OPPRESSION, AN ARTIST'S EXPERIENCE

by

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ABSTRACT

Oppression is a means to control those that do not follow the societal norms and restrictions. This has been reinforced throughout the ages and enforced through forums such as art and politics. As an artist, I will explore the many facets of art and how it can be used as a tool to portray the images and impressions that were made upon me as it relates to my experiences as a political prisoner. My intent is to explore the various elements of oppression through my artwork and raise awareness of persecution in hopes of effecting change on those that view this art, while at the same time expressing the pain and reality of political prisoners.

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INTRODUCTION

My thesis is the result of personal my experiences as a political prisoner during the regime of the dictator Saddam Hussein. In my work, I have tried hard to reflect on what happened to me, my country, and to apply that perspective to a broader view of oppression that exists in the world. By looking at the pain and injustice of oppression, I seek to create the positive benefit of education and advocacy through the creation of these works of art.

My intent is to give a brief account of ceramic art in relationship to its social and political beginnings that placed it in a lower status within the realm of fine art. I will discuss some of my influences including my personal experience, ethnicity, faith and some contemporary artists that I am drawn to. I will also discuss some of the processes and materials that I use as an artist, as I find solace in their connection to my theme.

Ultimately, I want to show the intertwining of politics, influences, materials and processes and have these connections create a reflective moment in the minds of the reader and viewer of my artwork.

My name is Asaad Zangana. Zangana is a tribal name meaning wealthy or rich. But that was long ago, before Saddam Hussein and his tyranny overtook my country. I thought I was free, but I was not. Iraq became one big prison with informants everywhere. There were large oil paintings of Saddam hanging on every street. They hung in my school office and in my home; always watching, always observing. There was no escape from the eyes of Saddam. I tried not to arouse suspicion by staying at a

hotel where I thought I was safe. I later found that the hotel personnel gave reports of my activities; both religious and political. In my country, everyone had to be a member of the Arab Bath Socialist Party. If you were not, or if you were independent, the government treated you as their enemy. You were accused of being a foreign agent. You were not allowed to continue with high school or college. Your life and freedom were taken away, as if you were a criminal.

In 1990, I was accused of being a foreign agent. It was reported that I had been speaking out about my disapproval of the government and the lack of religious freedom. I was arrested and kept in a cell in an underground facility for eighteen months. I was then tried without legal representation and sentenced to ten years in the infamous Abu Ghraib prison. The judge was ordered by the government to hand out the harshest punishment allowed for this type of crime. I served two years of this harsh sentence, but was released along with other prisoners due to an agreement between Saddam Hussein and the United States.

Even after I was released from Abu Ghraib, I was still subjected to Saddam's oppression. I was required to file monthly reports, which included all my personal and professional information. I was forced to sell my business in an attempt to leave Iraq, but I was denied a passport. I was only able to leave Iraq after changing my last name and fleeing to Jordan where I received safe harbor until I was able to apply for political asylum to the United States. One year later I arrived in the United States.

The United States became my new home and afforded me the opportunity to achieve my dream of studying Ceramic Arts. Art has allowed me a venue to express my suffering as a political prisoner. It has allowed me a way by which to heal myself.

My work explores issues of the oppression I experienced. As an aspect of this inquiry, I searched for and interviewed both political prisoners and regular prisoners with the intent of learning about their experience with persecution and torture. For this research, I went to Jordan, Syria and Egypt. My travels and research exposed me to the pervasiveness of human rights abuses in the world today

ART AND POLITICS

Throughout the centuries, politics and art have been intertwined and used as a way of expressing both political messages and personal beliefs, but the practice of art was seen as marginal at best, often relying on those with an ability to financially support it, versus it being able to stand alone as a true art form. This means that whoever liked art essentially would pay to have art commissioned. In addition, there are politics and known separations between what is and isn't considered art and what is and isn't considered craft.

Some recognize people working in disciplines traditionally identified as Craft (such as those who work in ceramics) as talented, but they feel the "craft" that they create is too prosaic to be elevated to the level of art. Throughout modernity the values of those practices called "art" were seen as more significant than that of craft.

Bauhaus aesthetics, which considered a merging of the arts and crafts, saw industrial capitalism as providing new markets and opportunities for craft production, and embraced the desire to accommodate the demands of industrialism as well as incorporate the medieval workshop tradition. Walter Gropius, the founder of the Bauhaus School, tried to bridge the gap between the two, insisting that artists be experienced craftsmen, artists and designers if a successful coordination between industrial design and machine production is to be achieved.

During the period of post-modernity, the distinction between "art" and "craft" has broken down. The transformation of the nature of art work, as well as work in general, was no longer dependent on the individual genius, strict hierarchies between "art" & "craft"—"the notion of artistic quality, which had previously been linked to technical mastery, to talent, and to relatively unchanging notions of style, found itself irrevocably connected to the notion of innovation"—problems posed to artisans and manufactures by the situation and economic class.[1]

The symbolic benefits of art came to be strictly identified with various types of aesthetic production. Artists working with paint and a canvas were more elevated than those working with different mediums. The attitude that painting was more acceptable as an art form was perpetuated by: journals, galleries, museums, academics, and the educational apparatus. National differences did leave some room for play between the zones.

Many historical and contemporary artists have used their artwork to make political statements. In their work, art becomes more about themes and point-of-views and less about the medium or process. It is prevalent in the works of Francisco de Goya, whose painting, the *March 3 Shooting*, depicts scenes of violence caused by corrupt politics. The work presents soldiers with men at knifepoint or bodies lying torn on the ground, depicting the reality of violence and oppression.[2]

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[1] Garth Clark, ed. *Ceramic Millennium: Critical Writings on Ceramic History, Theory and Art*. (Nova Scotia: Press of Nova Scotia College of Art and Design, 2006). 14-15, 116-128, 135

[2] Rosalind E. Krauss, *The Originality of the Avant-Garde and other Modernist Myths* (MIT Press, 1985), p39

Other artists have used music or words to convey a political message. Nasir Shameh used words. Shameh communicated stories of political tragedies in order to expose people to things they were not seeing. Gabriel García Márquez once said that he "could not remain silent in the face of injustice and repression."[3] Each artist took a different path and each expressed an individual, political view.

In Annette Cox's book Art-as-Politics, she discusses the theories behind Clement

Greenberg and his influence on the mid-twentieth century Abstract Expressionist movement. Greenberg believed that the artists should focus on process, versus a theme and reflect their own values and have confidence in ability. He was a great advocate for art as a manner of expression. Additionally, the abstract expressionist Clyfford Still used his art in a collaboration of techniques to create a whole picture.[4]

In contrast to Greenburg's beliefs, although I am very interested in various media and techniques such as merging ceramics with video imagery, it is more important to me to bring a sense of my personal experiences into the work. I want people to see my art as a reflection of both my artistic process and my personal and cultural experience. My goal is for my art to communicate the feelings and emotions that are held by various political viewpoints. Art is emotionally charged and has the potential to promote positive changes in the world. Certain struggles such as racism cause intense emotions in everyone. The same can be said of prisoners. My work can be very controversial because I focus on human rights issues; I show the reality of the human condition as I have studied in the

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[3] Vibha Maurya, "Gabriel Garcia Marquez." *Social Scientist* p58 (1983): Vol 11, No. 1

[4] Anette Cox, (1988). *Art as Politics: Abstract Expressionist Avant-garde and Society.* (UMI Research Press, U.S, 1988). 51-52, 142.

United States. In some work, such as Silent Chorus (Figure 2), I have used installation to help people see and feel how oppression leads to terrible acts upon humanity.

Human rights have their own set of unique issues and circumstances. For example in the United States, the South still has issues regarding human rights. According to an article written by Anthony Karen in 2009, there has been an increase in the rise of the KKK since the election of the first black president. Karen states "this has led to an increase of discriminatory acts." The acts have not been overt, but rather "simple acts, such as sitting in areas at restaurants where there is a white waitress." [5]

In 1936 Abel Meeropol published the poem Strange Fruit under the pen name Lewis Allen, purportedly after seeing Lawrence Bieter's 1930 photograph of the lynching of Thomas Shipp and Abrahm Smith.

> Southern trees bear strange fruit,
> Blood on the leaves and blood at the root,
> Black body swinging in the Southern breeze,
> Strange fruit hanging from the poplar trees.
> Pastoral scene of the gallant South,
> The bulging eyes and the twisted mouth,
> Scent of magnolia sweet and fresh,
> Then the sudden smell of burning flesh!
> Here is fruit for the crows to pluck,
> For the rain to gather, for the wind to suck,
> For the sun to rot, for the trees to drop,
> Here is a strange and bitter crop. [6]

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[5] Anthony Karen, "KKK-Increased and Strengthened since Obama's Election." *The Observers*. (2009), http://observers.france24.com/en/content/20090226-kkk-alive-well-2009-obama-anthony-karen/

[6] David Margolick, *Strange Fruit: Billie Holiday, Café Society, and an Early Cry for Civil Rights* (Running Press, 2000), pp. 25-27.

I find a strong connection between the evocative manner of the poem and my intentions for my work Silent Chorus (Figure 9).

Based on the research accomplished in forming my ideas for this project, complex and intriguing questions have arisen. For this reason I conducted a modest survey of Americans asking their views on the state of social issues, such as oppression and race relations. Many that I spoke to said that issues regarding race and oppression do not exist. Others however had different views, such as an African-American identified woman who feels oppression and racial issues are still alive and well; not only in the south but throughout the country. She also felt that though a lot of the issues were covered up or suppressed, they were still very much a problem (Appendix B). She cites daily occurrences of going to the shopping center and being followed by security guards or being pulled over when there are literally dozens of cars breaking traffic laws.

These issues and viewpoints as well as the mediums and techniques I have explored, have shaped my work. My work is about politics and oppression and how it affects the society. My work is about relating my views on social relationships involving the authority or power of those who practice unjust treatment. I have focused on Saddam Hussein because of the affect his regime had on me, but also because I was a political prisoner and I want to show people what happened to me and express to my nation and society the injustices that transpired.

My art explores the commonality between art, oppression, and politics. An example of this is shown by the imagery used in Remembering (Figure 4). I have explored this interconnected relationship through the use of imagery that expresses the

harsh realities that these arenas sometimes share. The imagery is meant to represent these realities in order to speak for those that have been oppressed. Some examples of this exploration include the political oppression which is practiced by a strong state over a weaker state; ethnic and racial oppression, which I believe is self explanatory, but goes deeper than skin color and racial ethnicity and finally, the religious oppression perpetrated by Saddam Hussein against the Shiites in Iraq. All of these are unfair practices by the strong over the weak.

My work Shell Game (Figure 5) involves the use of the American flag, combined with the Iraqi flag. I chose the American flag because I was greatly surprised during the course of my study of the flag of United States of America. I was enamored by the images and emotions that surround the American flag. I found it curious that certain government agencies continue to use flags made only in America, by Americans despite so many other products now being made in China, Taiwan, or elsewhere in the world. Even the most minute materials used in production of the flags, such as polyester, nylon, or cotton threads, are made specifically in the United States and are sewn together by Americans. Americans strongly believe that the American flag should be only made with American hands. I believe that is evidence of American patriotism. Additionally, I chose the flag because the flag is symbolic of the country that it represents.

In order to explore this further, I have arranged the tiles with various symbols associated with atrocities perpetuated by the United States and its agents at Guantanamo Bay Detention Camp. America is technically the most developed country in the world and being so, in my opinion, should have been past the atrocities that developed and/or

existed in Guantanamo Bay. The prisoners that were held at Guantanamo Bay never should have been held there without trial. I would expect this from Middle Eastern countries, but not America. I also chose the Iraqi flag because of my experience as an Iraqi citizen. Iraq is a third world country in terms of development. I integrated them so it is not easy to ascertain the differences between the two flags. Also, by using the flags of Iraq and the United States, the viewer is asked to examine the war that took place between these two countries and see the overlap between the two countries.

The distortion of the image that is a product of the integration of the two different flags produces a new but problematic image for the viewer to consider. The viewer is subliminally asked to review the changes that occurred when the United States caused the upheaval of the non-democratic, exploitive, repressive and murderous regime of Saddam Hussein in Iraq and in the process occupied the country. The overlap and distortion occur when the viewer is asked to question their personal beliefs about the United States and the practices used by the United States in association with torture and oppression. A country that claims to uphold human rights is found to have practiced torture on political prisoners in the Guantanamo Bay prison and is keeping prisoners to this day imprisoned for years without trial. Shell Game explores how the two countries share a philosophy of torture, and poses the questions: Are they both backwards on their view of human rights? Do they actually care, or are the two equal in the result of persecution/oppression? Is this why we have flag burning? When protesters burn the flag, could it mean that the country has done something wrong or has become hypocritical? Does the use of oppression in

each of these countries represent their worldview? How does this relate to democracy or to human rights?

ART AND INFLUENCES

My story and my art are representative of my nation, my people, and my religious beliefs, as well as the struggles that I faced as a Shi'a Muslin.

After the death of the Prophet Mohammad, may God's peace and blessings be with him, Sunni Muslims believed the leader of Islam did not have to be someone who was pious or knowledgeable about the religion. The Shi'a believed the leader should be Imam Ali, as the Prophet himself had appointed him to be his predecessor. In spite of this, after the prophet's death, the Sunni Muslims took control and appointed a political leader that would persecute Shi'a Muslims. Similar oppressions were exercised during the regime of Saddam Hussein. All religious acts, that were contrary to the current regime, were reported to the government. Simply visiting the grave of the Grandson of the Prophet known as Imam Hussein[7] was enough to generate a report to the government. Such a report could result in arrest, imprisonment, torture and even death.

On the other hand, in a country with religious freedom and freedom of expression, I find that the process of a form of exploration and memoralization helps me to make sense of my experience as a prisoner. David Morgan eludes to this phenomenon when we writes about the connection between art and spirituality, power and social purpose:

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[7] Vali Nasr, *The Shia Revival; How Conflicts within Islam Will Shape the Future* (W.W. Norton & Company, Inc., New York, London, 2007), 32

> Art and religion may also helpfully be compared with one another on the basis of their social purpose as forms of critical reflection, on the one hand, and as an authorization of prevailing forms of power, on the other.[8]

As I briefly discussed in the previous chapter, "prevailing forms of power" can affect even the art mediums that an artist chooses to work in. But today these distinctions are disappearing. Contemporary art embraces a broad range of interdisciplinary approaches and addresses many of the cultural, political and personal issues that artist want to speak to today.

> A strength of and a catalyst for the complex nature of contemporary art is its ability to convey and reflect realities, both exterior and interior. The visual, symbolic and metaphorical languages employed by artists reveal and analyze experience, as well as extending it. While today art may have become a surrogate for religion to some degree, and the gallery a sanctuary, neither art nor religion can displace the other.[9]

This is especially important, because my work/art is an extension of my faith. The inspiration that I find in molding and casting clay is unparallel to any other medium. My use of clay gives me the feeling of being closer to the earth and I find solace and comfort in using a medium that was given to the earth and thus to man.

A passage in the Holy Quran, TAHA 20, reads "We created you-from the earth - and into it we will return you, and we will ring you forth from it a second time". According to the Islamic faith, man was created from clay, Adam was molded from mud

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[8] David Morgan, "Secret Wisdom and Self-Effacement: The Spiritual in Art in the Modern Age." In *Negotiating Rapture: The Power of Art to Transform Lives*, ed. R. Francis (Chicago: Museum of Contemporary Art1996), p 35

[9] Image and Text, "Conceptual Art Online, Votive-1," http://www.imageandtext.org.nz/votive/votive1.html

and the spirit of God was breathed into him. For me, ceramics and the use of clay represents getting in touch with myself and returning to the earth.

My relationship with clay began when I was child on the banks of the Al Hussaineai River in Karbala, where the mud is a cause for joy and happiness. Sitting and playing in the mud is both childlike and creative. As the clay is squeezed through my fingers, I can sense the connection with Sumerian civilization, which is in fact built on clay. It reminds me of the images on Sumerian clay tablets. I believe these tablets to be the first writing on the face of the earth to the world and through my art and the use of clay, I find a connection to the cultural heritage that makes up my city. Karbala is known as one of the most famous cities in Iraq. It is known for the tales surrounding ceramics.

In my research for this thesis project, I have studied the works of Richard Notkin. My consideration of his work and the way that he speaks about it has lead me to a deeper understanding of my own intentions (see Appendix). In certain pieces he has used tiles to address the notion of chaos that comes from the violence of military aggression. In Notkin's work The Gift (Figure 7), he presents us with individual tiles containing various images such as, ears, skulls, dice and brains. From a distance these images of death form a nuclear mushroom cloud because of his treatment of the surfaces. All the tiles in his piece are related to the next, each assist in making up the larger picture (Figure 6). In my works Shell Game and Remembering I have created square tiles that depict elements related to torture and injustice such as the noose, handcuffs, guns and the scales of justice. Two of the tiles contain images representing the subject of mass graves that exist in Iraq, and that also occur in other parts of the world.

In 1991, the people of Iraq rose up against the tyranny of Saddam Hussein in a series of organized intifada rebellions. The uprisings were brutally repressed by Hussein's forces. As many as 200 mass graves have been registered by the Iraq Human Rights Ministry containing up to 15,000 murdered bodies in a single site.[10]
My work "After the War" is a representation of these occurrences and a tribute to these lives, (Figure 3).

I am also intrigued by the work of Mona Hatoum. She takes normal household items, objects that are mundane in their nature and function, and materials that are challenging in their relationship to art and forces the viewer to see things in a different light. She uses various techniques to visualize her ideas and feelings in each piece she creates. The use of space and light in her installation work has a profound impact on the viewer. Her installations are typically large-scale constructions of an environment that challenges the viewer to examine a range of feelings relative to her art and to experience the magnitude of the piece as it engulfs the room. (Figure 8).

Some of Hatoum's art is warm and inviting, at first glance. Then as you get closer you see things you never would imagine. Electrical currents flow through normal objects. Her art requires you to be part of it. If you were to view a picture of her work you would not see it as clearly as if you were standing in front of it. She inspired me to use different materials in my exhibit and to utilize lighting as a dominant formal and conceptual element

[10] John F. Burns, "Uncovering Iraq's Horrors in Desert Graves," New York Times, June 5, 2006, World Section, Middle East.

IMAGERY AND CONTENT

My goal in exhibiting this type of work is to personify oppression so that when anyone sees my work they will reject oppression and those that participate in it. Even when I was in prison waiting for death, my cellmates and I used to joke with one another. Ironically, in my own experience even the subject matter of oppression can have elements of beauty or humor that only one who has experienced it might be able to relate to. I believe the meaning of my work can be very hard to experience as a viewer or reader. As I continue with exhibits and my work, and interviews with political prisoners, I hope to make the viewers of my work think on a deeper level about the meaning of the work. I want to create a dialogue of hope and understanding.

In Shell Game and Remembering, I created ceramic tiles that have images related to torture as a way of cementing these images for the viewer. I created multiple castings of tiles with variations of subject matter to use in the creation of a large mural. The tiles in Remembering were developed using a firing technique that would allow me to create a backdrop for video images.

In After the War, I responded to many of the war photographs that I have seen where the remnants of what remain offer a chilling memory of the people whose lives war has torn apart. Susan Sontag suggested my own experience of being effected by the images I have seen as she seeks to place Virginia Woolf's Three Guineas in context:

> Not to be pained by these pictures, not to recoil from them, not to strive to abolish what causes this havoc, this carnage—these, for Woolf, would be the reactions of a moral monster. And, she is saying, we are not monsters, we members of the educated class. Our failure is one of imagination, of empathy: we have failed to hold this reality in mind.[11]

People respond to colors in different ways. This is sometimes due to culture and at other times, societal norms. For example, in the American culture black is associated with death, but white signifies life and purity. But in the Asian culture, white is the traditional color of mourning. In my work titled Remembering I didn't use glaze, or added color on the ceramic tiles. This is because of my use of video. With every shot the tiles display different colors, mixing the color of the unglazed tiles with those in the projected image. This makes it work differently than glazes, such as in Shell Game where my color choices remain fixed and reflect permanence.

The use of light and dark is also an effective tool for expression. This is also known as *chiaroscuro.* The contrast that light and dark creates can be seen in many forms of art. If we look at the works of Kahlil Gibran, he conveys his messages through his use of imagery and contrast. The same is true of Rembrandt, who uses light and dark to express a presence in his art; it required the view to be part of the art. You have to look deeply to see the reality of his work. He created lifelike images that stare back at you as you walked. In my work, the persecuted also look out at the viewers to engage them in their world.

This expressive concept is also used in other art forms such as music. Sometimes the rhythm and melody of music uses harmonies that are warm and inviting, while the lyrics hold a dark and ominous tone. One may have to pay close attention to the words, or

[11] Susan Sontag, *Regarding the Pain of Others*, (Picador, 2004), p 8.

it could be mistaken for upbeat music. In a similar way, from a distance some of my work may appear aesthetically pleasing, but when one looks closer, the imagery that I've chosen for the tiles will reveal the dark and ominous message in my work.

Narratives are also utilized in art. Humanity has passed on stories in both oral and written forms; of which, the earlier "spoken form" has been around since the dawn of time. For example, the story of a particular person or time in history may be moving and emotional. Although narratives are not always readable on every subject they can tell you a great story. The Message shows the life and times of the Prophet Muhammad (PBUH). It is the story of Islam shown from the view of a by stander. Laura Mulvey used her narrative abilities to show the shift in the orientation of film theory towards a psychoanalytic framework. Mulvey's ideas influenced thought on film theory, feminism, and psychoanalysis.[12]

In Remembering, I've added another layer of narrative associations on top of those implied by the tile imagery through the use of specific video projected imagery. These projections both compliment the imagery in the tiles, and focus the narrative toward particular victims of oppression. I met several families from Afghanistan, Iraq and the Congo. I recorded both men and women. My video projections show the lips and eyes of the women as they talk about their rights and their suffering. I wanted to show the expressions in their eyes and reveal their pain. I show only the men's eyes, in order to reveal the pain and confusion focused in their eyes as the women speak. I chose not to use audio, but silence as a way of showing the oppression the women spoke of. I wanted

[12] Laura Mulvey, "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," *Screen* 16 (1975): 6–18

to silence the voice of the women as a way of expressing what the world will not hear, and the changes that will never occur.

In other artwork, I chose to focus on particular types of imagery associated with torture and present them in installation formats. These include the hangman's noose, which represents death and in some cases a horrible release from oppression; bars, such as those that enclosed a prison cell, handcuffs because they are used to bind and take away freedom.

In Silent Chorus, I've used the hangman's noose based on its history immemorial. In my country, it is the start of injustice, tyranny and oppression. It is usually used by governments for the liquidation of liabilities. Throughout the history of Iraq, it was a way to control and execute ex-leaders. Ironically, this sometimes benefited my fellow citizens as a way of freeing the country from the tyranny of an oppressive regime. Additionally, the gallows were a decisive punishment for criminals and murderers. The noose was also used as a deterrent to future criminals and murders. The logic being that if they knew that the punishment for stealing and/or murder was execution by hanging, they would not proceed down that path. A historical example of this was in the era of Saddam Hussein. Saddam sentenced drug trafficking merchants and their couriers by hanging. This automatic sentence led to a country devoid of drugs. But Saddam also used the noose as a penalty for each of his political opponents and to arrest anyone he was suspicious of, or even as a way to control political jokes that may be said about Saddam Hussein or his government.

I used the title Silent Chorus, because of the cohesiveness a choir brings to music. They sing as a group, but in the end, they are the embodiment of one voice. The same is true of my nooses. The nooses hang from the ceiling in the gallery and are representative of the people I met while in prison. They are separated by hanging, but one in death, just as being political prisoners of different faiths and towns were one as we sat together in a cell. I met a prisoner named Sami, who with an armed gang tried to kill Saddam Hussein. They were arrested and ultimately hung. The nooses represent these twelve men that were hung and the sand under the nooses with footprints represents their presence. The spotlight casts shadows on the wall and the floor, evoking fear and terror as these men met their death. Silent Chorus also refers to the absence of voice, and sometimes ultimately death, that the victims of oppression experience.

I have used a variety of images to represent torture or oppression. Cutting off an ear was the penalty imposed for not serving (or assisting) in the army. The victim would be allowed to walk in the streets with their head bandaged as a way of demonstrating what happens to non-conformists. It is also a symbol for listening and spying; which is how I was arrested and persecuted. Another image that I chose to represent is the 'scales of justice'. The scales are tipped suggesting the inequities of justice. Another tile has a gun representing the power and authority of the regime to shoot and kill a person without due process. Yet another depicts barbed wire, always present on top of walls, cutting off a means of escape, or handcuffs representing the actual restraint that is imposed on victims for the majority of their incarceration. Prisoners' hands are tied behind the back to prevent any resistance from attacks. Even if prisoners are released, handcuffs can leave

lasting bruises and marks on their skin. I also have prison bars, representing the bars of a prison cell and the confinement within, and finally, there is a tile of an Iraqi flag that represents the country where countless others and I were persecuted, imprisoned, and tortured.

THE PROCESS

Process is important to the content of my work. In my ceramics work, the slip casting process allows me to use multiples in order to emphasize the pervasiveness of oppression that is represented in the images on the individual tiles. I chose to use square tiles. This allowed me to create endless possibilities on grid paper, or on my computer when planning the compositions. The square tiles were easily altered in terms of their placement and spacing in the final composition. In Shell Game, this allowed me to adjust my initial plans into various patterns and colors until I came up with a composition that I thought worked best when combining the two flags. New tiles could easily be added or in some cases deleted. These possibilities made the process more interesting and gave me a chance to add more details and reconsider previous layouts of my design. For example, my tiles that exhibit prison bars have human hands that are grasping bars in one tile, and on another tile the hands are gone. I made these tiles as a way of representing the transition from prison to death.

In another artwork, After the War, the process involved gathering shoes that would represent the many lives that were taken in Iraq. I had to decide how I would install them in the gallery. Initially, I thought of putting them at the back of the exhibit, but there was not enough room due to the exit, so I divided the shoes into two sections; one close to the video and the other adjacent to the wall. This was good because the

viewer had to walk through the shoes to see Silent Chorus. This provides a relationship between the two works, which is the loss of life talked about by the women.

The process of creating tiles and video is both time consuming and exciting because it takes patience and research. The need to be precise and pay attention to detail is of utmost importance, as it may affect later steps in the process. The process of taking four tiles that have been sculpted and casting them begins with having all the necessary tools and materials needed. Many common items such as a pencil and measurement tools are very useful to mark each tile; the pencil mark will get retained in the cast and help mark the position to cut the cast.

The idea in my mind's eye starts to take form on a paper. I use the size of the tile to establish the borders on the parchment. Sometimes several modifications will have been carried out to the first basic design, so that it morphs into the shape of what I would like to express. With papers scattered all over, I can make small adjustment so that the sketches match the size of the tiles. I carry out further research on the idea by trying to find imagery that relates to my content. I find ideas on the Internet, in some books, in everyday surroundings, and through life experiences. When I see what other artists have created, it gives me ideas for modifications that I would like to make in order to represent my idea better, and then I contemplate how to present these ideas on the tiles.

To get the idea onto the tile, I transfer the design from the paper onto clear plastic. If I were to put the paper onto the clay, the paper would get wet and tear apart and therefore ruin the design. Then I place the plastic on top of the clay and transfer the

drawing by pressing the lines with an arrow tool. After all of the lines are transferred onto the clay, I use the line bay arrow tools to push the lines deeper into the clay.

I carve, mold and shape the clay until the depth and texture of the clay expresses a representation of original design from my mind, which has been refined, and is finally formed into something to be seen by all.

The mold making process begins after all of the materials have been gathered. I then carefully measure out four tiles, with 6 inches between the top two tiles as well as the bottom two. They are then placed onto a piece of plywood, leaving a three inch border around the perimeter of the tiles. Additional boards that are a foot wide and at least four feet long are used to keep the plaster around the tiles, and clamps are used to keep the walls/boards together. The four tiles are then placed in their precise locations, and plaster is poured into the now bigger mold until it is about two inch's deep, then an additional inch of plaster is added to the cast.

The plaster is allowed to dry for at least three days until it is dry enough to remove the cast surrounding the tiles from the wood. Once the wood is removed, the cast that is almost 2 feet by 2 feet is very heavy. The four sections that were joined are now separated using a handsaw. The clay of the original tiles is removed from the cast. Little pieces of clay remain in the smaller creases and indentations of the original tile's design. The plaster mold must be cleaned of all of the clay to make a good cast.

There are four main procedures to make a successful cast. The first and one of the most important procedures is to fill the joints with clay, so it acts as a dam to keep the

freshly poured plaster in the wood mold. Extra clay may be used to help with many of the steps, so the art medium also becomes a tool. After the cast dries, the second useful method is to use the fresh moist clay to pick up the smaller pieces of the dry clay from the mold. The third is to keep calm while waiting for the plaster to dry. Another useful procedure is to give a beveled edge to the plaster that surrounds the soft clay tile, so that it can come out more easily which involves less cleaning and may keep the original clay tile in perfect shape for future use.

The step- by-step process is necessary and affects the successful outcome of uncountable hours of craftsmanship, which communicates the message of the heart and soul through art. Many tricks, which only come from experience, may even preserve the very being of the newly molded piece while it is in the kiln, and any other unsuspecting pieces that may be surrounding it if the artist has not cleaned his mold well. For example, the artist has to make sure to remove the dryer pieces of plaster that are left from the cast that will heat faster and cause a less dry piece of clay to explode ending the artist's vision in a single combative action.

The final step is to cast the clay tile by placing a frame of wood around the tile and using clamps to hold it in place. The casting mold needs to be mixed to the right consistency, after which, it is then slowly poured into the frame and checked for leaks. Once the casting mold dries it is ready to be worked and cleaned up so that I can use it to make many other tiles.

CONCLUSION

My art represents what happened to me either in portion or in entirety. This is what is happening in my country, in your country and around the world. My hope is to create a greater understanding through my art. In my opinion, Americans and American media and other non-Islamic countries, do not have a great understanding of my country. It seems that American media in particular, sensationalizes the oppression and loss of life of those in Iraq when the victims are American troops or Coalition forces, but if the persecuted are Iraqi citizens, reporting is less significant. It seems that when Iraqis die or are persecuted they are only represented in numbers. There are no faces and there are no names. My hope is to change this perception.

My hope in showing my work and exploring oppression throughout the United State and Iraq is that people will realize that we have commonality in what we see, hear and feel. Oppression is not just centralized in the Middle East or Muslim countries. It is also present in “developed” nations and we must all work to stop the atrocities that exist, and work at a better understanding of what oppression is and how it affects all nations and the world.

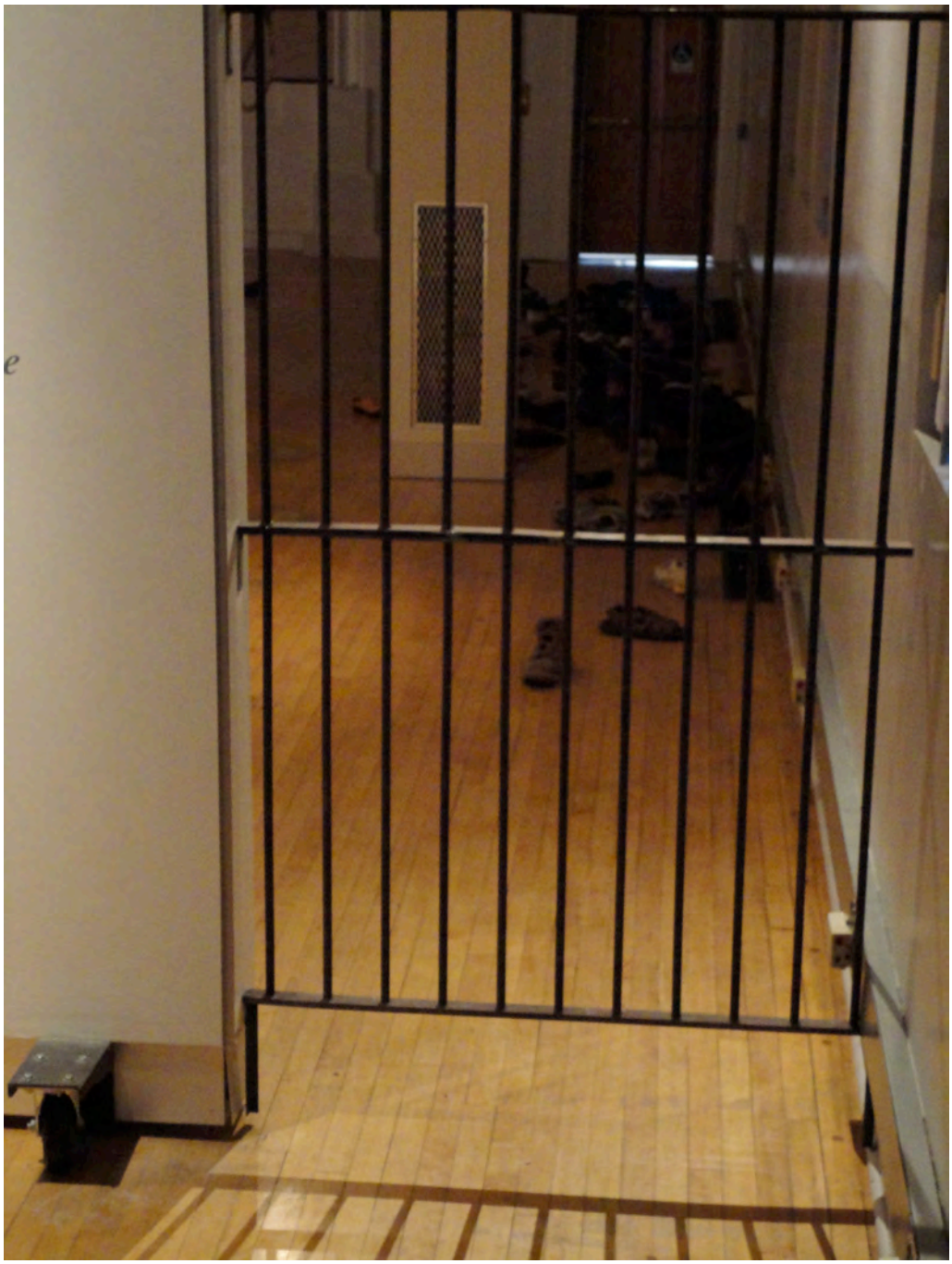

Figure 1: Asaad Zangana, Abyss, 2010
(Source: photograph by artist)

Figure 2: Asaad Zangana, Silent Chorus, 2010
(Source: photograph by artist)

Figure 3: Asaad Zangana, After the War, 2010
(Source: photograph by artist)

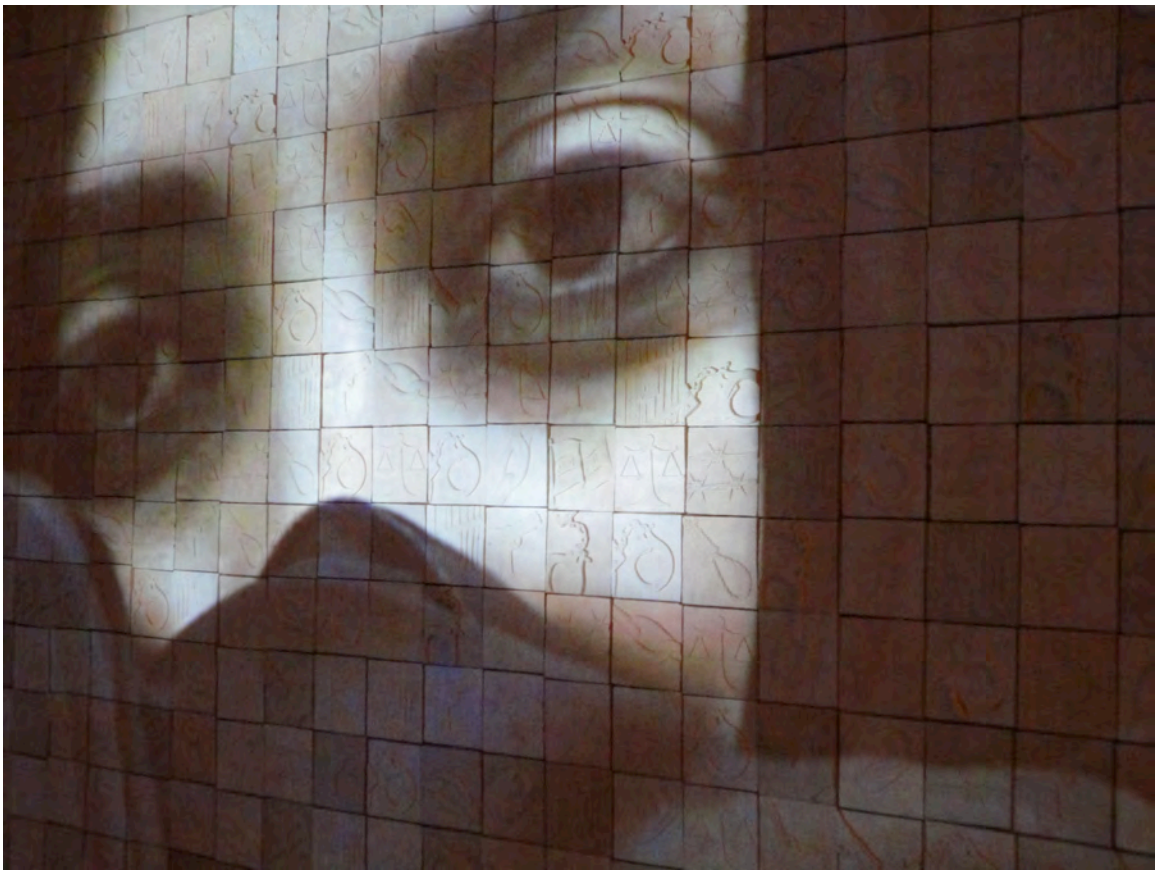

Figure 4: Asaad Zangana, Remembering, 2010
(Source: photograph by artist)

Figure 5: Asaad Zangana, Shell Game, 2010
(Source: photograph by artist)

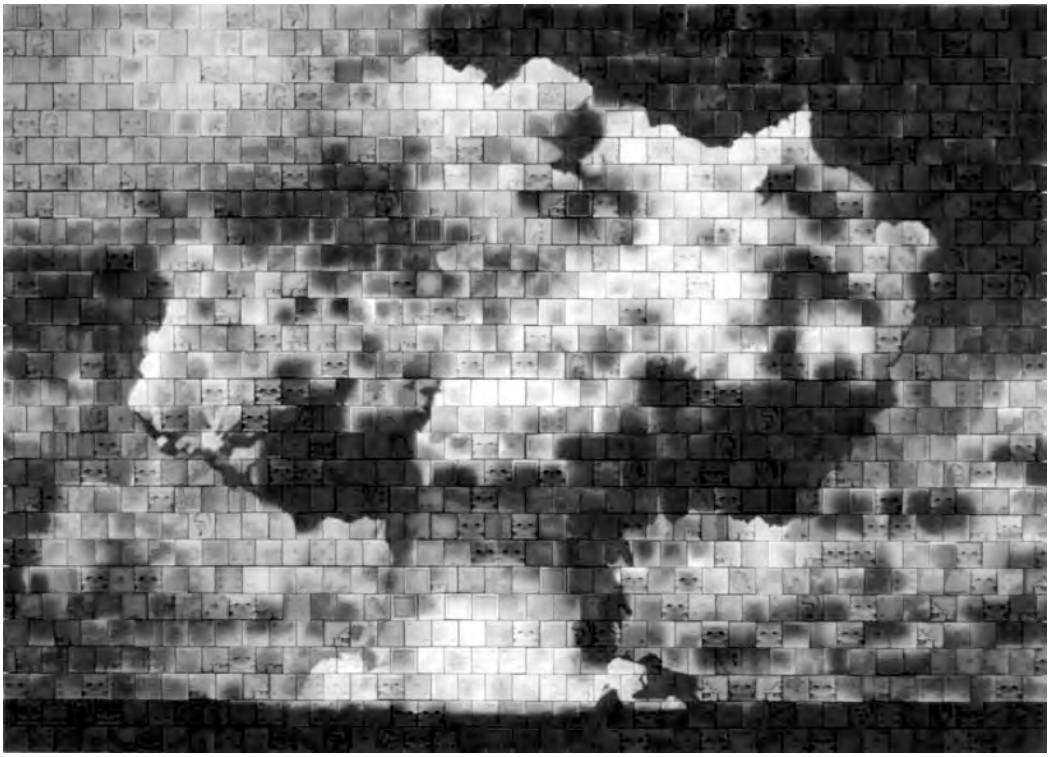

Figure 6: Richard Notkin, The Gift, 1999, 46" x 62.5" x 4.5" Earthenware tiles fired in sawdust filled saggers, watercolor highlights, wood backing (Source: http://www.portlandart.net/archives/2009/04/seeing_the_numb.html)

Figure 7: Richard Notkin, <u>The Gift</u> (Detail)
(Source: http://bioephemera.com/index.php?s=memento)

Figure 8: Mona Hatoum, Light at the End, Installation, 2002
(Source: http://www.webexhibits.org/colorart/hatoum.html)

Lawrence Beiter, Thomas Shipp and Abram Smith, August 7, 1930, 1930
(Source: http://www.thaidphoto.com/forums/showthread.php?p=914664)

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APPENDIX

2007 Jamison Lecture by Richard Notkin

APPENDIX

"Art and War: Four Decades of Social Commentary in Clay" -Richard Notkin
Museum of Contemporary Craft - Excellence in Craft Lecture
Oregon College of Art and Craft - Annual Jamison Lecture
Pacific Northwest College of Art - Host venue
Sunday, October 21, 2007 Portland, Oregon

I have been invited to speak today on the theme of "Art and War". When I mentioned this to my wife, Phoebe Toland, she said, "Go for it, Dick. You never pass an opportunity to get up on your soapbox." It's good to have a wife who doesn't bullshit you...With that in mind, I will examine the topic through my thoughts and through my art works. This topic has been, throughout my life as an artist, most near and dear to my soul, and with each passing year, I find that I have developed more questions than answers. For example, as a subgroup of our species, why do artists persist in creating artworks in an age of seeming indifference? Can art really have an effective and positive impact on our precarious world? I will offer a few points, admittedly subjective, on art and life, war and peace, and our turbulent world. I have borrowed liberally from some of my past lectures and articles, so I wish to apologize in advance if you have heard or read a few of these remarks before.

Let me begin by quoting a couple of great writers from the 20th Century:

George Bernard Shaw wrote: "The reasonable man adapts himself to the world; the unreasonable one persists in trying to adapt the world to himself. Therefore, all progress depends on the unreasonable man."
And, from George Orwell: "Speaking the truth in times of universal deceit is a revolutionary act."

All artists, of all media, are in essence, storytellers. Whether we choose to work directly with words, or arrange images to provoke a narrative interpretation, or compose music or work abstractly, the best creative works of artists stimulate profound thoughts and questions in the minds of their audience. Today's artists are a link to all artists who preceded them, as we breathe new life into old traditions through ongoing innovations. With the passage of time, these current innovations, like their predecessors, will become tradition, and the cycle will begin again for a new generation of artists. Each artist perceives the world in a uniquely subjective manner, and strives to present his or her perceptions by developing a personal blend of technical and aesthetic approaches. Personally, I have chosen the more overt role of the artist as social critic, which has raised numerous questions in my mind and stimulated much dialog with my viewers. The questions I am most interested in are the following:

- Can the arts serve as a universal -- even spiritual -- link between the world's diverse cultural, political, ethnic and religious entities?
- Why do human beings -- from all cultures and civilizations throughout human history – create various works of art, literature, music, drama, dance, etc.?