

ATHIER

MAN
OF
WAR

17 FEB – 29 MAR 2014





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EOA.PROJECTS
in partnership with
Ayyam Gallery

ATHIER: MAN OF WAR

EOA.Projects and Ayyam Gallery are proud to present Man of War, the first UK solo exhibition of paintings, drawings and prints by London-based Iraqi-British artist, Athier.

Known for a style that draws on a range of influences, from European Modernism to contemporary Iraqi art, Athier has produced a striking new body of work that explores the circumstances in which humans have become detached from man-made destruction, themes with profound resonance given recent Iraqi history.

Athier left Iraq before the first Gulf War in 1990 and has divided his life since then between London and Paris. His works reflect this personal history, incorporating Mesopotamian and Assyrian symbolism, figurative abstraction and Islamic geometry. Elsewhere there are echoes of a pre-revolutionary Iraq, testament to the powerful and enduring sense of exile and nostalgia visible in much of Athier's work.

The central symbol throughout this new series of works is the Portuguese Man of War, a highly sophisticated 'colonial' organism, often mistaken for a jellyfish, which is made up of many separate parts incapable of independent survival. The creature survives with no central brain nor capacity for what we might call 'thought'. Yet it has perfected the ability to hunt, kill and destroy. Like a jellyfish, its movement appears intuitive: its abiotic form collapses inwards and pushes outwards, creating the rhythmic expansion and release that propels it through the water. In Athier's paintings, this fluid movement is broken up and distorted by a rigid structure that traps a diversity of life within its trailing tentacles. This marine life-form is a figurative representation of Athier's experience of watching warfare in the Middle East from his position of exile in the West. His dense compositions, replete with human teeth, hands, eyes and pockets of blood cells, echo both the kinetic energy of an explosion and the organic form of the Man of War, always on the move, homing in on its target stealthily and with precision.

The publication was produced on the occasion of the exhibition Man of War by Athier in Edge of Arabia Gallery, London, 17 February – 29 March 2014

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www.edgeofarabia.com



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DISTANCE AND DISSONANCE:

Athier in conversation with Sara Raza

Athier met independent curator and ArtAsiaPacific regional editor Sara Raza in London in January 2014 to discuss his practice and first UK exhibition.

SR: Man of War is your first solo exhibition in London. What I find interesting is that you fuse references to real-life conflict and difference with the abstract idea of marine life. What informed this new body of work?

A: I have always been interested in animals as symbols, especially those we choose to represent human behaviour. My previous body of work explored the symbol of the eagle and its association with power and national strength. For these new works, I have used marine life to represent air warfare, which has become a method of detached and remote destruction.

SR: That's an interesting connection to make within your art practice, wouldn't you say?

A: For me, modern warfare feels like a wildlife documentary. Looking on at animals attacking their prey, you identify more and more with the victim, while the offensive forces feel less and less human. So this brings me back to the current symbol in my work of the jellyfish, which makes a direct parallel with the unmanned fighter drone. So pure from above yet so destructive on the ground.

SR: Tell me more about the wider significance of the jellyfish metaphor within this new body of work.

A: Jellyfish have been evolving side by side with the rest of the world for 600 million years. They serenely but actively hunt and kill – but they have no brain. Questioning the idea of destruction without intention led me to question what it means to apply destruction remotely. Killing and destruction used to be carried out through manned actions. Hammers, daggers, even bullets travelled from human hand, via a human brain, to the victim. But the more and more detached the aggressor has become, the more machines look to me like the

jellyfish. In the wider context, I am essentially terrified of a world where culpability is replaced with efficiency.

SR: Your work can be read as a visual commentary on the current social and political condition of your native Iraq. However, what role does Iraq's rich art historical legacy play within your artistic practice?

A: It has definitely played multiple roles in my practice. I have been around Iraqi art from a young age, as my mother, Maysaloun Faraj, as well as being a painter and sculptor, was an avid collector and supporter of Iraqi painters and an advocate of the importance of Iraqi painters' maintaining and contributing to a national artistic identity. For example, colour has always been important to how I work. I remember, when I was very young, speaking to the Iraqi artist Hamid Al Attar, who uses brutal scenes of entrapment, fear and chaos in his work, yet describes his vivid, bright colours as poisonous rather than optimistic. By holding onto that vibrancy, however dark the subject matter is, the work itself will always glimmer with hope portrayed through its brilliant colours. I think where Iraqi modernism is at its most inspiring is when it borrows not only from the world around it, but from the rich Mesopotamian history which informs not only the past, but also the present.

SR: How do you feel your practice has evolved in relation to the historical events that have unfolded in Iraq?

A: In a way, Iraq has always been more of a concept than a geographical place for me. I am attached to it in a primal, gravitational way, where I feel my centre is defined by it, and my blood is coloured by it. Having lived away for so long, I have often idealised the land and its politics. I am constantly in turmoil, trying to come to terms with the continued carnage in the aftermath of the occupation and the violence that has arisen with the power struggles of the current government. But on the other hand, I am extremely positive about a bright future for the country. My father and brother are both prominent architects involved in the rebuilding of Iraq and I am optimistic about the country's opportunity to gain stability and look towards an independent future.

SR: Your international travel and the fact you have established studios in multiple cities such as London, Istanbul, Paris and Beirut also seems to have been influential to your practice. How does this experience affect your artwork?

A: My love of travel started with understanding the methodology of the father of the modern Iraqi art movement, Jawed Selim (1919 – 1961). For Selim's style to become as fluent and unique as it was, he studied in London, Paris and Rome in the mid-20th century before returning to Baghdad. This allowed him to absorb from the vibrant movements unfolding in Europe at the time, and re-appropriate them with fresh eyes to form a proud and new aesthetic borrowing from the old, the current, and the new.

SR: It is interesting how influential Iraqi artists like Selim have been in shaping modernist Arab art and also how internationally informed their practice was – this shatters many misconceptions concerning how artistic modernism evolved in Iraq, wouldn't you agree?

A: Absolutely. Iraq was a highly artistically and intellectually sophisticated country, influenced by Ottoman and Persian cultural and linguistic tropes and in many ways highly cosmopolitan. Iraqi artists travelled extensively and I have always aspired to that. I guess in a romantic way, setting up studios in different cities allows the inspiration of your surroundings to diffuse more immediately into your work. My love of the 20th-century Parisian modernist art movement has played a large role in my own practice. I have a studio in Paris and I will always be partly rooted there.

SR: I noticed that teaching has also been an important element in your practice. How is imparting your knowledge as a teacher important to you as an artist?

A: I have taught in a variety of settings, from British schools all the way to Palestinian refugee camps, and I am passionate about actively encouraging creativity. Specifically in the more deprived camps such as Sabra and Shatila in Beirut, I found the group mentality involved in mural work to be very important to the students' sense of their own capabilities. There are so many aspects of working with children as an artist that go beyond the production of visual artwork to the very notion of self expression, for which very often children do not feel they have a platform. Especially now, where the West has such negative connotations for children in the Middle East, and vice versa, education and especially art education is a key tool in helping to confront this – and I would like to remain an active part of this.



MAN OF WAR

PAINTINGS



Man of War I, 2013
Acrylic on canvas
187x284 cm



Man of War II, 2013
Acrylic on canvas
189x247 cm





Man of War V, 2013
Acrylic on canvas
195 x 212 cm



Man of War VI, 2013
Acrylic on canvas
195 x 212 cm



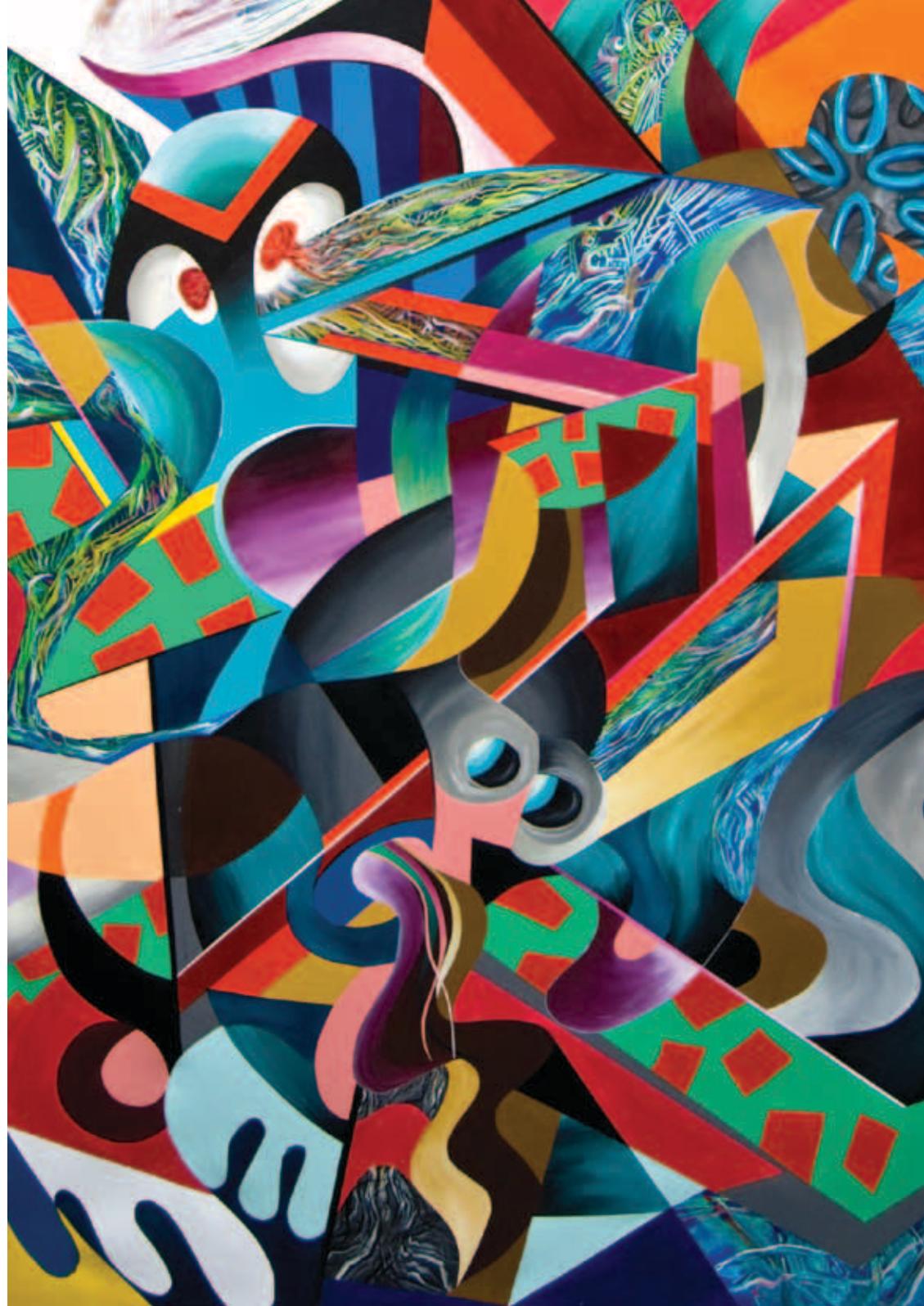
Man of War IX, 2013
Acrylic on canvas
175 x 190 cm



Man of War III, 2013
Acrylic on canvas
205 x 237 cm



Man of War IV, 2013
Acrylic on canvas
195 x 212 cm





Man of War VII (Diptych), 2013
Acrylic on canvas
530 x 205 cm

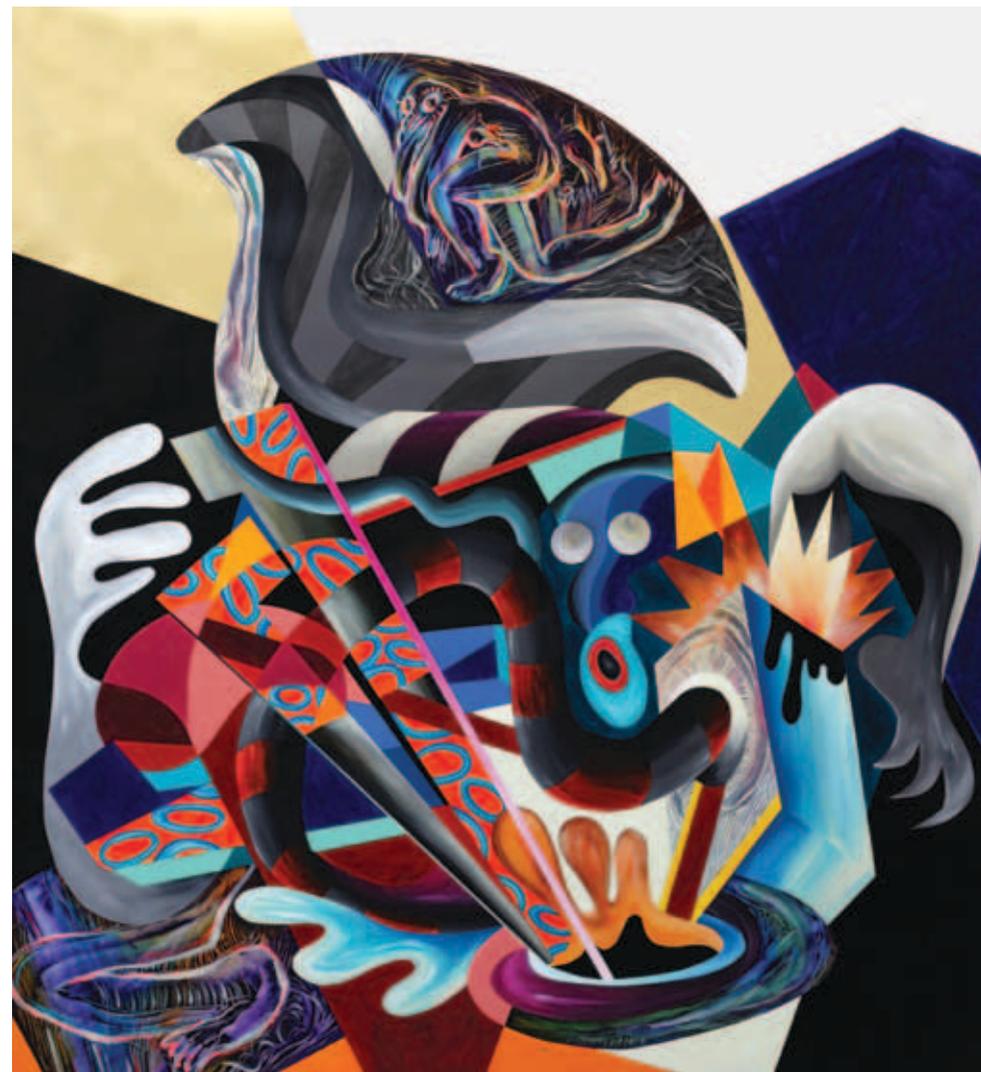


Man of War XI, 2013
Acrylic on canvas
175 x 190 cm





Man of War X, 2013
Acrylic on canvas
175 x 190 cm



Man of War VIII, 2013
Acrylic on canvas
173 x 190 cm



Man of War XII, 2013
Acrylic on canvas
175 x 190 cm



Man of War XIII, 2013
Acrylic on canvas
175 x 190 cm



Man of War XIV, 2013
Acrylic on canvas
175 x 190 cm





MAN OF WAR

DRAWINGS



Man of War Study II, 2013
Graphite on paper
80 x 60 cm



Man of War Study, 2013
Graphite on paper
60 x 80 cm



MAN OF WAR

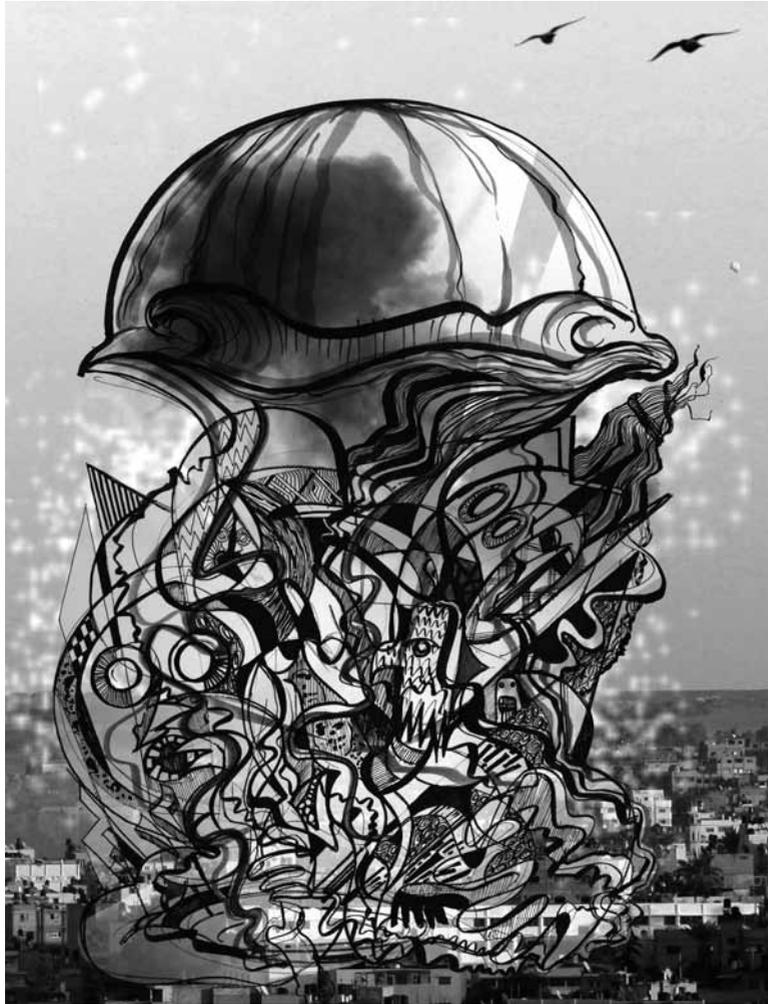
EDITIONS



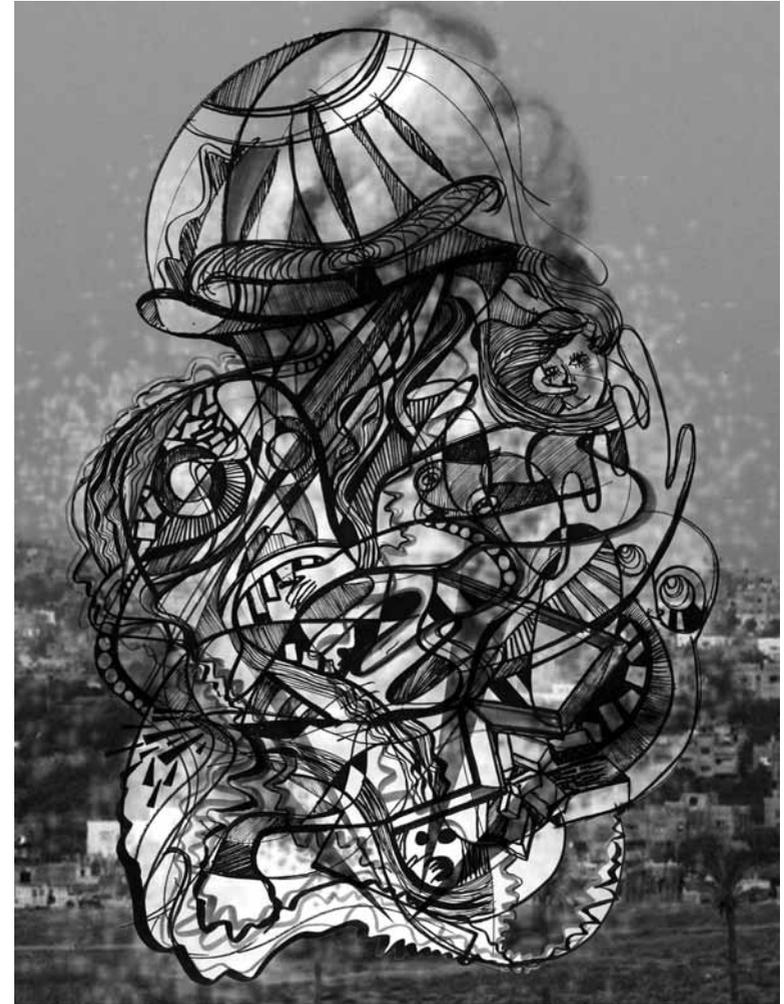
Man of War I (Edition), 2013
Archival print on cotton paper
Edition of 8
62 x 50 cm



Man of War II (Edition), 2013
Archival print on cotton paper
Edition of 8
62 x 50 cm



Man of War III (Edition), 2013
Archival print on cotton paper
Edition of 8
62 x 50 cm



Man of War IV (Edition), 2013
Archival print on cotton paper
Edition of 8
62 x 50 cm



Man of War V (Edition), 2013
Archival print on cotton paper
Edition of 8
62 x 50 cm



Man of War VI (Edition), 2013
Archival print on cotton paper
Edition of 8
62 x 50 cm



MAN OF WAR

DESTROY A LIE
EDITIONS



Destroy a Lie III, 2013
Silkscreen print
Edition of 25
137 x 100 cm



Destroy a Lie V, 2013
Silkscreen print
Edition of 25
137 x 100 cm



Destroy a Lie II, 2013
Silkscreen print
Edition of 25
137 x 100 cm



Destroy a Lie IV, 2013
Silkscreen print
Edition of 25
137 x 100 cm



Destroy a Lie VI, 2013
Silkscreen print
Edition of 25
137 x 100 cm



Destroy a Lie I, 2013
Silkscreen print
Edition of 25
100 x 137 cm

