WELCOME TO IRAQ

15 MAR – 1 JUN 2014
MAIN & FIRST FLOOR GALLERIES
ADMISSION FREE

EXHIBITION GUIDE

The South London Gallery presents a restaging of the group exhibition, Welcome to Iraq, originally shown as part of the National Pavilion of Iraq in the 55th Venice Biennale in 2013.

Commissioned by Ruya Foundation for Contemporary Culture in Iraq (RUYA), established in 2012 to promote culture in Iraq, Welcome to Iraq was curated by Jonathan Watkins, Director of Ikon Gallery, Birmingham.

Welcome to Iraq brings together works in a variety of media by eleven contemporary artists, almost all of whom live and work in Iraq. Works were selected to highlight the depth and breadth of artistic practice in Iraq, but also to expose a shared emphasis on the nature of everyday life there, exemplified by a determination ‘to make do and get by’ and an inventiveness borne out of necessity in extraordinary historical circumstances.

Following extensive studio visits across Iraq, curator Jonathan Watkins selected clusters of works by photographer and filmmaker Jamal Penjweny, political cartoonist Abdul Raheem Yassir, painters Bassim Al-Shaker, Cheeman Ismaeel and Kadhim Nwir, and sculptors Furat al Jamil, WAMI (Yaseen Wami, Hashim Taeeh) and Akeel Khreef. Film and video is also included, with recent works by Ali Samiaa and Hareth Alhomaam both looking in different ways at communications between the sexes.

Visitors are invited to relax and reflect on the exhibition in the comfort of recreated domestic spaces which echo the references to everyday life which appear in many of the works. Sofas covered with traditional Iraqi throws and coffee tables laden with books and comics about Iraq, presented in collaboration with the Iraq National Library and Archive, can be enjoyed along with refreshments of Iraqi tea and biscuits.

LIST OF WORKS
FIRST FLOOR GALLERIES

42–45. Abdul Raheem Yassir
Miscellaneous cartoons
(Untitled 15, 16, 11, 7)
(clockwise from top left), 2003–13, ink on paper
21 x 29.7cm each
Courtesy of Pierre Le Coz, William Whitall and Steven Guermeur

46–47. WAMI (Yaseen Wami, Hashim Taeeh)
Untitled (various works), 2013
Cardboard and mixed media
Dimensions variable

All works courtesy of the artists

ACCOMPANYING EVENTS

Please see the website for details on further events which accompany the exhibition.

Exhibition Talk
Wed 19 Mar, 7pm, Free
Curator Jonathan Watkins gives an introduction to the exhibition.

Exhibition Tours
Sat, 1pm, & Last Fridays, 7pm, Free
Join the SLG’s gallery assistants for informal drop-in tours.

The Sunday Spot
Sun 30 Mar & Sun 27 Apr, 2-4pm, Free
These drop-in family workshops led by artists explore the exhibition’s themes and ideas. Ideal for children aged 3–12 years and their parents or guardians.

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Abdul Raheem Yassin (b. 1951, Qadisiyyah, Iraq) is widely regarded as one of the best political cartoonists now working in Iraq, responding to the absurdity of his circumstances with ironic humour and poignancy. His style is smart in the way it suggests innocence, knowing in its directness. In one of his line drawings, he takes on Iraq’s inexperienced police force. Officers are shown diligently frisking a man, apparently unaware of the huge revolver in his hand.

Female artist Furat al Jami (b. 1965, Maniz, Germany; lives and works in Baghdad, Iraq) is a filmmaker, but has been selected to show one of her rare sculptures. A suspended honeycomb frame drips its contents into a broken antique pot, in order to convey sweet melancholy, a sadness that she feels about her homeland in its current state whilst inspiring hope in the possibility of healing and new life.

Jamil Penjweny (b. 1981, Sulaymaniyah, Iraqi Kurdistan) has garnered attention for his extraordinary series Saddam is Here, featuring Iraqis in everyday places – on the street, in hotel rooms, in shops – holding a photo of the former dictator over their own faces, demonstrating the lasting impact of his brutal regime. The show also features two video works by Penjweny which document illegal trading on the border between Iraq and Iran, where the artist was born. Another Life is a short film which follows several days in the lives of Iraqis who smuggle alcohol from Iran into Iraq. With the grizzly appeal of covert mobile phone footage, and straightforward editing, there is no melodram in the depiction of these scenes. However in the final moments, this low-key atmosphere is shattered when, instead of rolling credits, a short text explains how two are used to make chairs, in gestures of recycling that touch on an urgent need for raised consciousness with respect to the environment and limited natural resources.

Hareth Alhoma’am’s (b. 1987, Baghdad, Iraq) short film, Buzz, exemplifies the stifled, mediated nature of communications between the sexes in modern Iraq in spite of the advent of social media. We follow the short story of a young man and a young woman as they navigate daily life in Baghdad with family and friends. Filmmaker Ali Samiaa (b. 1980, Baghdad, Iraq) presents a new film, The Love of Butterflies. It tells a story in which dramatic tension is derived from a balance struck between mental infidelity and family commitment, between a firm moral stance and sympathy.

Cheeman Ismaeel (b. 1966, Sulaymaniyah, Iraqi Kurdistan) is a painter who applies her decorative style not only to canvases but also to household objects, such as a television, a clock, an oil heater and a lunchbox. The proposition is refreshingly personal: “Making do and getting by” – articulated with great wit – is a far cry from incongruous aspiration.

The recent reality is very different, of course, this being a place that suffered terribly during Saddam’s dictatorship.

The canvases of Kadhim NIRW (b. 1967, Qadisiyyah, Iraq), on the other hand, are more abstract and reflect urban life through a combination of distressed colour and graffiti-like drawings. Stencilled letters and numbers sometimes convey clear messages – “IRAQ”, “2003” – or they embody a meaning known only to the artist, superimposed on layers of vague pictorial references. Such expressive and complex mark-making, in light of difficult circumstances, reads as a kind of existential self-awareness.

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www.southlondongallery.org/welcometoiraq

A catalogue (£20) accompanies the exhibition and is available in the shop alongside Welcome to Iraq’s t-shirts and canvas bags.

Please note
Photography is permitted.
The biscuits may contain nuts.

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