



Ikon Gallery

1 Oozells Square, Brindleyplace, Birmingham B1 2HS

0121 248 0708 / www.ikon-gallery.org

Ikon Gallery Limited trading as Ikon, registered charity no. 528892

Jamal Penjweny

Saddam is Here

19 February – 21 April 2014

Ikon presents the first solo exhibition of Jamal Penjweny, including photography and video works reflecting on life in Iraq today. Born in Sulaimaniya, Iraqi Kurdistan, in 1981, Penjweny started his artistic career as a sculptor and painter, moving into photography whilst supporting himself by working as a shepherd and, latterly, a café proprietor. His work has been the subject of international attention following its inclusion in *Welcome to Iraq*, the Iraqi pavilion at the 2013 Venice Biennale, curated by Ikon Director Jonathan Watkins.

Saddam is Here (2009-10) consists of twelve images of Iraqi people in familiar surroundings, each holding a life-size picture of Saddam Hussein's face in front of their own. Saddam's likeness becomes a mask obscuring any expression of emotion, any gaze, or possibility of sure identification and individuality. It is ludicrous, hilarious and at the same time absolutely ominous, pointing up the insidious influence of a dictator. Of the work, Penjweny comments, "Saddam is here. Iraqi society can not forget him even after his death because some of us still love him and the rest are still afraid of him... His shadow is still following Iraqi society everywhere."

Another Life (2010), a short film by Penjweny, follows some days in the lives of Iraqis smuggling alcohol from Iraq into Iran. It has the grainy appeal of covert mobile phone footage, and is very matter-of-fact in its editing. There is no melodrama, but the last moments are like an emotional hammer-blow when, instead of rolling credits, we find ourselves reading paragraphs explaining how two of the men just introduced to us were killed by customs police a few days after filming.

The photographic series *Without Soul* (2011) shows everyday scenes - Iraqis at work and prayer, Western soldiers in ranks and on patrol - each with a single red line drawn across the neck. The mark makes reference to the Islamic custom dictating that images of living creatures should be avoided, their creation considered the rightful domain of God rather than that of humanity. By separating body and head, Penjweny 'invalidates' the image, disclaiming his role of creator. The images of *Without Soul* are often taken without the awareness of the people they depict. For *Iraq is Flying* (2006-10), on the other hand, Penjweny requested that his subjects jump whilst being photographed and so it seems that they are jumping for joy, perhaps in reminiscence of lost childhood games, in the face of the great hardship they experience in everyday life.



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Saddam is Here is organised in collaboration with the Ruya Foundation for Contemporary Culture in Iraq.

This is the opening exhibition of *Ikon 50*, the year-long programme celebrating Ikon's 50th anniversary.

Ends.

Note to Editors:

1. Ikon is open Tuesday – Sunday and Bank Holiday Mondays, 11am - 6pm. Admission is free.
2. Ikon Gallery is supported using public funding from Arts Council England and Birmingham City Council.
3. For more information, high-res images and to arrange an interview with the curator please contact Helen Stallard on 0774 033 9604 or email h.stallard@ikon-gallery.org