



Al-Mutanabbi Street Starts Here Project, Fine Arts Gallery, George Mason University School of Art, Fairfax, Virginia Nikki Brugnoli Whipkey

Al-Mutanabbi Street Starts Here!

By Cathy DeForest, PhD

Collaboration is a perfect fit for printmakers. As a beginning printmaker, nothing gave me greater pleasure than learning from fellow printmakers at Sherry Smith Bell's Blue Sky Studio in Lafayette, California. My greatest collaborative experience to date is working with the *Al-Mutanabbi Street Starts Here! Coalition* begun in 2008.

Named after the famous classical Arab poet Abu at-Tayyib al-Mutanabbi (915-965 CE), al-Mutanabbi Street has been a thriving center of Baghdad's bookselling and publishing worlds for many years, a center for intellectual exchange. On March 5th, 2007, a car bomb exploded on al-Mutanabbi Street, killing 30, injuring 100. When the world did not notice this tragedy, Beau Beausoleil, a San Francisco poet and bookseller, formed a coalition of poets, artists, writers, printers, booksellers, and book lovers to create a response that is now in its ninth year.

Letterpress printer, Kathleen Walkup, facilitated the first call to letterpress printers to create broadsides marking the tragedy, which yielded 43 broadsides in 3 months. Following that, Beau worked with Sarah Bodman over the next two years and 130 broadsides were created, one for each person killed or wounded on that tragic day. Collaborating with a host of artists, librarians and museums, Beau organized 23 exhibits, starting in October of 2007 at the San Francisco Center for the Book, including five in Great Britain, two in Ireland, one in Canada and one in the Netherlands.

In the summer of 2012, a broadside exhibit of all 130 broadsides was held in Washington, D.C., organized by Casey Smith at the Corcoran School of the Arts & Design. The Pulitzer Prize winning journalist, Anthony Shadid, connected Beau to Dr. Saad Eskander, the Director of the Iraq National Library. After some correspondence, Dr. Saad Eskander welcomed one complete set of the 130 broadsides into the permanent archive of the Iraq National Library. An exhibit of broadsides was held in Baghdad in April of 2013. library.fau.edu/depts/spc/jaffecenter/collection/al-mutanabbi/index.php

Detroit to Baghdad: Al-Mutanabbi Street Starts Here Exhibition at the Arab American National Museum in Dearborn, Michigan



Felicia describes her process further, “When I asked Beau Beausoleil, to suggest a poem to work into my print for *Absence and Presence*, he sent me *Roots*, by Lamees Al-Ethari, an Iraqi poet largely in exile from her home. The poem speaks of Lamees’s painful loss and ties to her homeland, Iraq. In developing this relief print I interpreted the poem through the image, color and typography. The image is my drawing of barbed wire as roots, speaking to exile and war. The colors—yellow, khaki, mud brown, black—evoke the harsh desert, the brilliant sun, the dark earth and tangled roots. The multiple passes of the handset type obscure the language and challenge the viewer to decipher the message, to dig into the text and engage with the intensity of the poem. The intent is for the print to be gritty and dirty, to disturb.”

Dialog has been the driving motivation behind the presence of *Al-Mutanabbi Street Starts Here! Project* member, Bill Denham says it well. “Over the past eight years, through the production of over 600 works of art and through the more than 50 exhibitions and the more than 150 programs that have accompanied these exhibits, our purpose, those of us who have responded, has been to express solidarity with the Iraqi people and to take the lesson from the bombing of al-Mutanabbi Street to heart—the attack, born of cynicism and hatred and ignorance, was made not only on life and property but, more fundamentally, on ideas and on culture itself. This project enables artists to join hands with our Iraqi brothers and sisters, to join hands with all those with whom we have contact and to work always to forge new bonds between people, within and across cultures.”

Personally, I did not feel I could create my artist book, *Ink and Blood*, without getting to know some Iraqis. I traveled from my small rural town in Southern Oregon to San Francisco seeking Iraqi connections. I was introduced to Salam Talid, who graciously answered my questions, helped me download Arabic fonts and translated text for me. I know this tale could be told by many of the artists involved with the *Al-Mutanabbi Project*. Many project members collaborated with artists, writers, translators and librarians in order to create their works.

The use of social media has also promoted collaboration, where members and friends of the project connect through Facebook, YouTube postings, email newsletters and blogs.

Beau Beausoleil’s prolific emails to the coalition connect us to ongoing tragedies and triumphs in Iraq, the Middle East and North Africa. One of his emails inspired my print, *Our Immortal Soul*. Within twenty-four hours of the car bombing of the ancient bookseller street, ten poets stood in the rubble on top of buried body parts to deliver the *Manifesto of the Baghdad*



Al-Mutanabbi Street March 5, 2007, artist book, screenprint, by Art Hazelwood

Poets, written by Abdul-Zehra Zeki. I created solar plate intaglio etchings of the Arabic Manifesto and its sister English translation. To represent the rich culture defended by the Manifesto, I collaborated with John Sullivan of Logos Graphics to create relief and intaglio plates of ancient cuneiforms. To elevate the unfolding of the Manifesto with these ancient beginnings of written language, I made my print into an artist book, and encased it a portfolio bound by Sabina Nies, my favorite fine bookbinder.

The greatest achievement of this work however came about in a circuitous route. In 2015 I encouraged Hampshire College in Western Massachusetts to host the *Al-Mutanabbi Street Starts Here Project!*, where I participated in a panel discussion at the college, and met Claudia Lefko. Claudia had been working with Dr. Marzin Al-Jadiry, an oncologist in Baghdad since 2004. As a result of her connection, my book, *Our Immortal Soul*, was hand carried back to Baghdad to be delivered to the Manifesto poet, Abdul-Zehra Zeki. It took nine years for Abdul-Zehra to know that his words live on in the minds of those who see the coalition's printmaking exhibitions across three continents. Collaboration has wide circles.

My printmaking experience is a microcosm of this project. Hundreds of stories can be told of how poets, writers, printers, books artists, printmakers, film makers, booksellers and book lovers have woven their work together into a web of solidarity for the Iraqi people and the in defense of culture throughout the world.

Many present and past CSP members have contributed to the print project including Sherry Smith Bell, Art Hazelwood, Karen Kunc, Mary Laird, Katya McCulloch, Golbanou Moghaddos, Carrie Ann Plank, Felicia Rice and Kim Vanderheiden. Carrie Ann Plank inspired her students at the San Francisco Academy of Art from Saudi Arabia to contribute prints.

Art Hazelwood, long time activist and printmaking teacher, created an accordion screen printed artist book, *Al-Mutanabbi Street, March 5, 2007*, that depicts the joy of book lovers on the street and the carnage after the

bombing. His woodcut print, *Arise From the Flames*, is a compelling image of a man and woman holding a book. A flame arises behind them, reflecting the courage and grace of the Iraqi people despite all the suffering they have endured.

Art Hazelwood's contributions to the project, however, went beyond his artist book and print. As a US coordinator for *Absence and Presence*, he encouraged his students at the San Francisco Art Institute to contribute work, including those born in Iran and Turkey. Art also tapped long time activists to become involved in the project. Next, Art took the project into Katya McCulloch's printmaking class at San Quentin Prison. Their work with the men there, Jasper Alford, Khalifah Christensen, Dennis Crookes, Justus Asad Evans, Ronnie Goodman, Gary Harrell, Ray Ho, Frederick P. Tinsley, and Michael Williams, produced profoundly significant work. These men understand what it means to have their culture taken away and to live in a kind of war zone.

Beau is adamant with curators that this project is not an 'Art Exhibit' but a project of art in the service of ideas. He asks curators to step outside of their normal curatorial boundaries. Sometimes this leads to differences in how Beau and curators view collaboration. Beau does not want just a series of exhibits, isolated from the ideas of the project. In his words, "I'm not really comfortable with a phrase that has started to pop up in descriptions of exhibits about to open, as the work being part of a 'traveling exhibit.' To me each exhibit is unique and holds the possibility of reaching people in a way that we haven't yet. Traveling exhibit, sounds too much like a set piece, but each exhibit includes a different group of artists' books, broadsides, and now prints, so everything is made new again and again."

When an *Al-Mutanabbi project* member is involved in the curating of the project, collaboration of the finest kind is often the result. Two such exhibitions are debuted in 2016, one in Portland and one in Washington, D.C.

Bill Denham first became involved with the project when he letterpress printed the design and image CSP member Kim Vanderheiden created, *The Diameter of the*



Our Spirit Still Lives On, linocut by Ronnie Goodman



Mutanabbi St. Explosion 2007, linocut by Frederick Tinsley

Bomb. This piece is based on words by Yehuda Amichai and translated by Chana Bloch. Bill's involvement in the project is a model of collaboration. After moving to Portland from the San Francisco Bay Area, Bill hosted an event in Portland with Dr. Baher Butti, who moved to Portland from Iraq in 2009. Their first event in 2014 drew over 70 people, 35 of whom were Iraqi refugees. The evening was filled with English and Arabic readings, Iraqi music and art, and homemade Iraqi food. The highlight of the evening was the moving testimonies of each refugee.

Building on that success; the following year Bill and Dr. Butti hosted another event that drew a standing room only crowd, an estimated 60% of whom were Iraqi refugees now living in the Portland area.

The events of 2016 corresponds with the national printmaking Southern Graphics Conference in Portland. The exhibition of prints, broadsides and artists' books as well as multiple events begin March 5 and close May 15, 2016. To accomplish all this, Bill Denham and Dr. Butti built alliances with the Iraqi Student Club of Portland State University, the Iraqi Society of Oregon, the Portland Office of Neighborhood Involvement, The Middle East Studies Center at Portland State University and the World Affairs Council of Oregon.

In Bill Denham's words, "Each broadside, artists' book, poem, essay or print that we witness in the exhibit defies the darkness of cynicism, ignorance and hatred that resulted in the bombing of al-Mutanabbi Street and gives us a platform to build upon for the future of our community, which has become more diverse with the influx of 1,500 Iraqi refugees. The more ways we can experience each other, the more ways we can hear each other's stories, the more we will come to see our common humanity—an essential ingredient in our shrinking world. So we will build on the work of Beau Beausoleil and the *Al-Mutanabbi Street Starts Here! Coalition*, we will create replicable projects and events; lectures, slide shows, panel discussions, group conversations in the format of a 'World Café.' Our new focus is developing curricula for high school and college classes—that will continue the work of inclusion and community building for years to come."

Another outstanding model of collaboration was designed and coordinated by Helen Frederick in Washington, D.C. in 2016. Helen curated exhibitions and programs at twenty-five venues, including the George Mason University School of Art, the Corcoran School of Art & Design at The George Washington University, and the Smithsonian American Art/Portrait Gallery Library. Poets, translators, and critics gave readings, translation workshops, and talks, bringing the poetry of the Arab and Muslim worlds to D.C. area audiences. Artists, noted calligraphers, printmakers, and papermakers at George



Ink and Blood, artist book, intaglio and monoprints by Cathy DeForest

Mason University, gave hands-on workshops. A street festival was held for residents of Washington, D.C. in art making, poetry readings, music, food, and book exchanges, in celebration of the spirit of Baghdad's al-Mutanabbi Street.

In Helen Frederick's words, "As an artist, organizer, and professor at George Mason University's School of Art (SOA) I value the collaborative academic and professional community focused on advancing creativity through traditional and new media applied to varying social contexts. SOA is founded on the premise that art both reflects and inspires a creative society, improving the human condition while describing the world, both as it is and could be. I personally am immersed in this project to support freedom of expression through the arts, to help share and foster dialogue and positive ideas about the Middle East, and everywhere where the free exchange of ideas is threatened rather than embodied as a human right. This project will forge links with others across generations and locally, nationally and internationally, erase biases, and support voices that cannot be heard."

The power of collaboration and the collective voice is reflected again and again in the *Al-Mutanabbi Project*. It is our hope that the people of Iraq will feel seen and heard and that the world will value the beauty and depth of their culture.

My last words in my book, *Ink and Blood*, are:

Like the rivers that embrace Baghdad,
 The flow of culture endures;
 It is in our blood to have ink in our hands.

 There will always be someone inspired to
 communicate through words and images.
 There will always be someone drawing
 sustenance from art and knowledge.

 The Republic
 of the Imagination

 cannot

 be destroyed.

Contributors: Beau Beausoleil, Felicia Rice, Art Hazelwood, Bill Denham, Kim Vanderheiden and Helen Frederick.

For a full list of exhibitions see:
al-mutanabbistreetstartshere-boston.com
sfc.org/exhibitionsabsence-and-presence

Contact Beau Beausoleil at overlandbooks@earthlink.net

To join the printmaking project, *Absence and Presence*, contact Cathy DeForest at literarybridge@gmail.com.