

PRESS RELEASE

Title: Apocrypha
Paintings by Mohammed Sami
Exhibition Dates: 5th May to 3rd July

Patrick Heide Contemporary Art is delighted to present the first solo exhibition of Iraqi artist Mohammed Sami entitled 'Apocrypha'.

Mohammed Sami's paintings explore the stratifications of memory and trauma triggered by common everyday objects and environments. He employs diffused and layered messages that can be read in multiple ways to grasp our imagination.

Rather than directly relating to the Iraq conflict, which he witnessed first-hand, Sami's paintings articulate its recollection remotely and obliquely – usually through traditional painting subjects such as still-life, interiors and landscapes, pervaded by a sense of unease, absence and metaphorical allusion.

"Painting is the means by which I engage the traces of personal memory" Sami explains. "Memories are curious things, sometimes they masquerade as shadows, objects, smell or even something banal, without revealing themselves as memories..."

Displacement II shows a plug and an outlet that do not match in a somewhat derelict interior. The cable is laying on the floor devoid of its function, a lack of contact and communication silently pervades the image. In *Family Issues I and II*, paintings devoid of people, like all of Sami's recent works, the strain of human tragedy is almost palpable. In *Skin* the carpets, symbols of oriental culture and history, are beautifully rendered yet claustrophobically placed. On a closer glance it is hard not to think of wounded flesh. *23 Years of Night* shows a boarded-up interior, mirrored and fragmented. The impossibility to enter or to look in from the outside alludes to a safe domestic space while a war or other danger rages beyond its limits. A place of inner warmth amongst external turmoil. Sami accomplishes to pair loneliness with beauty. Violent tension with tranquillity. A post-apocalyptic aura that bears the seed of renewal, a healing scar, the silence after a fight.

Migrant's stories have been told for centuries, yet Mohammed Sami's story is very much one of the 21st century. His arrival as a political refugee in Europe resulting in a scholarship at the Master program of Goldsmith's college in London can be seen as a story of liberation and personal achievement, and as a victory of human and democratic values. Nonetheless, Sami's paintings poignantly voice ongoing anxieties and century old traumas that still haunt him even today. Yet Sami has found a vital path to express himself. His paintings bear glimmers of hope. They don't educate or accuse. They tell their stories with sincerity and human empathy.

Mohammed Sami is part of the Government Art Collection and the York Museum Trust. Selected paintings will be included in the exhibition 'Mixing It Up: Painting Today' at Hayward Gallery in autumn 2021 and 'The London Open 2022' at Whitechapel Gallery in 2022.

A catalogue with an essay by Paul Carey-Kent was published in May 2021.



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What Isn't Quite Said: Mohammed Sami's 'Apocrypha'

'A blackish spot marks the place where a centipede was squashed last week, at the beginning of the month, perhaps the month before, or later'. In Alan Robbe-Grillet's novel *La Jalousie* (1957) the narrator returns repeatedly to the same interior scenes, such as that mark, trying to describe them as precisely, almost mathematically, as possible, as if seeking to guarantee his objectivity. The reason he does so is to avoid seeing them as evidence of the suspected infidelities of his wife. And yet the potential for subjective meaning leaks in regardless, often driven by puns such as that of the title: 'La Jalousie' is, in French, both the word for the slatted glass window through which the narrator looks and for the suppressed jealousy the narrator feels.

Something similar occurs in the paintings of Mohammed Sami. What could be innocuous interiors, still lifes and landscapes don't simply explore the process of observation and the materiality of paint, but pull us remorselessly in to wider interpretations. The effect can be observed at three levels of knowledge: what we see; how that is titled; and what we know of the artist.

Take Sami's painting of rolled-up carpets. Immediately there's a sense in which the very act of singling out a seemingly banal subject for the special attention of painting it tells us that it is significant. Consider the sheer intensity of looking and time taken to realise details in Ellen Altfest's scrutiny of fruit and flesh; the washed-out way in which Luc Tuymans presents Belgium's colonial history; or the quietly unsettling blankness with which Wilhelm Sasnal presents fragments of the contemporary, how in Adrian Searle's words the paintings 'stare back at you with something unknowable'. We're also drawn in to Sami's composition, which presents but subtly varies ten serial occurrences; and makes the most of how viewing the carpets' patterns from the back allows for a blurring of the register into a somewhat post-impressionist study in creams, reds and pinks. I'm reminded of Vuillard. Even so, there is a queasy quality to the image. Carpets are naturally horizontal, and here – as one unfurls and another buckles – they look likely to resume that position. The colours are also those of flesh and blood, as if the resumption of horizontality might be that of a corpse.

On the second level, that possibility of ambiguity and disturbance is reinforced by the title: *Skins II*. Sami is from Iraq, and the Middle Eastern term for the backing on which the carpet is fixed is indeed 'the skin'. But that fact now seems a charged coincidence, consistent with the idea that bodies might somehow be involved.

Third, we can factor in Sami's biography. Not only is he from Iraq, he lived there from 1984-2007 during a succession of conflicts: the Iran-Iraq War (1980-88), the Gulf War (1990-91), the various uprisings against Saddam, and the Iraq War (2003-11) which led to the death of Saddam Hussein in 2006. Only after that was Sami able to reach Sweden, traveling from there to study in Northern Ireland (BA, University of Ulster 2016) and London (MA, Goldsmiths 2018). So there is more than a possibility that the potentially innocuous subject is triggering a traumatic memory.

But we should be careful: Sami has titled his show 'Apocrypha' – defined as 'reports not considered genuine'. So who knows? Moreover, it is over-reductive to translate even such extreme circumstances as those of Iraq's recent history into a monosemic account of everything as martial. Even in wartime, life goes on. Look at the two paintings from the long-running series *Family Issues*, for example. The titles suggest that the distressed room and the broken chair could be the result of an argument between partners, or the scene of domestic abuse. War is not the only conflict. Yet, given the role of Saddam's extended family in his regime, the possibility that this is bomb damage remains equally valid: that, too, involved 'family issues'. We are dealing with ambiguity.

Poor Folk makes comparable use of its title. The reference is to Dostoyevsky's first novel, which explored mid-nineteenth century poverty through exchanges of letters between characters living in hovels. So this could be a house affected by economic deprivation – but again, poor folk result from war, too. Supporting that possibility, the figure we glimpse – not just partial, but distorted because what we see is a reflection in a broken mirror – seems to be giving a soldier's salute. And the covered window might serve the purposes of black-out. According to Sami, he lived for four years with windows covered with MDF behind their curtains, so critical was it to prevent the light leaking out to attract military attention.

So we have ambiguity. One thing may well stand for another, but little is definite. Compare the scenes from a satirical fable, such as *Animal Farm*, in which the behaviour of the animals comments on Stalin's communist regime. And Orwell proves directly relevant, too, as Sami titles another series of paintings *Nineteen Eighty-Four*. On the one hand that is the year of his birth, so we could be looking at an aspect of what formed the artist. But we're also likely to think of Orwell's vision of a society in which everything is observed and truth is distorted. What appears in the painting fits both: a green military uniform which alludes to Saddam, who – says Sami – wore 'three different degrees of green – one when he visited homes to consolidate his support, pretending to be nice; one when talking to foreign leaders; and a third shade when waging war.'

One might consider the three semiotic modes of relating signifier to signified. Sometimes that will be symbolic: the signifier does not resemble the signified, but has an arbitrary and purely conventional relationship to it. If Sami chose to paint a flag, he would be in that territory. Second, the relationship may be iconic: the signifier is perceived as resembling or imitating the signified – being similar in possessing some of its qualities. A portrait of Saddam would provide an example. Third, the relationship may be indexical: the signifier does not resemble the signified, but neither is it arbitrary: rather, it has a physical or causal connection to it, whether intentional or otherwise. That is where Sami's paintings come in: what we see are indexical signifiers which connect in memory to what is signified but not seen. Sometimes the links are obvious in such cases: smoke signifies fire. But in Sami's case nothing is so definite to the outside observer. The green cloth might stand indexically for the waging of war, a broken chair for an argument, rolled carpets for the morgue. Such uses of the indexical support the accumulation of menace, but without allowing us to appeal to convention or similitude to decode it.

The most abstract paintings in the show also depict cloth. They could be mistaken for colourfield works focused on the interplay of colour, surface and painterly touch – I say 'mistaken', but they do indeed function as such. Yet the titles indicate that clothing is shown, namely 'Joseph's Coat'. They are not crisply folded clothes neatly presented, but crumpled, worn, ripped, and seen in sections such that it is hard to identify just what part of the garment we are looking at: is that a sleeve or a neck? That hints at trauma, and the title leads us to the biblical tale in which Joseph's coat stands in for envy and betrayal, suggesting that Sami may be accessing a parallel memory - and inviting the viewer to bring in their own experience.

'Refugee Camp', on the other hand, seems an explicit title. However, that effects ambiguity in a different way, as – although Sami has lived in such a camp – that isn't what's depicted. Rather, we see painterly evocations of vegetation in front of an ordinary dwelling. Refugee status is normalised as if to suggest that many people may have 'refugee-type' experiences in their lives.

Sami explains that there is a long tradition in Middle Eastern literature of saying one thing but meaning another, a device which enables things to be implied without the potential dangers of stating them directly. The same was true in Eastern Europe behind the Iron Curtain. In the Middle East, Sami explains, the term 'pun' tends to be applied to that move, rather than to wordplay. The root is the same – in the deception arising from alternative meanings – but the potential uses are more serious. We're not told that the subjects of these paintings are the triggers for memories of violence, are the indexes to which such memories have attached themselves. Yet the more you see of Sami's work, the more that, being common to all the ambiguities available, emerges as the primary reading. The paintings themselves start to look ill. Like Robbe-Grillet's narrator, we're driven back to a decoding that starts to feel obsessive, but without being able to pin matters down. Therein lies the paintings' power: without resorting to the closed and limiting depiction of violent acts, Sami's pictures hook us into their aesthetics at the same time as the accumulated suggestions of their indexical references – whether real or apocryphal – pull us into the likelihood that they signify a history of trauma.

Paul Carey-Kent