

## Interview

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# The Symphony of Death

Adel Abidin in  
Conversation with  
Basak Senova

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In March, 2012, Al Akhbar<sup>[1]</sup> reported that at least 90 Iraqi teenagers with 'emo'<sup>[2]</sup> appearances were stoned to death by religious extremists in Baghdad.

Iraqi artist Adel Abidin, who resides in Helsinki, produced a new work in the summer of 2012 in response to these regrettable events. Entitled *Symphony*, it is an homage to these young people. The production took place in Amman and the work was recently presented in Istanbul at Arter.<sup>[3]</sup>

Abidin's works reflect on the cruel realities of socio-political situations in different geographies, utilising a refined aesthetic expression that creates frequently shocking paradoxes. Often oscillating between opposite poles, his works challenge viewers, enveloping them, trapping them as witnesses. *Symphony* was presented as a sculpture and video-based installation at Arter. The sculpture-based installation featured 90 small white doors in the walls, evoking a morgue; some of them were closed, while some were open. When the viewer pulled open the doors, small white statues of these young people, resting in peace, came into view on the sliding drawers.

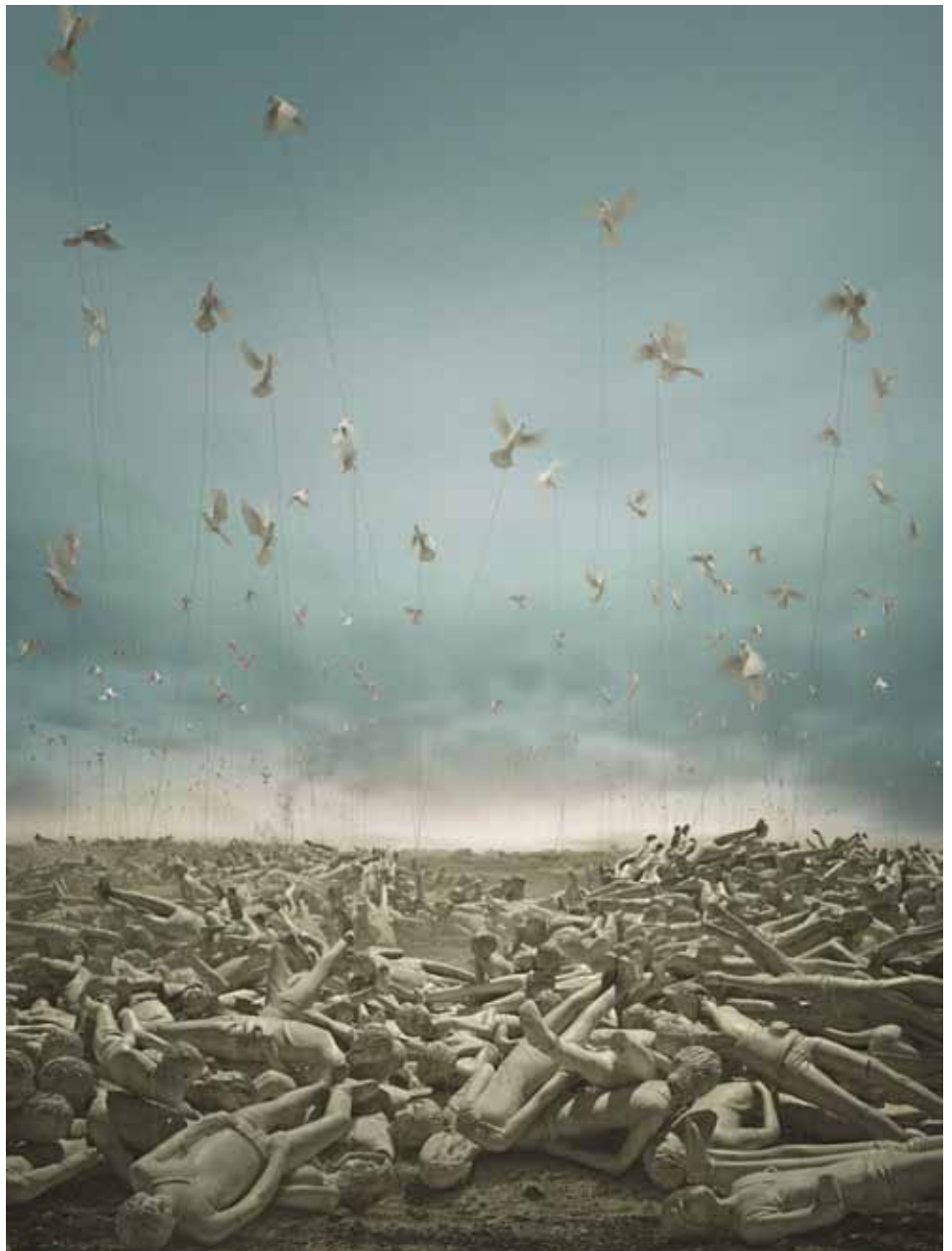
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[1] <http://english.al-akhbar.com/node/4990>

[2] <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Emo>

[3] The Move exhibition, curated by the author, opened on the 5th of October, 2012, at Arter, Istanbul and brought together three solo exhibitions by Adel Abidin, Rosa Barba and Runa Islam together. *Symphony* (2012) was presented in Adel Abidin's solo exhibition, titled beyond ...

Adel Abidin, still from  
Symphony, 2012,  
one channel video  
installation, 3'15", video  
still: ARTER, 2012.  
Courtesy of the artist  
and ARTER.



The video installation depicts the aftermath of the massacre of these young people, with statues from the installation standing in for their bodies. A thread connects each of the statues' mouths to the leg of a white dove. The flock of doves flaps their wings in vain, attempting to escape, but are anchored by the weight of death. The fluttering wings form a white cloud in the sky, registering the only movement in the work. The stillness of death is juxtaposed with the frantically flapping wings. The whistling cries and rustling wings of the doves create a soothing yet terrifying white noise. It is a symphony of death. In this interview with Basak Senova, Abidin tells of when he first heard about this terrible event and how it moved him to make a work in response to it.

**Basak Senova:** When and how did you learn about the killings of these young people?

**Adel Abidin:** I was with my friends at a bar in Helsinki, when the topic randomly came up in March 2012. It was very shocking.

**BS:** What did you feel when you first heard about it?

**AA:** I felt very sad. I am disgusted that there are people who discriminate against others according to their physical appearance, sexual orientation or for whatever other reason. I don't think that anyone on this earth has the right to judge and furthermore execute another person.

Adel Abidin, *Symphony*,  
2012, sculpture-based  
installation, installation  
view: ARTER, 2012.  
Photo by Gülay  
Yigitcan, Alikemal  
Karasu. Courtesy of the  
artist and ARTER.



**BS:** So, after hearing this news, you started to research the event.

**AA:** Yes, I was traumatised once I started reading further about the issue and watching interviews with some officials who were against the killings. What further shocked me was that the same officials were at the same time stating that 'emos' are bad for Iraqi society, as their ideology is imported from the west. This made me laugh, given their clearly westernised attire. Some clerics even suggested that 'emos' should be sent to court and put in jail.

**BS:** As I read it, underneath all the accusations leveled against emos by the Moral Police of adversely affecting the society through devil worshipping and bizarre appearances, was the implication that these kids were gay.

**AA:** It is true: it was not only about killing young people because they had bizarre appearances or because it was feared they were into devil worshipping. They were simply killed on the suspicion that they were gay.

**BS:** How do you deal with homophobia? Is this incident simply about the closed culture in Iraq or do you perceive it as symptomatic of rising intolerance across the entire globe?

**AA:** I believe that we should learn how to respect and accept other people for who they are and the choices they make. The young people who were stoned to death were honest about their choices and chose to express themselves through their appearance, and

were punished horribly. However, I think the reason for this cruel crime was not solely homophobia. The perpetrators were likely shaken by this confrontation with the 'other' and tried to eliminate it. As I see it, it is the path to fundamentalism. In reality, the issue is actually much more widespread than just this incident. If we look at the bigger picture, we will see other such stories in different parts of the world.

Adel Abidin, *Symphony*,  
2012, sculpture-based  
installation, installation  
view: ARTER, 2012.  
Photo by Gülay  
Yigitcan, Alikemal  
Karasu. Courtesy of the  
artist and ARTER.



**BS:** When exactly did you decide to produce a work about it?

**AA:** I immediately decided to do something about this, but didn't hit on the final idea right away. As I read and researched, the concept began to materialise.

**BS:** In the production of the work, you took two different routes: sculpture and video. While having their own characteristics and plot organisations, they complement each other. Nonetheless, the sculptures form the basis of these two works. How do you relate sculpture with the memory of these young people?

**AA:** I never claimed to be a sculptor, and haven't previously explored that field, specifically with realistic realisations. But I felt that I needed to make an iconic figure of the 'emos' and use them as symbols of every victim that has been discriminated against. It was a real challenge. However, what led me to do the sculpting myself was that I wanted to be connected with these figures personally, regardless of where they were from.

**BS:** For the sculptures, you applied a technique of carving and moulding gypsum, but you processed them in such a way that they look like mossy and cracked old stones. Is there a specific reason behind this aesthetic?

**AA:** These young people were not hanged or shot. They were stoned to death, their skulls actually smashed. I wanted to express this dimension in the work and therefore chose to make the sculptures

from cheap gypsum, as it has the colour and feel of stones.

**BS:** In the video, these sculptures depict a massacre.

**AA:** From the beginning, I was certain that I wanted to create the scene of a massacre, as a tribute. Then, I thought the right path for it was to try to convey the vision of the soul and the body in Sufism. Ibn Sina [the eleventh-century philosopher] posited that the soul is a free materialistic thing, belongs to no time and that there is nothing before it.

Left: Adel Abidin, Symphony, 2012, sculpture-based installation, installation view: ARTER, 2012. Photo by Gülay Yigitcan, Alikemal Karasu. Courtesy of the artist and ARTER.  
Right: Adel Abidin, Symphony, 2012, one channel video installation, 3'15", installation view ARTER, 2012. Photo by Gülay Yigitcan, Alikemal Karasu. Courtesy of the artist and ARTER.



**BS:** Could you elaborate the reference of Ibn Sina in the work further?

**AA:** Ibn Sina made an analogy between the soul and a dove in one of his poems. He believed that the spirit is ancient and eternal and it landed from the highest truth onto humans by force. This idea always attracted me. I always wondered: When the body is gone, what happens to the soul? Does it stay near the dead body; does it wait for something to happen? Does it vanish with it? Or, does it return to where it came from? In this imagined massacre, the doves are connected to the dead bodies with thin threads so they cannot fly away. Yet this experience is accompanied by a symphony, performed by the desperate fluttering wings of the doves.

**BS:** How do you read this symphony?

**AA:** The concept of death and the cruelty of discrimination form its notes. It is a symphony of people, countries, and hopes that have died. By taking its point of departure from the story of these young people, the work actually depicts a scene and sorrow that takes place in different locations and times in the world. However, how we react to this scene is either by standing still and watching it (just like the position I put the viewer who watches my work in) or expressing



our feelings in different and impulsive forms. So, this symphony expressed my feelings and reactions to this particular disaster that took place in my homeland. I tried to articulate my reaction with aesthetic elements; hence, I translated a tragic event as a poetic scene.

**Adel Abidin** (born in 1973 in Baghdad, Iraq) received a bachelor's degree in Painting from the Academy of Fine Arts in Baghdad in 2000 and a Master's degree in Media and New Media Art from the Academy of Fine Arts in Helsinki in 2005, focusing on installation, interactive installations, videos and photography. His multi-media practice explores the complex relationships between culture, politics, and identity. Using a sharp palette of irony and humor, Abidin gravitates towards social situations dealing with elusive experiences and cultural alienation, using his cross-cultural background to create a distinct visual language often entwined with sarcasm and paradox, while maintaining his ultimately humanistic approach. Abidin has exhibited in numerous group and solo exhibitions such as The Helsinki KIASMA Museum of Contemporary Art, The DA2 Domus Atrium 2002 Centre of Contemporary Art (Salamanca), Location One Gallery in New York City, the 17th Sydney Biennale, Aksanat (İstanbul), the 10th Sharjah Biennale, and 52nd Venice Biennale, where he represented Finland with *Abidin Travels*, a mock travel agency that promotes tourist trips to Baghdad. In 2011, he presented new work in a string of solo exhibitions at Darat al-Funun in Amman, Gallerie Anne de Villepoix in Paris, and Wharf: Centre d'Art Contemporain de Basse, Normandy. He also exhibited his critically-acclaimed video installation *Consumption of War* at the Iraqi Pavilion at the 54th Venice Biennale. He has held solo shows at L'Institut du Monde Arabe (Paris) and Kunsthalle Winterthur, Switzerland and has also been selected to participate in a group show in Tokyo at The Mori Art Museum entitled *Arab Express* in 2012.