

1 Iraqi Peace Song by Laurie Alpert

THE PHOENIX OF BAGHDAD

2 Different Shades in the Sand by Frans Baake





3 *Al-Mutanabbi Before and After* by Sabina-Mariana Stan

In 2007 a car bomb destroyed a Baghdad Street. Sarah Bodman reveals how the attack on the heart of this war-torn city's literary community has led to an extraordinary international campaign and a project that is uniting book artists across the world to create An Inventory of Al-Mutanabbi Street to make us think about the tragedy

On 5 March 2007 a car bomb was exploded on Al-Mutanabbi Street in Baghdad, the street of booksellers and the centre of the city's literary community. In one moment of the history of this busy street of shops, outdoor bookstalls and cafes, more than 30 people were killed and more than 100 were wounded.

In San Francisco, the poet and bookseller Beau Beausoleil read about the explosion in his morning newspaper. He was shocked that a community focused on the printed page, and the sharing of knowledge had been so mercilessly attacked. His protest began with a call to poets, printers, writers and artists who value freedom of expression in the printed page. This grew into the Al-Mutanabbi Street Broadside Project – 130 letterpress printed broadsides created by writers and artists; 130 to mark the dead and to raise awareness of, and discussion about, what was lost in the street. Artists, writers and staff at institutions have joined in around the world, organising events and exhibitions of broadsides with readings, talks and panel discussion events that have raised over £3,000 for Médecins Sans Frontières. An anthology of writing, *Al-Mutanabbi Street Starts Here*, has also been recently published by PM Press in the US, and

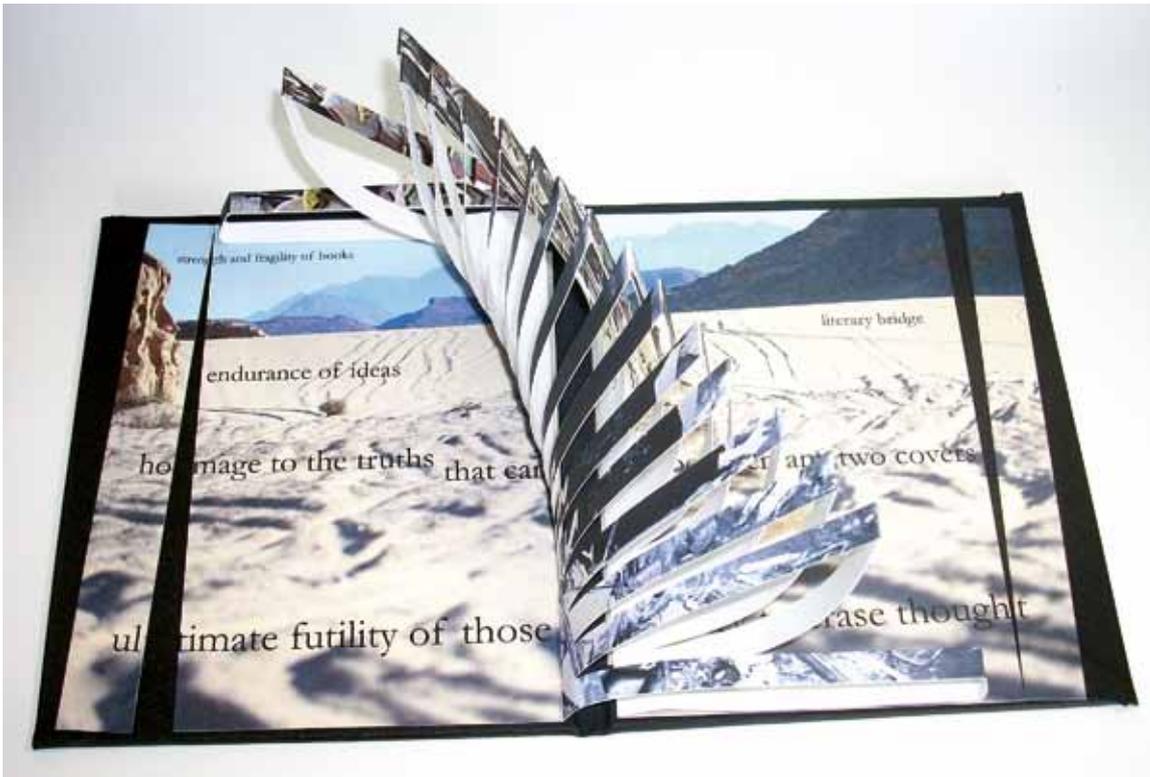
a complete set of 130 broadsides is on its way to the Iraq National Library.

In August 2010 Beausoleil and I launched a new international call to book artists to join *An Inventory of Al-Mutanabbi Street*. Considering what was lost that day in a street full of books, he believed that book artists could assemble an inventory of works that would continue to talk to the world about Al-Mutanabbi Street.

We put out calls on websites and in journals and asked artists we knew to join us. They in turn asked other artists, and on it went. Our original hope to gather 130 artists, the same number as joined the broadsides project, was soon exceeded. Before we knew it, we had 260 artists signed up. Each was asked to make three books within a year of joining; two for touring exhibitions and one for the Iraq National Library, which will eventually house a complete set of all the books. The artists could make books in any format, from hand-printed editions, to small photocopied pamphlets, altered books, miniature books, paperbacks, text- or image-based works. The only rules were that these books should remember Al-Mutanabbi Street, and had to be capable of being packed for travel.

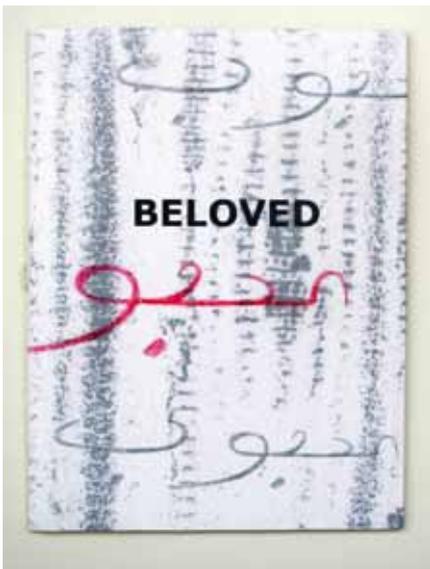
Until December this year artists will be sending their books from Argentina, Australia, Belgium, Canada, Denmark, France, Germany, Iran, Iraq, Ireland, Italy, Lithuania, Malta,

4



4
March 5th, 2007
Al-Mutanabbi
Street by Alex
Apella
 5
Beloved Bashir
by Noëlle
Griffiths
 6
Monday 2012 by
Kathleen
O'Connell

5



6

The Netherlands, Peru, Poland, Romania, Spain, South Korea, Switzerland, Thailand, Turkey, the UK and the US. Whether they are created through hope or protest, love or anger, sorrow or contemplation, the books are a both a lament for what is lost, and a testament to the power of the printed page.

The Inventory of Al-Mutanabbi Street tour will launch with three exhibitions from February 2013. Here is a preview of some of the books that have arrived so far. As you will see, no two are alike, but they are all bound together in their response to Al-Mutanabbi Street.

The Iraqi Bookseller by Laurie Szujewska was inspired by “The Bookseller’s Story Ending Much too Soon”, an article written by Anthony Shadid for the *Washington Post Foreign Service* on 12 March 2007. Shadid’s story was a personal account of the

Al-Mutanabbi Street bombing told through a reminiscence of his friendship with Mohammed Hayawi, a bookseller on the street. Letterpress printed at Szujewska’s Ensatina Press, California, it was completed in February 2012.

Redemption, by Lizanne van Essen, from the UK, is constructed from intricately cut and folded paper and was completed in October 2011. She explains that it unfolds as a “timeline – leading from despair to hope, from memory to anticipation. The black and red of the hurt and anarchy of the explosion mix with the white of peace, healing and future tranquillity, while the green of the doves’ eyes completes the colours of the Iraqi flag – the symbol of the nation.”

Iraqi Peace Song, by Laurie Alpert from the US, was completed last December. “In 2007, I photographed a sculpture

in the Golan Heights of a kneeling soldier pointing a gun toward Syria. This has become a haunting motif in my work," he says. "The text is from the poetry of Al-Mutanabbi. I've included my mother's music as a symbol of beauty and hope amid the ongoing violence and tension in that part of the world. *Iraqi Peace Song* is a lullaby featuring cello and choir and is sung in both English and Arabic. I hope that soon I will no longer feel compelled to include the kneeling soldier from the Golan Heights in my work."

Monday 2012 by Kathleen O'Connell from Peru was completed in July this year. She linked two tragedies that occurred on the same day: "The unsettling shock of a car bombing: it was a Monday on Al-Mutanabbi street. It was an act of violence and terror. The unsettling shock of a bicycle crash: it was a Monday in Murfreesboro, Tennessee. It was an accident. I witnessed the bicycle accident, hearing the man utter an animal groan, seeing the blood pooling in his ear, watching his confusion unfold, waiting for the ambulance to come. It was horrible to see this human hurt. In my mind this event replayed, multiplying and measuring itself. How much more was the impact of the car bomb on Al-Mutanabbi Street?"

Beloved Bashir by Noëlle Griffiths (Hafod Press, UK) was completed back in February 2011. "The fictional character of Zariya writes notes to Bashir between 2002 and 2007 asking him to buy specific books and magazines from Al-Mutanabbi Street, creating an insight into the thoughts of a woman who has lived through the social and political changes of Baghdad."

Seven Voyages by Michael Pisano (Memory Press, US) was completed in July this year. "Books and stories allow us to travel to distant and exotic lands in our imagination, sharing universal legends that connect cultures and enrich humanity," he explains. This book was inspired by the story of *Sinbad the Sailor*. Pisano completed the illustrations in pen and ink, while the book was designed and bound by Maria G Pisano. "It's in honour of the booksellers and other Iraqi citizens killed in the bombing of Al-Mutanabbi Street," he says.

Al-Mutanabbi Before and After by Romanian artist Sabina-Mariana Stan was also completed in July. It is a collaged and painted series of three individual books. "This is my first impression of what happened on Al-Mutanabbi Street in 2007 and is a story told in images of the street before and after the attack," she says.

Australian Tim Mosely completed his *3 books of blue* in February 2012. He used his favourite childhood books to remind us that what you learn from books as a child will stay with you as an adult: "Because of books I remember that tigers and kangaroos – although worlds apart – can come together under one blue."

In March this year Mary McCarthy and Shirley Veenema completed *Al-Mutanabbi Street* in the US. They describe this as: "A circular narrative of destruction and rebirth, entered by either cover. Panoramas of place and events capture the irrepressible nature of words, thoughts, and ideas."

Pile of Bricks by Catherine Cartwright in the UK was completed in October 2011. It was inspired by Julie Bruck's poem *March 9, 2007 Al-Mutanabbi Street, Baghdad*. She recalls "paring down the poem to the words that describe the objects found by the man who searches for his teenage son in the bombed devastation of Al-Mutanabbi Street. The words of the objects; pink plastic flower, a pair of glasses, and a book with crisp,



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Pile of Bricks by
Catherine Cartwright



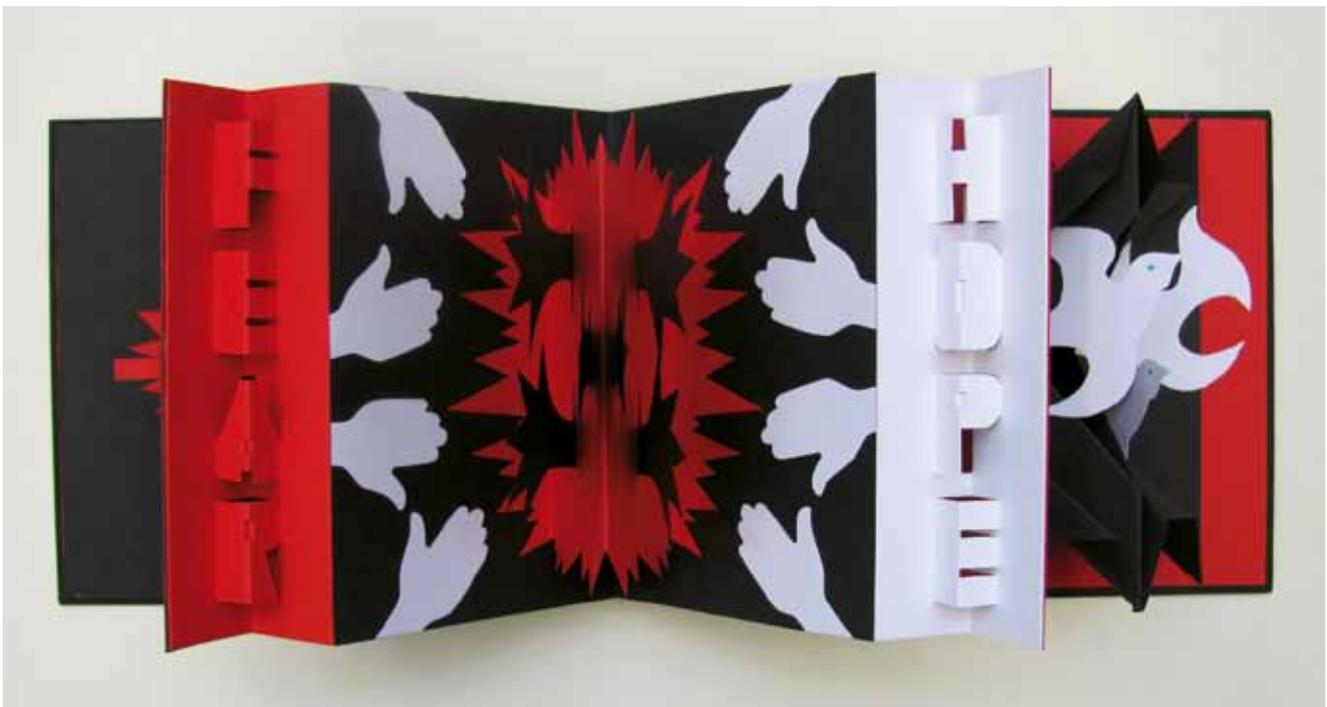
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Seven Voyages by
Michael Pisano
9
The Iraqi Bookseller
by Laurie Szujewska
10
Redemption by
Lizanne van Essen

8



All 260 artists' books created for this project will be on show at The Cambridge Arts Council, Cambridge, Massachusetts, US, from February-July 2013; The John Rylands Library, Manchester, UK, from 6 February - 29 July 2013, and the Center for Book Arts, New York City, New York, 10 July - 14 September 2013. Further exhibitions will run throughout 2013 and 2014. For events listings visit www.al-mutanabbistreetstartshere-boston.com Artists' quotes in this text are taken from their project statements that accompany the images of their books in the online gallery at www.bookarts.uwe.ac.uk/mutanmain12.htm

9



10



11

11
Al-Mutanabbi Street
 by Mary McCarthy
 and Shirley Veenema
 12
3 books of blue
 by Tim Mosely

12



white pages' were deeply moving to me and became etched on my mind. I created a book that could be handled and rearranged while the words were thought about, in a form that would reflect on the impact of the bombing."

Argentinian Alex Appella completed a cut bookwork entitled *March 5th, 2007 Al-Mutanabbi Street* in January 2011. It unfolds to reveal the words "memory" and "future" on either side.

Different Shades In The Sand was completed in April last year by Frans Baake in The Netherlands. The work is a book of forms that the Middle-East landscape represents to him, stencilled on to sandpaper. "These shadows are reflections of forms; they belong to each other. While the object might have disappeared, the shade remains as a memory," he says.

These books are all individual, unique personal responses to the attack. As Beausoleil explains: "We hope the books

created will use Al-Mutanabbi Street and its printers, writers, booksellers and readers as a touchstone. We hope that these books will make visible the literary bridge that connects us, made of words and images that move back and forth between the readers in Iraq and ourselves. These books will show the commonality of Al-Mutanabbi Street with any street, anywhere."



Sarah Bodman is an artist and senior research fellow for artists' books at the Centre for Fine Print Research (CFPR), where she runs research projects investigating and promoting contemporary book arts (visit www.bookarts.uwe.ac.uk for details). She also writes a regular column on artists' books for the *ARLIS News-Sheet* and for the journal *Printmaking Today*.