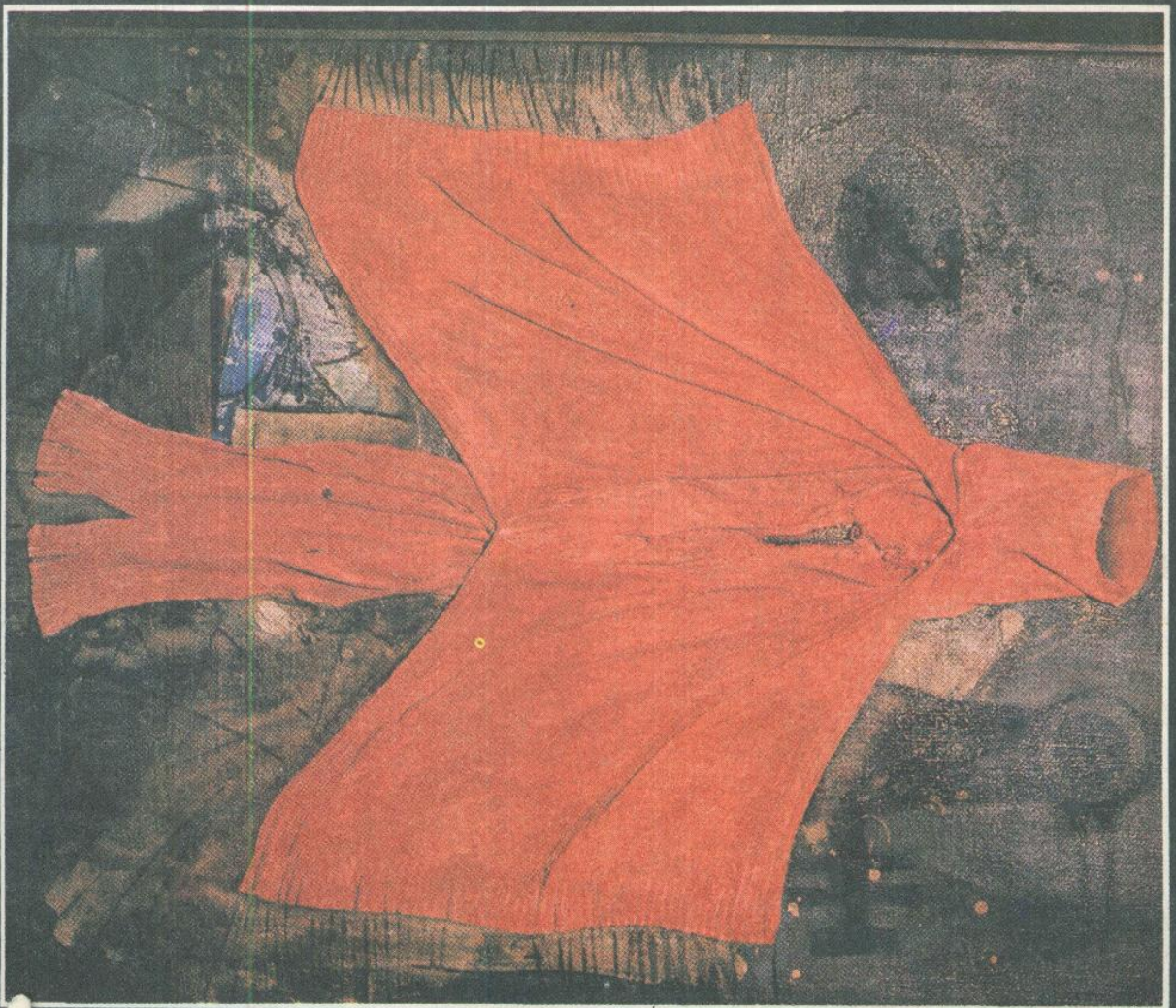


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Kadhem Hayder 1932-1985

Portrait of an Artist

By Farouq Yousif

There is a strange harmony between Kadhem Hayder's works and the theme of death. Such a theme might look bleak and nightmarish to many people, but with Kadhem Hayder it was different. He tried to evoke memories related to death with a great deal of courage and intimacy.

No Iraqi painter or intellectual has been so intimate with death as was Kadhem Hayder. None of them has ever used the theme of death as a basic element of his aesthetic and expressive works as did Kadhem Hayder. Moreover none of them has tried to reveal the life that lies behind the mask of death as this painter has.

Kadhem Hayder was an exceptional case among a group of nihilistic artists who saw life lying stiff while death was the only moving nerve in the corpse of life.

He found out that the only weapon with which he could courageously face up to death was death itself. He believed that man should defend his freedom through death rather than life. The painter did not resurrect death to create a black joke or to make the viewer get involved in a fabricated dilemma. Death was present before his eyes whenever it broke off ties with objects and established its own civilisation of blood and earth to which the universe would finally return. Time for Kadhem Hayder covered the bloody moments which existed through upsetting and interrupting the familiar rhythm.

It seems that the only moment he discovered his own nature was when he revealed the rich, creative, and noble aspect of death, as it lies in death itself. In this connection only martyrdom could express this

kind of view towards existence as a whole. To him martyr was synonym to the man standing alone in the heart of the universe and martyrdom was the sole act through which an individual could achieve his human nature. Kadhem Hayder portrayed life by using masks, actors and colourful backgrounds. The conflict of all these elements materialized the tragedy of life which was renewed by the presence of brightness and darkness, good and evil, and space and mass. Such vigorous tragedy along with its absolute potentials penetrated through time to become a constant element of place.

Therefore, Kadhem Hayder was indifferent to time. He used symbols to refer to it at a specific place. By this he could tackle a limited event by the use of a wide scope of signs and symbols.

This view of death influenced his understanding of freedom, an element about which he was concerned more than anything else in his life. Freedom was the motive, the concern and the goal that he tried to achieve through his works on the intellectual, stylistic and technical levels. This made Kadhem Hayder become a leading experimental painter.

Kadhem Hayder was prompted by an irresistible desire to embark on modernization. He applied various styles and thoughts by utilizing the power of his versatile mind as well as his unmatched skill.

As a result Kadhem Hayder became the type of artist who was in a constant struggle with himself in an attempt to gain victory over what he had previously accomplished. He also endeavoured to reveal new aspects of his thought, contemplation, and stylistic and technical potentials.

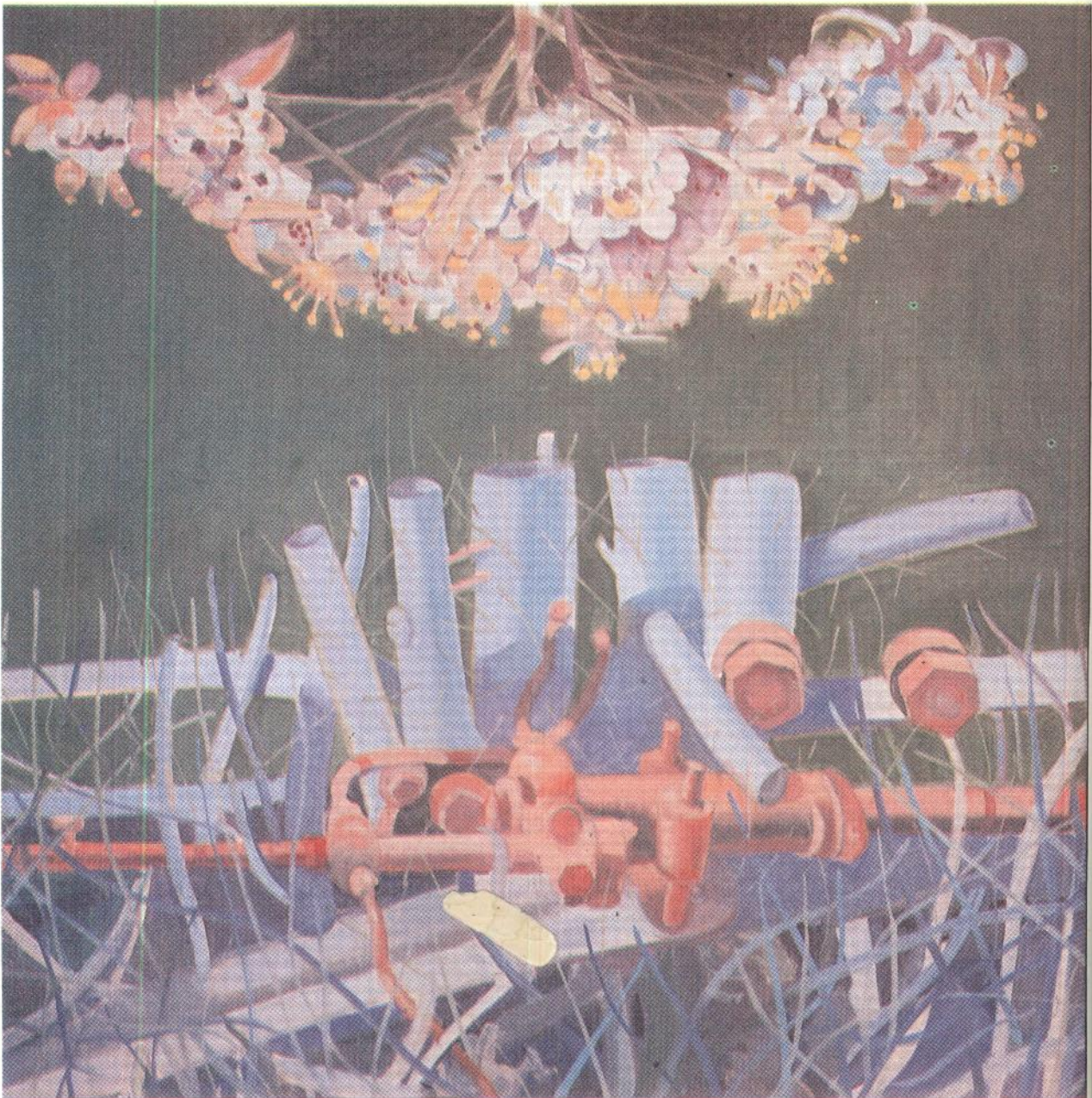
The works of art that Kadhem Hayder accomplished through a number of stages were significant. But he did not remain a prisoner of these works because of the concern that lied in the depth of his heart. The important thing for him was to use these works of art as a means to know himself better.

Kadhem Hayder was at his best when he died. Death came to him after he had spent all his life gaining victory over it through his works. He resorted extensively to the use of legendary symbols, both past and present. Most of these symbols portrayed man who appeared more impressive than any other subject.

Since the mid 1950s Kadhem Hayder raised the question of contemporary man and his crisis. He

particularly tackled that aspect which is related to man's symbolic conflict with death as well as his realistic fight against its causes. This stage in the life of this painter was crowned with such works of art in which man, the individual, appeared inside one or more cubes. Man was an expression of besieged freedom. In Kadhem Hayder's paintings man did not represent the group's apparant contentment that is related to their inter-relation and living structure. Instead man expressed hidden contentment which a number of historic conditions and people conspired to cover up.

Kadhem Hayder tried to express this idea through the use of masks. This is because he was fond of theatre. He designed the decors of many significant



plays that were received with acclaim by the audience in Iraq, and had a role in the development of Iraqi theatre. One of his brilliant ideas in this respect was to make the curtains of the stage visible. By this approach he attempted to make the viewer believe that the most important and vital act of life was that taking place behind the scenes. In order to transfer this idea into painting, the artist left a number of spaces on the surface of his paintings to show that more technical care is needed.

For him the surface of a painting was just like actors' faces subjected to the brush of the make-up artist.

The idea that "life or an act of life always lies in the depth or in the invisible part of an object" was

one of the major ideas that Kadhem Hayder tried to follow and apply. Sometimes he painted scenes from nature in an attempt to catch his breath and recover his ability to tackle the inner elements of life more accurately and more impressively.

In the depth of hidden moments of life man stood encircled by the threat of defiance. In other words the painter did not use the idea of encirclement to ascertain man's apparent isolation and drive him to the state of despair. On the contrary he endeavoured to reveal man's strength in facing up to his tragedy. Adel Kamel, an arts critic tried to explain this in his statement about Kadhem Hayder, "It is an expression of man's fear of the unknown, of his surroundings, and of his consciousness. It is also an express-



ion of man's confinement by social, psychological and political conditions." Such State can also be explained as man's attempt to maintain his survival beyond time.

Through his paintings Kadhem Hayder presented a different concept of originality. Earlier *The Baghdad Group for Modern Art*, the first Group which dealt with art in a contemporary manner, presented originality as an attempt to search for local roots in heritage. But Kadhem Hayder believed that originality interpreted the condition of man facing challenges by his own internal power.

As a result stylistic and technical changes did not obstruct artist's search for originality. Kadhem Hayder's style was a blend of folk arts, heritage, the American Pop-Art School, and stage technical elements.

This approach represented the painter's concern and attitude towards future. It also showed how intimate he was to the essential sense of life.

An excellent example of this idea can be found in Kadhem Hayder's works of art which he put on display in Beirut in 1965 under the theme *The Martyr's Epic*. This was an outstanding one-man exhibition in the history of modern Iraqi art.

Through resorting to heritage he endeavoured to discover the constant elements that govern man's movement beyond time and place. Kadhem Hayder did not in fact respect the physical idea of time. In 1974 he presented two works of art. The first included a great number of clocks under the theme *Beyond Time*, and the second was entitled *5 o'clock + 7 o'clock = Zero*.

Kadhem Hayder did not call for evoking heritage as Jawad Salim and the artists who followed him did. He instead sought to revive man's overall movements through the use of specific past events which are related directly to man's continuous attempts to defend his principles, and the vigour which is

derived from the history of his creative act. In this connection the legend of the *Battle of Kerbala* whose main theme was martyrdom represented a door widely open to life instead of death.

The painter used the theme of martyrdom as a positive dialogue with death rather than a mere negative response to it. In this way Kadhem Hayder defended the causes behind life through reviving the Arab-Islamic heritage. He used the idea of sacred death as materialized by martyrdom.

Therefore death in Kadhem Hayder's opinion was not a horrifying maze. Death in his works was clear and vigorous despite its harshness and ruthlessness. Martyrdom was not an attempt to attain man's salvation. It was rather a means ascertaining man's relation to life with its hidden sense including principles, masks, roots and capability to interpret a genuine act.

However, his most important concern was to be free. He did not want to be restricted by a certain idea or style. He portrayed strain regardless of the time and place in which it took place. He used a variety of symbols uprooted from their time and planted as universal concepts.

In his works he would shift swiftly from horses, swords, tents and desert to cages, masks and stage curtains. In doing so he would not find any harm in using wires, magazines' clippings, plastic and various pieces of wood. This is for certain a testimony to this artist's love for freedom.

This also ascertains his concern for and fear of being related to something hidden that dragged him to various directions. But what confuses this supposition is the fact that Kadhem Hayder was a committed painter. His works revealed his confidence in man, adherence to hope, profound understanding of the causes of life and his absolute faith in man's capability to show positive defiance.

Profile

* Born in 1932

* Graduated from the Academy of Fine Arts, Painting Department, Baghdad, in 1957.

* Graduated from the Central College, London, in 1962, specializing in lithography, and stage decoration.

* Held his outstanding exhibition in Beirut in 1965 under the theme *The Martyr's Epic*.

* Founder of *The Academic Group* in 1971.

* Held one-man exhibition at the Iraqi Cultural Centre in London in 1984.

* Participated in a number of group exhibitions.

* Died in December 1985 after a long illness.

