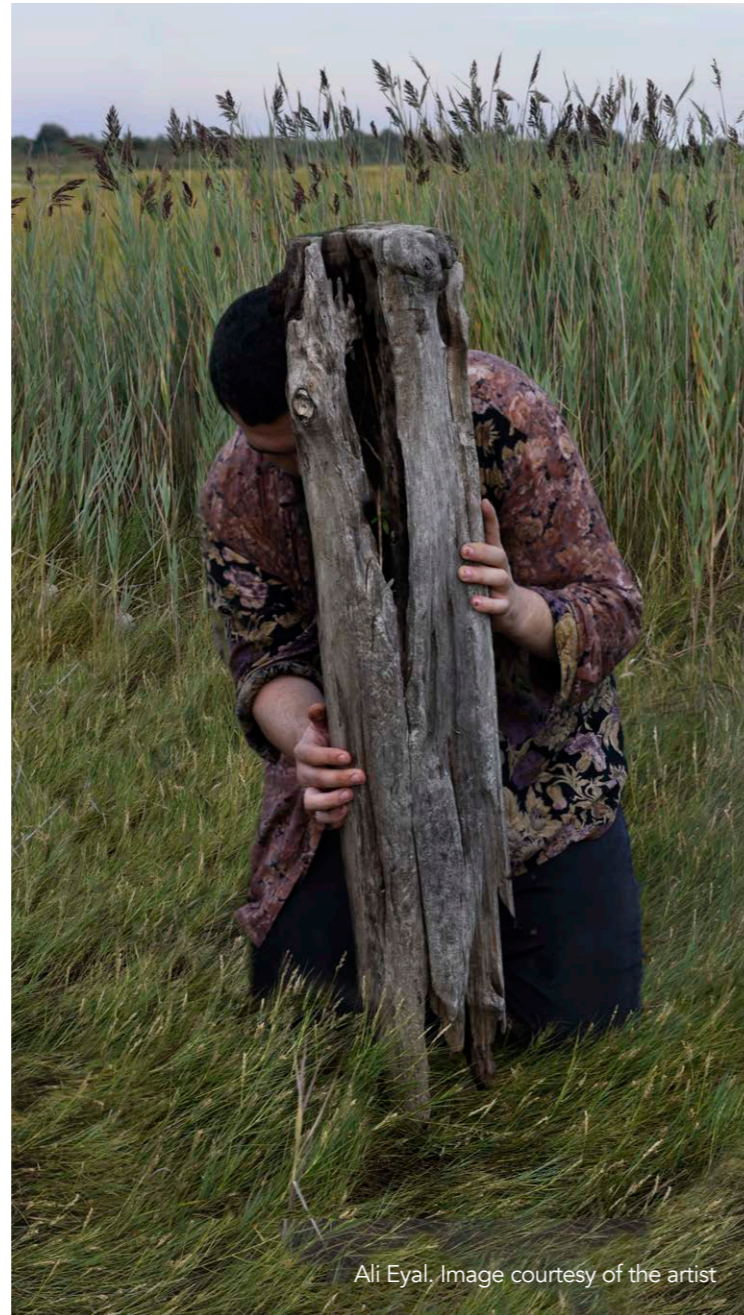


Ala Younis. Photography by Leonie Hugendubel



Ali Eyal. Image courtesy of the artist

ALA YOUNIS AND ALI EYAL

Can I Hug All These Flowers? at Onomatopee in Eindhoven is the first two-person show by Ala Younis and Ali Eyal. It explores, investigates and comments upon what lingered after the Gulf Wars of 1990–91 and 2003–11, the political events surrounding the invasion of Baghdad and their legacy and implications.

Sophie Kazan Makhoul for *Canvas* spoke to the artists about the exhibition, which conjoins their work, experiences and perspectives in a variety of media.

They explain how it evokes memories, feelings and histories of a particular place, somewhere that exists in both real and imagined worlds.

Ala Younis. *Battles in a Future Estate – Museum*. 2024. Jacquard-woven cotton textile. 150 x 205 cm. Image courtesy of the artist

Sophie Kazan Makhoul: Ala, you were studying architecture in Jordan during the 1990s. What was your experience of Baghdad at that time?

Ala Younis: I was aware of the trends and spaces happening and how these were shaping the realities, violence and stagnations experienced more widely across the region. In 2010, I found out about a gymnasium building designed by the Swiss architect Le Corbusier, and it took me five years to produce a work on the stories and entanglements of its making. In 2018, I recentred the piece around women and my memories as a student of architecture, and it was interesting to find these narrative conduits of an expanded history. An edition of this research is present in the show at Onomatopee. Ali talks about his father's disappearance, based on events or situations where his mother appears as the space that collects him in these traumatic moments. I felt there is an interesting conversation between these approaches in our works.

Another mutual feature is the devastation of the Iraqi museums, including the Museum of Modern Art on Haifa Street, which I study in

my *Battles in a Future Estate* multi-iterative work. It housed over 9000 works before it was looted in the aftermath of the US-led coalition invasion of Baghdad in 2003. Ali sensitively touches on this in his video work, *The Blue Ink Pocket*, and. (2022), which collects fragments of the lost artworks from the most unpredictable places. In the show, I also present a video lecture that I put together exploring this museum as part of a four-decade history of the street. Next to my video are two textiles in which I imagine two exhibitions taking place in a hall at the museum. One of them is about deconstruction as an architectural movement, as well as the destruction inflicted on the city by the two Gulf Wars.

SKM: Ali, you grew up in Baghdad and refer to the city during the American-led invasion as "our farm" and to Iraq as "the forest". Can you say a little more about your practice as an artist and how you use art to frame your view of the past and particularly those times?

Ali Eyal: My father disappeared in 2006 and we could only find his car. Someone had filled it with guns and set it on fire. When my



Ali Eyal. *A lovely spot for a picnic, it's a very quiet area, but I will not tell you which park.* 2024. Image courtesy of Chertluedde

mother came to collect me from school, I heard her weeping from a distance, and so my work *6x9 doesn't fit everything and*, (2021) is about that. A lawyer took a photograph of the car and we went to ask the US-led coalition forces, which had landed on the "farm", why they burnt so many cars for no reason. I wrote this story about the car and our encounter with the US soldiers on the back of the photograph. What happened is still vivid in my memory and makes my heart ache.

Whenever I make an artwork, I return to this farm. I remember faces were black because of the smoke from the burning fires. Something like mythical creatures, or like being in a theatre. When there's no way I can face the pain in words, I vent them out in my art. These feelings and memories surround me in my current state of exile, but also appear to me like a different world. So, ultimately, the colours and fiction that you see and read in my paintings make me feel safe too, and some travel back to that other world.

SKM: The title of the exhibition, *Can I Hug All These Flowers?*, feels both polite and surreal. It deals with fragments of history, political erosion and memories. Can you say a little more about it and how you came up with the idea of hugging flowers?

AE: Yes, I proposed this title. As a kid during sanctions, in the 1990s, I used to eat flowers. In fact, I was obsessed with flowers! But even though I wanted to hug them, their thorns could hurt me too. This contradiction sounded very relevant and suited the content and context of this exhibition.

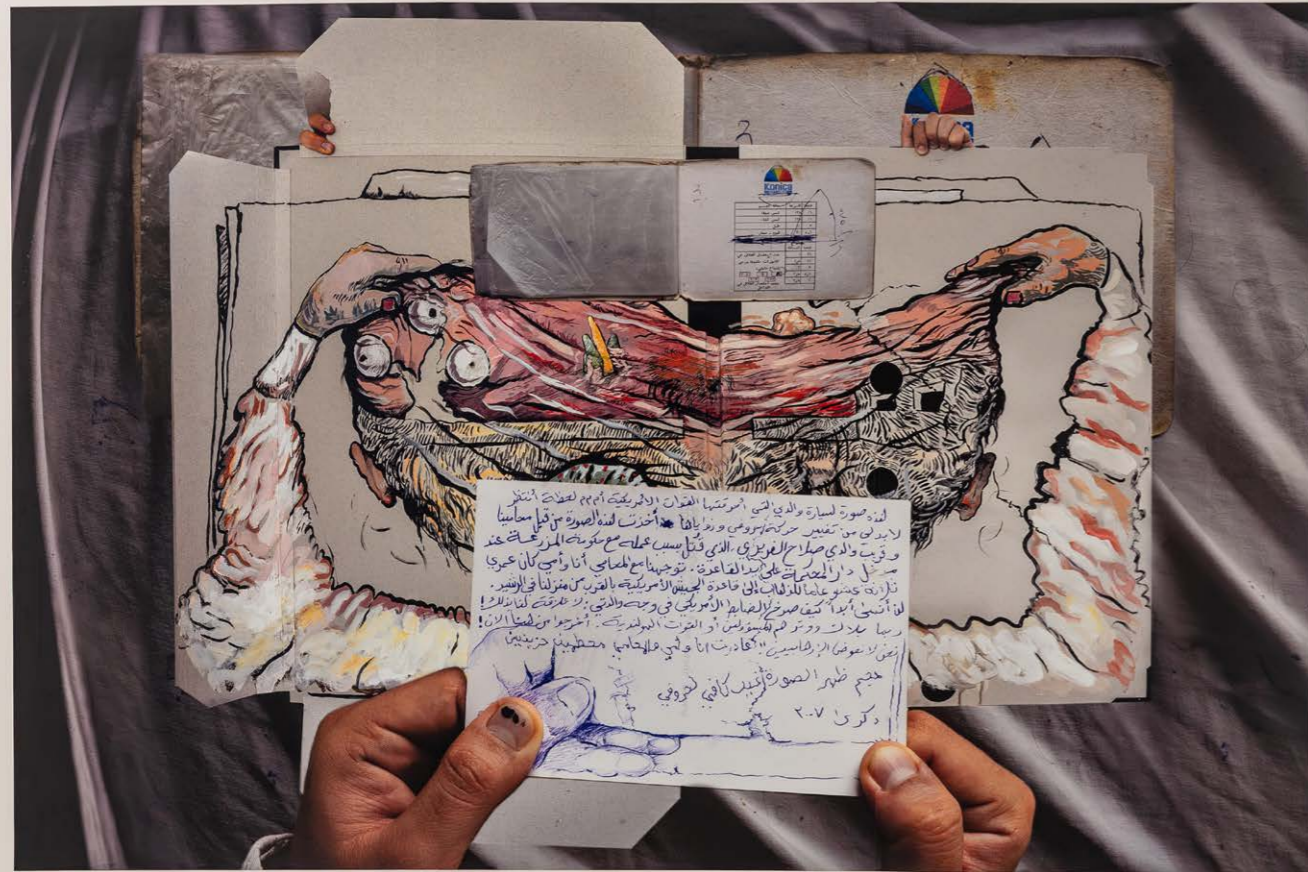
AY: I was touched by Ali's suggested title, and more so when he told us that he was addicted to flowers in the 1990s. I had been following the appearance of flowers in diplomatic and commercial relations between different political camps, and was including some in the exhibition too! My research led to several iterations, beginning with *Friendship Garden (Defunct Moving Image)* (2023), which looked at how flowers adorned newsreels propagating friendship between Egypt and the Soviet Union. The work was shown at Survival Kit in Riga, in a fresh produce market. It was important to place my handmade paper flowers on a tiled booth, where they almost seemed to 'hug' a monitor showing these archival clips, as if embracing the image of the political friendship that they once symbolised. I was also curious why certain flower varieties disappeared from the Jordanian market in the 1990s while, between 1991 and 2008, flower cultivation in the Gaza Strip emerged as a regulated export industry reaching nearly 75 million exported stems annually. The Dutch flower industry was instrumental in this history, and so we were looking to also include something from this research in the exhibition.

SKM: It is interesting that flowers are woven through both your work and particularly your project, *Ala, Cut Flowers* (2025), which is an embroidery of flowers related to the cut flower industry in Gaza.

AY: In 2024, I made an installation incorporating copies of and stories from *Majid Magazine*, the children's weekly published in Abu Dhabi since 1979. Displayed on stands topped with handmade crepe-paper flowers, the magazines formed part of guided 20-minute walks



Ala Younis. *Trading Fragility.* 2026. Image courtesy of the artist



Ali Eyal. *6x9 doesn't fit everything and..* 2021. Photography by Thiele Elissa. Image courtesy of ChertLüdde



Ala Younis. *Battles in a Future Estate – Deconstruction.* 2024. Image courtesy of the artist

reflecting on the circulation strategies and impact on young readers. Interestingly, each issue remained current for only one week – mirroring the lifespan of cut flowers in the wholesale market, where they lose approximately 15 per cent of their value each day and survive for about seven days.

With *Cut Flowers*, I was also referring to a personal memory with one of the architects featured in [the artwork] *Plan (fem.) for Greater Baghdad* (2018), which is also part of the exhibition. We met in person in a café inside a church in London, and upon finishing our meeting I checked out the church itself and saw some embroidered kneeling cushions. Somehow this memory and the story about flowers merged as one in this new and small piece. I installed it by wrapping a cardboard box as if a package is waiting nearby to be collected.

SKM: The layering of histories, political events and memories is definitely something that your practices have in common. This is your first two-person exhibition together. How did you meet and how did this exhibition come about?

AE: Ala and I met at Ashkal Alwan in Beirut early in 2019. I moved there from Baghdad in 2016 and, in terms of history, Beirut was like a different bridge to the world for me. I went there for ten months, and the director of Ashkal Alwan, Christine Tohmé, really believed in my work and introduced me to many curators, collectors and artists. I

stayed in Beirut for almost four years. I met Ala and she was researching for a project on independent publishing which she was co-curating with Maha Maamoun for Beirut Art Center. So we collaborated and I produced a new work which I titled *No Part Of This Book May Be Reproduced, In Any Way, By Photocopying, Recording, Or Otherwise, Except With The Prior Written Consent Of The Publisher*. It featured my mother's handwritten memoirs with drawings I made in blue ink, which spilled off the paper onto the walls. The exhibition opened in the summer of 2019.

AY: Yes, it was a fantastic and super-sensitive piece. We loved how it continued to evolve while travelling afterwards to other exhibitions in Abu Dhabi, Amman and Toulouse. Together with curator Silvia Franceschini and Onomatopee director Luuk Nouwen we discussed many times what works would resonate with the context and audience in Eindhoven. During the installation and especially during the opening tour, it was intriguing to see how the narrative could flow from Ali's work to mine and back again. The works shown address the war, the looting of artworks from Baghdad's museums, and the strong presence of female protagonists during times of distress, all in distinct approaches and yet intersecting in unexpected ways.

SKM: I understand the need to relate these stories and how they are remembered, especially as the Arab world and its history are

often viewed through a lens of trauma. How does your art respond to this dimension and to the particular audience in Eindhoven?

AY: I agree that trauma is often foregrounded when it comes to the Arab world. However, there are also hopeful aspects and practices that operate within and beyond these limits. What interests me is how life is lived on the ground, despite what the media or propaganda choose to highlight, invite solidarity with, or overlook. In the exhibition, I also noticed that the word 'Dutch' appears again in a handwritten note inside Ali's artwork. He is referring to the day he and his mother went to the US forces stationed in Iraq to enquire about his disappeared father and burnt car – there were also Dutch forces present in the area. In the work, he is fitting this memory in his writing on a small card, with the font shaking and shivering as he tries to both deal with the memory and the retelling of it. I think this recurrence opens up much to explore.

AE: I also changed my handwriting on the back of the photograph to make it look like that of a child, or to make it sound like a trembling voice. I am a painter, and I press hard with the pencil, applying pressure as I revisit the memories. Art makes me feel saved, and it feels like an infection too, like fiction as opposed to reality. I often change the names of people from the past, but sometimes I include their real names to honour them through my artwork. At times, it feels as if I am a witness, giving my testimony in my own way as an artist.

SKM: As artists, both of you deal with what history leaves behind – the fragments and the ghosts. Can you give us any insight into what kind of projects you are working on next?

AY: I do work with fragments, but not so much with ghosts, I feel. If anything, ghosts might be another way of describing emotions that continue to float and resurface from time to time in my work, and which perhaps appear to be existing somewhere inside the project process.

It was a pleasure to work with the Riso printshop at Onomatopee, where I produced a series of diagrams drawing on business and logistical tools related to flower irrigation, trading and exhibiting. This forms part of a larger body of work in which I want to explore how the names of certain flowers have evolved over the centuries and how they intersect with, and come to signify, other meanings in the present. For this exhibition, however, the diagrams were a small addition, and further discussions around future publications will continue.

AE: And my work is at the Whitney Biennial this year! 🇺🇸

Can I Hug All These Flowers? runs until 10 May and the Whitney Biennial until 23 August