



Grendi Löfkvist's *An Inventory of al-Mutanabbi Street*, 2013. Ondine typeface by Adrian Frutiger, linoleum cuts, photopolymer plate from Logos Graphics, shards of broken glass from the streets of Oakland.

## Born of Baghdad bombing, exhibit trains focus on Iraq

Institute Library hosts *al-Mutanabbi Street Starts Here*

ELIZABETH WEINBERG

IMAGES AND IMAGE DETAILS  
COURTESY OF STEPHEN KOBASA

On March 5, 2007, in the midst of the United States troop surge in Iraq, a car bomb exploded and killed 26 people on Baghdad's al-Mutanabbi Street. The street, named for the 10th century Iraqi poet, was historically the locus of Baghdad's book-selling and literary community. The destruction was such that the street remained officially closed for more than a year.

News of the bombing briefly appeared in the American media and made its way to Beau Beausoleil, a bookseller and poet based in San Francisco. Alarmed by the minimal response from the San Francisco literary scene, he organized a memorial reading. Out of that grew the al-Mutanabbi Street Coalition, which has since brought together writers, letterpress printers, and book artists to create works to memorialize and comment on the bombing. In the seven years since the bombing, the writings have been compiled into an anthology and parts of the project have been exhibited at numerous institutions across the United States, Europe, and North Africa as *al-Mutanabbi Street Starts Here*. Beginning on March 1, an exhibit of selected materials from the project curated by Stephen Kobasa will be on view at the gallery of the Institute Library in New Haven.

Bettina Pauly's *A Sun that Rises*, 2013. BFK paper, soft Uryu paper, Mulberry paper, hand-dyed silk ribbon, machine stitching; the background is an abstract etching, text letterpress printed, digitally set in Garamond, using photopolymer plates.

I spoke with Beausoleil on the phone in January; what follows is an edited version — for clarity and length — of that interview.

**EW: What made you expand the project after the memorial reading that you organized in 2007?**

BB: I didn't want the page to turn on what happened. I felt that by examining that one day in all the ways that we could, we would learn a great deal about the Iraqi people — their cultural community and their lives — and I began to see the commonalities between al-Mutanabbi Street and any street here that holds a bookstore, or a library, or a university, or a gallery or a museum. These are all shared cultural spaces.

**EW: How did the project grow from there?**

BB: I decided to go on from the 43 letterpress broadsides that we had first collected to sell at the reading to try to find 130 letterpress printers to contribute



Wuon-Gean Ho and Ingrid Scheider's *al-Mutanabbi, Once Again*, 2012. Single sheet of paper screen-printed in five colors on both sides and letterpress in two colors on one side, folded and glued to make a book.

broadsides. Then in 2010 I decided that I wanted to call for book artists to join, because I felt that by bringing new art disciplines into the project we could continue. Part of this project is constantly making people aware of Iraq and what's happened to Iraq's people. In this country we desperately want to walk away from it.

One of the things that this project isn't is a healing project. In order to begin any kind of healing, you have to understand what the wounds are. And the wounds that we've left in Iraq will be coming to the surface for years to come. We're a project of witness and solidarity.

**EW: What would you like to see grow out of that witnessing?**

BB: I'd like to see people assume responsibility. I want people to be troubled by the work that they see in these exhibits — troubled in the best possible sense of that word. I want them to turn over the ideas that they encounter in the exhibit and the associated events. I don't want this work to be merely seen as an art exhibit. That's the very last thing that I want.

And at some point I'd like for the project to be able to work with Iraqi artists and writers. But as far as I'm concerned, they have no real reason to work with us yet. We have to earn their respect for what we're doing and what our motives are. And that will come — we have Iraqi writers in our anthology, and the director of the Iraq National Library welcomed a set of the broadsides into their archives because he feels that it's important for the Iraqi people to see this work.

**EW: To what extent were local Bagh-dadi and Iraqi artists and writers involved with the starting process, and how have you seen that change?**

BB: We probably have more Arab-American writers and artists who are part

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## Iraq exhibit

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of the project now, either through contributing work or helping with exhibits. There are only a few Iraqi writers who are still in Iraq that have worked with the project, and really no artists yet. And again, that will happen when it happens.

We just had an exhibit open at a gallery in London called the Mosaic Rooms, which shows work from the Middle East and North Africa. We're sharing the exhibit space with an Iraqi artist named Hanoos Hanoos. That's the very first time we've exhibited with an Iraqi.

And on March 5, we have an exhibit opening at the American University in Cairo, which is the first time that we've exhibited in the Middle East.

**EW: How has preparing for that exhibit been different?**

BB: One thing is that customs held the work for 10 days. I thought the work would be seized. We talk about the car bombing in a lot of the works, so I just thought my god, if the wrong person sees this. It was finally released after 10 days and one of the people at the university wrote me and said it was clear that the work was very carefully examined. But I can't think of a better time for it to be in Cairo than right now.

**EW: What responses have you had from hosting institutions and audiences?**



Beau Beausoleil and Andrea Hassiba's *Until it is in Flame*, 2012. Mixed media, paint, papier-mâché, bronze Milagros, schoolbook strap, and paper.

BB: One art museum in the Netherlands wanted to put a disclaimer on the exhibit that they didn't necessarily agree with the project. And we had a similar thing when an exhibitor in Los Angeles solicited the project and then ended up backing out.

But it's mostly been really positive responses. I mean you can imagine how, if you're an Iraqi and you're here in this country either by your own decision or because you were forced to leave your country, and you see a project like this, it's like something thrown into the water that you can grab hold of. A lot of people approach me at readings

and exhibits just to talk to me and thank me for doing this.

There's often somebody in the back at readings who stands up and accuses us all of being, you know, secret jihadists — but you have to deal with people like that.

**EW: How do you deal with that?**

BB: I try to stay really calm, explain what the project's about, and that we aren't who they want us to be. I mean they want us to be some kind of straw dog and they want to be the person who reveals what our real agenda is.

But you know, at that same reading, after it was over, this young woman came up and bought a copy of our anthology. She said that her father was still in Baghdad, that he refused to

leave, and that she was going to send him a copy of the anthology. She just started crying at that point, and all I could do was embrace her and start crying myself. So I know that we touch people deeply and that the work that we're doing can symbolize really positive things for people.

*al-Mutanabbi Street Starts Here* will be on view at the Institute Library from March 1 through May 3. There will be readings from the anthology *al-Mutanabbi Street Starts Here* during the opening reception on Saturday, March 1, and a panel discussion on books in a time of terror on Saturday, April 5, at noon.

**Yale University Art Gallery**

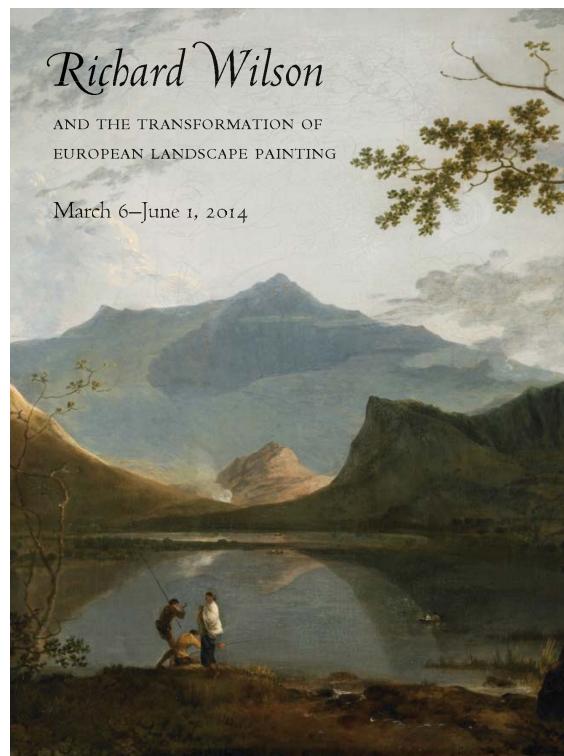
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Yale University Art Gallery, view of the American painting and sculpture galleries, 2012



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Richard Wilson, *Snowdon from Llyn Nantlle* (detail), ca. 1765–66, oil on canvas, National Museums Liverpool (Walker Art Gallery). Courtesy of National Museums Liverpool, Walker Art Gallery

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