

Title

Mohammed Sami: The Point 0

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Mohammed Sami: The Point 0

by Michael Kurtz • 05.04.2023

The paintings of Mohammed Sami (b.1984) shift and fragment under the weight of close scrutiny. In *The Praying Room* FIG.1 a thin wash of black paint creates an area of negative space outside an open door. But this wash bleeds into the shadow that the door casts inside the room, turning the interior inside out and infecting it with the darkness outside. The wall to the right of the door is suggested by a thin strip of light blue and green paint. Parallel to the picture plane and connecting to neither floor nor ceiling, it undermines any remaining sense of perspectival coherence. The room has the structural integrity of a cardboard stage set after a violent play: walls are scraped and scratched, shadows washed and sprayed, and the floor is built up with layers of scuffs and swirls to create a surface as worn as the threadbare carpet it represents.

Born in Baghdad, Sami grew up under Saddam Hussein's government and entered adulthood in the shadow of the United-States-led invasion of Iraq in 2003. He was granted asylum by Sweden in 2007, where he spent nine months in a refugee camp, and now lives in London. The impact of this tumultuous youth echoes throughout Sami's recent canvases, which are on display in his first institutional solo exhibition in the United Kingdom, at Camden Art Centre, London FIG.2.¹ Commonplace objects become sinister spectres in the desolate ruins he paints FIG.3, as memories of a violent past disrupt the relative safety of the present.



Fig. 1 *The Praying Room*, by Mohammed Sami. 2021. Mixed media on linen, 230 by 285 cm. (Courtesy the artist and Modern Art, London; exh. Camden Art

Centre, London).

Sami's works not only reflect personal experience, they also engage critically with the global visual culture that defined the so-called 'war on terror', in particular the emergence of a new type of image that W.J.T. Mitchell termed the 'biodigital picture' or 'biopicture'.² In his 2011 book *Cloning Terror: The War of Images, 9/11 to the Present*, Mitchell noted that human bodies – of hostages beheaded by terrorists, New Yorkers falling from the Twin Towers and leaders both venerated and executed – pervade the period's significant imagery, and that, with the rise of digital technology, such images took on unprecedented agency, behaving like living bodies themselves. They moved instantaneously across global networks between satellites and computers, televisions, phone screens and electronic billboards, with the colonising impulse of a virus. Some attained 'iconic status' and became 'operative forces in sociopolitical reality', able to manipulate people by instilling fear, raising political support, justifying violence on a vast scale and creating numbing distractions.³

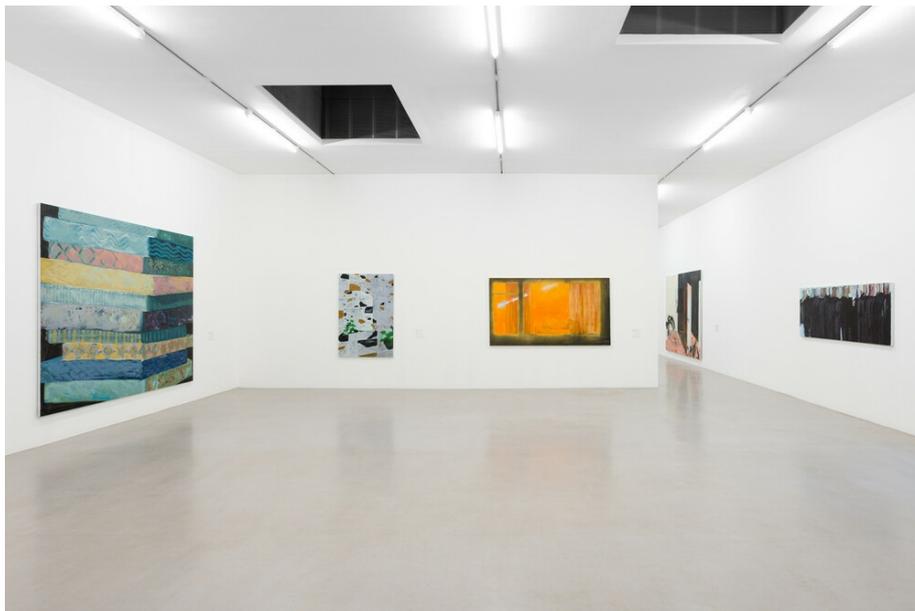


Fig. 2 Installation view of *Mohammed Sami: The Point Oat* at Camden Art Centre, London, 2023. (Courtesy the artist and Modern Art, London).

Sami finds ingenious ways to render in paint the shifting power relations between reality and representation. The rough, translucent cluster of brushstrokes in the lower right of the canvas in *Father Figure I* **FIG.4**, for example, appears in a mirror on the left as a house plant, its dark green leaves and white flowers in crisp, opaque detail. Meanwhile, the wilting specimen in the bottom right of *The Praying Room*, which is delicately painted with variegated patches of green, casts a menacing shadow on the opposite wall. Executed in spray paint, it takes the form of a spider: like a biopicture, it has a 'life of its own'.⁴ Just as biopictures invade our private spaces and thoughts, the phantom creature disturbs

the peace even in this isolated, windowless setting – a room for prayer according to the title. Luc Tuymans (b.1958) once advised Sami to ‘paint the sound of the bullet, not the bullet’ itself, but in the younger artist’s hands this distinction is unstable.⁵ Images, shadows and reflections appear more forceful than the physical things that precede them.



Fig. 3 *The Weeping Lines*, by Mohammed Sami. 2022. Mixed media on linen, 291 by 343 cm. (Courtesy the artist and Modern Art, London; exh. Camden Art Centre, London).

This is the vision of an artist who has lived in the crossfire of the ‘war of images’. Sami was recruited at a young age to paint propaganda for Saddam’s Ba’ath regime, including large-scale murals and likenesses of the dictator.⁶ It is perhaps unsurprising then that one of his primary subjects is the tyranny of biopictures. A military portrait, much like the Saddam icons that were compulsory in Iraqi homes under his rule, hangs on the wall in *Meditation Room* [FIG.5](#). The top of the image is obscured by shadow and a thick layer of black spray paint hides the subject’s face. The glossy substance causes the silhouette to shine when it catches the light and stands out on an otherwise matt surface. This concealment heightens rather than diminishes the portrait’s material presence, which demonstrates its stubborn power. Although the portrait is seemingly indestructible, the room around it crumbles. The image manages to survive in a space inhospitable to living, breathing bodies. The architecture appears to break under the strain of ideology; reality is dying at the hands of images.



Fig. 4 Installation view of *Mohammed Sami: The Point Oat* Camden Art Centre, London, 2023, showing, on the left, *Father Figure I*. 2019. Acrylic on linen, 160 by 105 cm. (Courtesy the artist and Modern Art, London).

The response to Sami's exhibition has thus far tended to focus on his oppression under the Saddam regime, often without mention of the 2003 invasion of Iraq.⁷ This emphasis – bolstered by frequent reference to his rise from the prescribed imagery of a propaganda painter to the expressive freedom of an international artist – implies a simplistic narrative of the artist's escape from the 'authoritarian Middle East' to the 'liberated West'. It is unfortunate that *Abu Ghraib* (2022), Sami's shadowy rendition of the notorious 'hooded man' photograph of an Iraqi torture victim in the United States military prison, is not included in the show, as it would have made plain the complicity of Western nations in the violence on display. Even his less explicit works, however, resist such reductive narratives.



Fig. 5 *Meditation Room*, by Mohammed Sami. 2022. Mixed media on linen, 280 by 230 cm. (Courtesy the artist and Modern Art, London; exh. Camden Art Centre, London).

Take, for example, the painting that gives the exhibition its title, which depicts a window from inside a plane. The trope of picture-as-window has a long history, and often has embodied a liberated, empowered form of spectatorship. The world is moulded into a perspective for the viewer, who is in a position of safety and authority above it. Indeed, as a symbol of global travel, of moving up and looking down, the plane window announces Sami's liberation: it is a fresh start, *The Point O* **FIG.6**. However, 'O' is a sign of nothingness as well as renewal. In the window, a landscape is suggested by a gradient of ochre, but this perfunctory attempt to

imply depth is betrayed by the simplicity and solidity of the paintwork. A conventional image of total vision becomes a frame without a picture – an anti-icon, flat and empty. Its blankness recalls Sami's memory of 'a perpetual sunset' created by the large amounts of sand lifted into the air around Baghdad as a result of the invasion, during which troops destroyed the city's natural shield of trees against the surrounding desert.⁸



Fig. 6 *The Point O*, by Mohammed Sami. 2020. Acrylic on linen, 170 by 120 cm. (Courtesy the artist and Modern Art, London; exh. Camden Art Centre, London).

Sami does not simply reflect on his difficult past or glorify his newfound freedom. He plays with pictorial convention, subverting the viewer's expectation of pleasing clarity and depth to articulate the ambivalence of the refugee experience: escape and loss, liberation and destruction are intertwined. He refuses to erect new idols in place of old, to participate in a conflict fought with sensationalist images. *Weeping Walls III* **FIG.7** is an eloquent statement of this refusal. Framing a pale patch of tattered wallpaper where a picture used to hang, Sami resists the imperative to embrace binary ideological thinking and quickly

cover the blank space with something new. Instead, he draws strength from a state of in-betweenness and evades the image-war. Rather than rejecting Saddam's propaganda for a false dream of freedom, he asks us to linger here, at 'the point 0' and wait for the dust to settle.



Fig. 7 *Weeping Walls III*, by Mohammed Sami. 2022. Mixed media on linen, 75.5 by 65 cm. (Courtesy the artist and Modern Art, London; exh. Camden Art Centre, London).

Exhibition details **Mohammed Sami: The Point 0**
Camden Art Centre, London
27th January–28th May 2023

About this book



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By Mohammed Sami
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Warr Pavilion, Bexhill-on-Sea, 2023
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Footnotes

- 1** Catalogue: *The Point 0*. By Mohammed Sami. 192 pp. incl. numerous col. ills. (Camden Art Centre, London, and De La Warr Pavilion, Bexhill-on-Sea, 2023), £30. ISBN 978-1-399-93943-0, unpaginated.
- 2** See W.J.T. Mitchell: *Cloning Terror: The War of Images, 9/11 to the Present*, Chicago 2011, esp. pp.69–111.
- 3** *Ibid.*, p.xvii.
- 4** *Ibid.*, p.104.
- 5** Luc Tuymans quoted in A. Sherlock: 'Houses in faraway winds', in Sami, *op. cit.* (note 1), n.p.
- 6** *Ibid.*, n.p.
- 7** See, for example, L. Cumming: 'Mohammed Sami: The Point 0', *The Observer* (29th January 2023), available at www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2023/jan/29/mohammed-sami-the-point-0-camden-arts-centre-london-review-giorgio-morandi-masterpieces-from-the-magnani-rocca-foundation-estorick-collection, accessed 4th April 2023; and T. Jeffreys: 'Mohammed Sami paints the traces of trauma', *Frieze* (9th February 2023), available at www.frieze.com/article/mohammed-sami-camden-2023-review, accessed 4th April 2023.
- 8** Sherlock, *op. cit.* (note 5), n.p.

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