



Birds of peace and prey

Once Saddam Hussein's portrait painter, Samir Khursid's artwork transcends the violence of his homeland and reflects hope for peace

BY SUE ZALOKAR
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According to the United Nation agency there are 45 million displaced people in the world, and more than 15 million of those people are refugees. Among them is Samir Khursid, an Iraqi-born painter and a political refugee lending his vision to Portland's ever-broadening art scene.

One of 11 children, he spent his childhood under the reign of Saddam Hussein. Khursid has a gentle nature and appears much younger than his 34 years. When he begins to tell you his story, though, he speaks with the wisdom of experiences far beyond his age. His eyes reflect with equal parts sadness and joy.

Khursid was ordered to paint Saddam Hussein portrait during his mandatory military service. He would go on to paint more than 400 portraits of Hussein. It was mandatory for every household and business to display a portrait of the late dictator. One did not want to be caught without a portrait. Khursid said one didn't even want to be caught with an unflattering portrait, lest you bring trouble to your family.

After Hussein's ouster, Khursid fled his homeland for Turkey out of fear for his life. He had received threats by the Iraqi opposition who did not favor some of the portraits he was painting for Americans on the Kirkuk Air Base. Two years ago he came to the United States.

Today, Khursid lives as a kind of painter in residency at the Falcon Art Community.

His show, "Birds of Freedom" opens tonight, Sept. 27, from 6:30 p.m. to 10 p.m. at the Falcon Art Community 5415 N. Albina Ave. Portland) I went to visit him in his studio and had the chance to speak to him in English and through the help of Turkish-speaking interpreter, Nesteren Demirdag.

Sue Zalokar: When did you start painting?

Samir Khursid: When I started knowing the world.

S.Z.: What is the first memory of a painting or drawing you did?

S.K.: When I opened my eyes, there was the war between Iraq and Iran. I come from a very poor family. There are no painters in my family. I have no idea where (my ability to paint) came from. I started drawing the birds. We had birds – little finches and love birds. I started drawing those. On the TV I would see the planes and then the bombings, so somehow I was affected and I started drawing.

When I was very young, my father went to the war to fight. I started using painting and drawing as a toy because we didn't have enough money to get toys.

I used to steal my sister's pencils and paper because she went to school. From the paper, I started moving onto the walls and floors.

Once a year, the carpets from the walls would come down and the walls would be

repainted. That's when my mother would find the drawings that I'd done behind the carpets. The story follows – in a very typical Turkish or Arab mother way – she throws her slipper at me. (laughter) So, I would get in trouble.

Because my father was in the war and we were short on money, my mother would make little nuts and things, sunflower, pumpkin or watermelon seeds – she would roast them. My siblings and I, we would take the seeds to the soccer stadium and sell them there, as well as some ice cream that my mother would make.

Every time, I would come back home and I would continue to draw. I don't really know why it is such a strong feeling that it calls me. And now I call to it as well.

S.Z.: I have seen and read about a canvas – one of the few possessions you brought with you to Portland. It is an unfinished painting of your parents. Have you finished the painting?

S.K.: I wish I could finish it. When I finish it, I have to take it to them. But it makes me sad, so I cannot finish it.

S.Z.: Do you have contact with any of your family?

S.K.: Yes. About once a month, we Skype or talk over the phone.

S.Z.: Did I understand you right earlier, they are coming to see you?

S.K.: In 2008, they came to Turkey. It was the seventh month, in July. That visit was when I saw the scars on my brother's back. We were changing shirts and I saw the scar. That was when I learned that six months before, they tried to kill my brother thinking that he was me.

S.Z.: Do think you will ever return to Iraq?

S.K.: Maybe Iraq will get better in 30 years. In 30 years, I don't know if I'm going to be in this world or not.

S.Z.: How many portraits have you painted of Saddam Hussein?

S.K.: It's easily 400 portraits. Even more. I was doing that in the military and then also I was doing it on the side as well.

S.Z.: What were your impressions of him?

S.K.: We were taught that Saddam was our father. We opened our eyes to the world and then on TV we saw him and we were told, "He's your father." So, we were always calling him Papa Saddam. After a while I started wondering, "Where's my real father?" And I was told he was in the war, fighting.

Saddam was good for some people and bad for some people. Maybe if it wasn't for Saddam, I wouldn't have been an artist. If I didn't fear him, maybe I wouldn't have gotten better. If you don't get a painting right, you could get executed. You cannot

make any mistakes with Saddam.

S.Z.: Did you ever see him?

S.K.: No. You are never able to see him. We would paint him from photographs and then the people who are close to him, would get it as a present from him. They would take it to him and show it to him.

Every business, every household had to have a Saddam painting, so people would buy different sizes. So people from (Saddam's) party, when they go into a business, they look to see if there is a Saddam painting. And if there isn't, that is when you could get into trouble.

S.Z.: What was it like when the U.S. invaded?

S.K.: I finished my military service in 2000 and then I went to Baghdad to work for three years. I would paint backgrounds and whatever would sell. A month before the Americans came, Baghdad started getting really confusing and chaotic. I went

back home to be with my family. I worked at home for a little bit. Then when the invasion started, first my city fell and then Saddam was caught. After that, I went back to Baghdad to work, but at that time nobody was buying paintings. Then I started working for the Americans and that's when my life got better.

S.Z.: Later you would paint portraits of U.S. soldiers and their families, but that was not looked on favorably by the Iraqi opposition and your life took another intense turn. Tell me about the days before you fled to Turkey.

S.K.: Financially, my life changed after I started painting

Americans. I was being watched by the opposition so I lost my freedom, because wherever we went, they would be watching. If (members of the opposition) get the opportunity, they will shoot you.

My siblings weren't able to work, so I was able to help my family a lot. The money I made painting for Americans helped to pay for my brothers and sister's university educations.

I wasn't thinking about death, but I could

have easily died.

S.Z.: How long did you stay at the airbase?

S.K.: Two years. From 2004 to 2006. By then, it had gotten much more serious. My family was under a lot of threat. It had come to the point where either get you, or someone from your family.

S.Z.: What are your thoughts about the possible strike by the U.S. on Syria?

S.K.: Even if the U.S. doesn't bomb them, they are bombing themselves.

The thing that should be happening, is happening. Now everyone in the Arab countries are having their struggle. They are all about to go through the same thing one by one.

What is going on in Syria right now, we lived it in Iraq in the '90s. Saddam bombed us. We had to hide under the ground – 300 people in a room. We had a lot of hunger. Everything they are going through, we had to go through.

I am more on the side of supporting the U.S. in bombing because there is a lot of people, people like me who are there, in Syria who want their freedom.

The egg needs to be broken for the chicks to come out – to hatch. The change will not come from one person, it will come from the universe. It will come from the nature of everyone wishing the same thing. Change will come from the land because the people are



Left, Samir Khursid explains the story behind his painting, "D", which involves three birds fighting over a piece of bread, amid a landscape of nature and humanity. Far left, Samir in front of one of his paintings in his studio at the Falcon Art Community.

PHOTOS BY SUE ZALOKAR

carrying that message to nature and then war erupts and the geography changes and that will bring freedom to people. Like it happened in Europe. Like it happened in the Soviet nations.

S.Z.: There must be both good and bad as

S.Z.: The title of your show is "Birds of Freedom." What is the significance of this theme?

S.K.: Freedom isn't just for birds that fly. Everybody wants their freedom. Everybody is struggling to gain their freedom. Humans and every living being is struggling to gain their freedom.

I wish we all had the freedom to be able to see what's happening in the world, just like when the birds fly in the sky and look down on the earth.

When I was in Turkey and even now, my mother says every time I speak with her, she would say, "I wish I was a bird. I would just fly from here and land next to you and see how you are."

After years and years of my mother saying that, it began to appear in my paintings.

S.Z.: Do you feel that you are free?

S.K.: (After a period of silent thought.) My art is with me now. I can make art, but I still don't have the language freedom. I still don't have the freedom to go around this country or to other countries. I still don't have my freedom as a person. I am as free as I can be through my art. And I owe this to you.

S.Z.: To me?

S.K.: To Americans, because you value what I do. You have opened the door for me and you let me do my art as much as I want to.

S.Z.: Tell me about the contrast of dark and light in your work. (Khursid leads us to the painting called, "D" that hangs in the hallway outside his studio at the Falcon Art Community).

S.K.: Maybe the answer to your question about the light and the dark might be in here. This is Saddam (he gestures to one of three birds at the center of the painting who are fighting over a piece of bread).

There is a piece of bread and the birds are eating it. Those three birds in the center represent all of the dictators. We made Saddam a dictator, we applauded him. Whatever he said, we clapped. Our silence made him a dictator. Saddam was just another human being, like me.

After he saw our weakness, he chained us. We had the key to the lock, but we still needed help. The U.S. helped us to get the key into the lock. That is how we unchained ourselves and got rid of Saddam.

These three birds could share this bread – there is enough for three of them – but the strong bird is attacking the weaker birds. They are selfish, so their ideas start changing and they take away from the weaker ones, they take more than their share.

If there is a war in the world, it is because there is selfishness and people don't want to share things with others.