harmonious. He deals with colours in such a careful way that there is no room for spontaneous movement. But the same face is repeated in most of the paintings", Al-Sheikhli added.

Most of Saifou's paintings are without titles. He has no names for most of them, and we have no names for what we feel about them". "I worked towards freeing my paintings from titles to offer a chance for viewers to imagine and put their own titles", Saifou told *The Baghdad Observer*. Some of the canvases' titles, however, are repeated along the exhibition. Four paintings, for instance, have the same title of "Face".

Other four canvases bear also one title: "The Martyr". Another four have the title of "Ishtar Passing Downward", while "Adam and Eve" is the title of three canvases.

Dominated by red-ochre, Saifou's works give the impression of a broken world, broken bodies, and a kind of deformation. The heads are always cut, the faces dis-

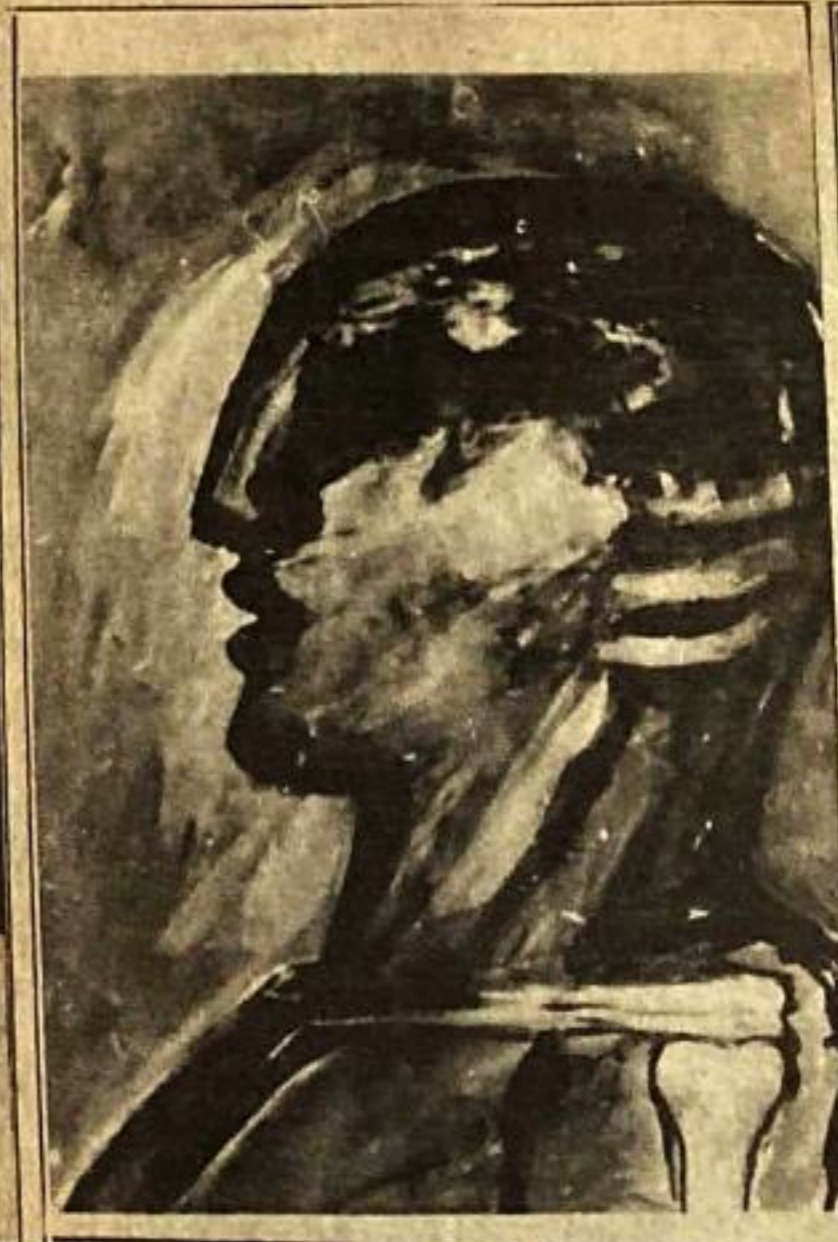
torted, the legs in disorder, the bodies off balance.

It might be said that physical deformations document psychological tension or stress.

Some people may find all this an unwarranted intrusion upon the subject. While others may recognize it as a philosophical point of view towards human nature and



"The Family"



"Face"



"The Martyr"

body.

The painter's brush depicted a very severe world that may shock the viewers as they look at human ruins.

The painter, however, was too busy greeting the visitors and giving them chocolates as he wanted to decrease the tension portrayed in his show.

The exhibition included also miniature portraits of

some prominent figures in the world of literature such as William Shakespeare, D.H. Lawrence and Nitsche. "By painting these geniuses, I tried to depict my impression and admiration of their literary works", the painter says.

Lines and figures have always some room in Saifou's paintings. "Some figures represent dates of personal events, others refer to predic-

tions for the future", he explains.

Born in Mosul in 1953, Saifou has worked in journalism since 1974.

A graduate of the College of Fine Arts in 1979, he looks for the academic elements in painting. Though his brush movement is free, his painting is not absolutely free from traditional rules.

He worked as a designer

for the Iraqi Cultural Centre in Paris (1979-1982).

Saifou took part in Ba'ath Party's exhibitions, Iraqi Cultural Centre's exhibitions in Paris (1981-1983), Baghdad Art Festivals, Wassiti art exhibitions, and Cagnes-sur-mer exhibition (France, 1985).

He was awarded the second prize of the Wassiti Festival in 1984 and a certificate of merit in 1987.