



**AHMED ALSOUDANI**, the Baghdad-born, New York-based painter ("Untitled," 2011, left) will be among the six artists showing work at the Venice Biennale's Iraq pavilion opening in June. Below, curator Mary Angela Schroth, photographed at mixed-media artist Ali Assaf's studio in Rome.

UPSTART

# Iraq Comes to Venice

Curator Mary Angela Schroth is spearheading a campaign to return Iraqi art to the prestigious Venice Biennale after a 35-year absence. **BY MARISA MAZRIA KATZ**

**W**ALKING A PROVOCATIVE TIGHTROPE is what American contemporary-art curator Mary Angela Schroth does best. In 1993, with memories of apartheid still fresh, Schroth staged Italy's first exhibition of South African art. During the days of glasnost and a collapsing Soviet Union, she presented the world's first show of perestroika-era Russian artists. And in a move that some might interpret as the ultimate in cultural and political overtures, Schroth is now preparing the return of the Iraq pavilion to the 2011 Venice Biennale after a 35-year hiatus.

Artists or curators who have worked with Schroth throughout her career, which includes running one of Rome's first nonprofit art spaces, Sala 1 (pronounced "Sala Uno," Italian for "Room One"), say it's the native Virginian's tenacity and inquisitiveness that have shaped her vision since she entered the art world back in 1976. "With anyone else it would have been impossible," says Basra-born, Italy-based artist Ali Assaf, who is



the commissioner and one of six Iraqi artists presenting work in the pavilion. Bringing his native country back to Venice was a cause he championed for years, but decades of unrest prevented its materialization. "At first it couldn't be done because of Saddam, but then it became impossible because of the severe fighting and confusion," he explains. Subsequent assassinations and the resignations of several ministers of culture and security, Assaf says, didn't help matters. In 2009, Assaf approached Schroth to curate the pavilion in hopes that the combination of his passion and her trademark ambition would lead Iraq back into the Venice Biennale limelight. "After 30 years of constant war and conflict, Iraq is ready to return to normalcy," Schroth says. "That process can start with projects like this one in Venice. That may be idealistic, but you have to start somewhere."

In the two years since, Schroth, 61, has worked with Assaf to select artists who represent a cross-section of intergenerational talent from the Arab nation. But

COURTESY OF ROBERT GOFF GALLERY (TOP)

**AZAD NANAKELI**  
Stills from the Florence-based artist's video installation "Destnuej" (2011)



**WALID SITI**  
"Family Ties" (April 2009), an installation in Dubai by the London-based artist

**HALIM AL-KARIM** "Hidden War" (1985), a triptych by the U.S.-based photographer



**ALI ASSAF**  
"Waters!" (2009), an installation at Sette Sale in Rome

**ADEL ABIDIN**  
Still from "Three Love Songs" (2010-11), a video installation at Mathaf, the Arab Museum of Modern Art in Qatar

with the exodus of much of the country's creative class, as well as today's fragile security situation, choosing artists currently residing in Iraq proved unfeasible. "Getting Iraqi artists [who live in Iraq] is not an easy job," says Iraq's ambassador to Rome, Hassan Janabi. "It could be tedious and possibly create friction. Instead, they sought out artists living on the outside who could truly reflect what constitutes an Iraqi artist." The list includes New York-based Ahmed Alsoufani, who will simultaneously show several paintings inside the nearby Palazzo Grassi, and the London-based Kurdish artist Walid Siti.

The title of the pavilion, "Acqua Ferita"—or "wounded water" in Italian—was selected to shift the Iraq conversation away from war and onto one many view as equally significant. "Terrorism is a theme we are fed up with," Assaf says. "There are other problems, such as the lack of water in the region, that no one talks about." The concept drew support from Janabi, who is also an official adviser to the Iraqi Ministry of Water Resources. "Vast areas once covered with water are now desert," Janabi says. "Water is life and this life has been taken away. This is critical and it's now diminishing."

Although some might chafe at the idea of an American curating the Iraq pavilion, contentious nationality issues have always remained far outside

Schroth's purview. "My nomadic life means I have more in common with these artists than a normal curator," she says.

Indeed, it has been nearly four decades since Schroth lived in the U.S. Her departure for Europe came on the heels of a five-year stretch working as a CBS producer under the helm of Walter Cronkite, covering events like Watergate, the end of the Vietnam War and the election of Jimmy Carter. Her first destination was Normandy, France. Although Schroth had no formal art training, her enthusiasm led her to some of the country's most off-the-map art happenings—the most fruitful of which was a collaboration with French contemporary artist Joël Hubaut. Together they established the independent art space Nouveau Mixage, hedged inside an abandoned garage in the center of Caen. It was there Schroth learned how to become an "artist's producer," or someone, she explains, "who could translate their projects into reality."

While living in France, Schroth met the commissioner of the U.S. pavilion at the 50th Venice Biennale, Kathleen Goncharov, and the two have since traveled to remote biennials and art events around the world. "My investigations to countries outside the Eurocentric context have been a big part of my identity in my work with contemporary art," Schroth says.

With the impending closure of Nouveau Mixage, Schroth relocated to Rome. She arrived in a city replete with sweeping, historic charm, but a flatlining contemporary art scene. "Rome was a backwater," Schroth says. "It didn't have in the early 1980s what it has today. It just wasn't interested in international contemporary art."

A lack of galleries and independent spaces forced Schroth to spend her first year scouring the city for artists and setting her sights on transforming disused spaces into art hubs. One of the first such shows exhibited the work of Italian and British artists in abandoned, underground bathroom stalls beneath a central Roman piazza. The event, which still retains a kind of cult status in Italy today, proved to be one of the most pivotal in Schroth's career, as it facilitated her introduction to sculptor and Passionist priest Tito Amodei.

Amodei's art studio was housed inside a vaulted, former basilica compound owned by the Vatican. Inside the complex was also the 800-square-foot Sala 1 gallery that he used for sculptural exhibitions. He had for some time been on a desperate hunt for a director to take over the space. "Back then it wasn't cool to be connected to the Catholic Church," Schroth says. "Many didn't think it could be a viable art space, but it just needed a curatorial jumpstart. Like any place, it was just a container unless you had a vision." And so in 1985, Schroth assumed the role of director at Sala 1. The only rules for running the space, explains the now 84-year-old Amodei, were: "No politics. No religion. No Vatican. Only culture."

Keeping their distance from their landlord, which meant never asking for financial assistance, has enabled Sala 1 to maintain a large degree of creative freedom—best exemplified in a succession of groundbreaking exhibitions. These include the 1995 "Halal" show, the first display of contemporary Israeli artists in Italy, and collaborating with the Studio Museum in Harlem in 2006 to present the U.S.'s first show of comic books hailing from sub-Saharan Africa and the diaspora.

Now with the recent opening of MACRO, the contemporary art museum and galleries, including an outpost from powerhouse dealer Larry Gagosian, Rome is beginning to take hold as a serious contemporary-art center. "At a time when Rome had mostly sleepy institutions, she was one of the only people working with emerging talent," says Viktor Misiano, former contemporary-art curator at the Pushkin Museum and curator of "Mosca: Terza Roma," Schroth's 1988 exhibition of Russian art. "She is one of the few that had the courage to do something unusual."

As if to underscore Schroth's unremitting energy, she is also curating the first-ever Bangladesh pavilion for this summer's Venice Biennale, which coincides with the country's 40th anniversary. Both Bangladesh and Iraq will be housed in the Gervasuti Foundation, a 17th-century hospice and now artisan's workshop in a construction zone in central Venice.

"For me being with the artist is as good as it gets," says Schroth in a still-thick Southern accent. "And although sometimes it's not perfect, in the end, they give you what I call illumination."

"Which," she adds, "just so happens to be the theme of this year's Biennale." ♦