

Dia al-Azzawi
EXCURSION ACROSS TIME

ضياء العزاوي
نزهة زمان



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10 March – 16 May 2026

RICHARD SALTOUN

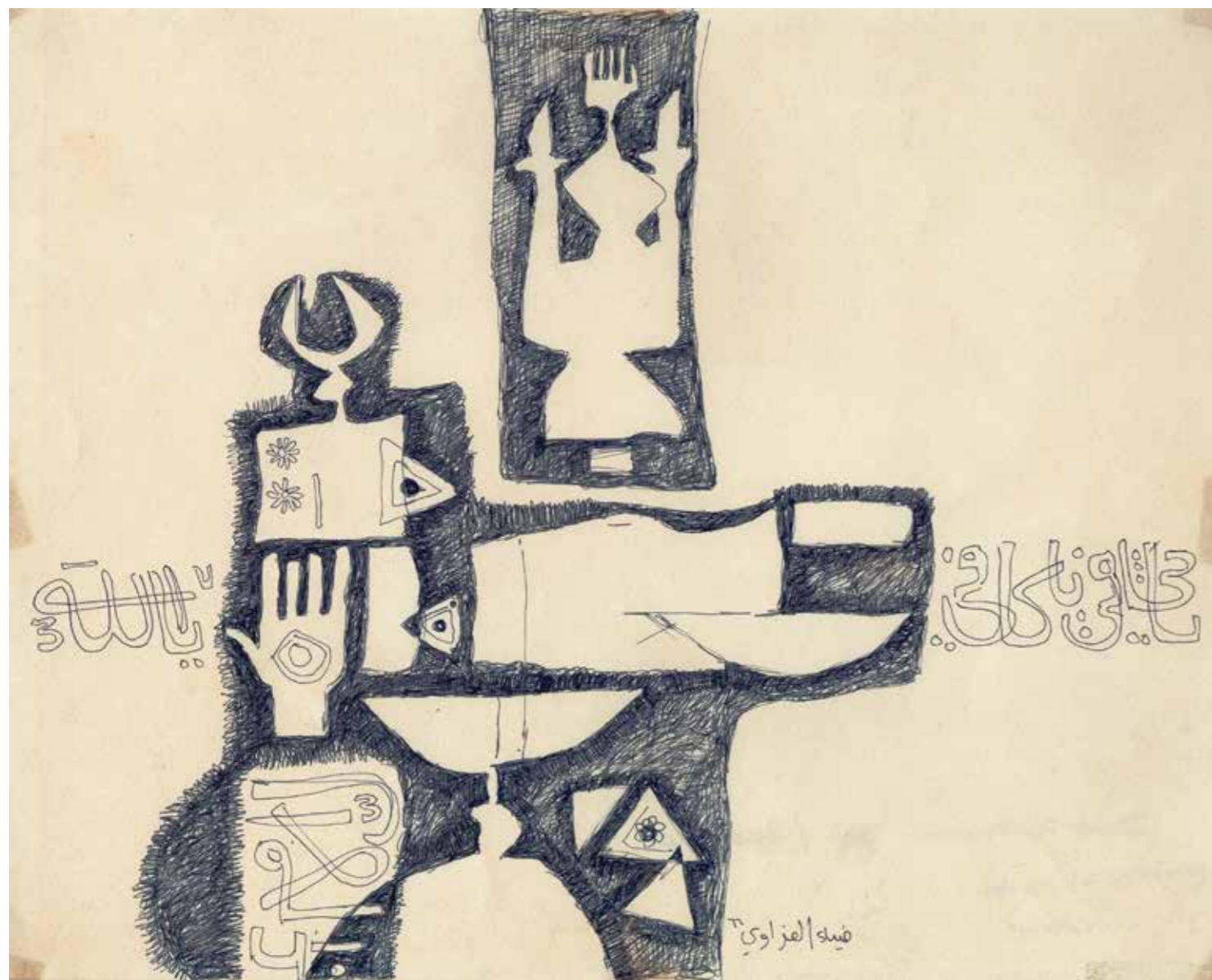
41 Dover Street, London, W1S 4NS

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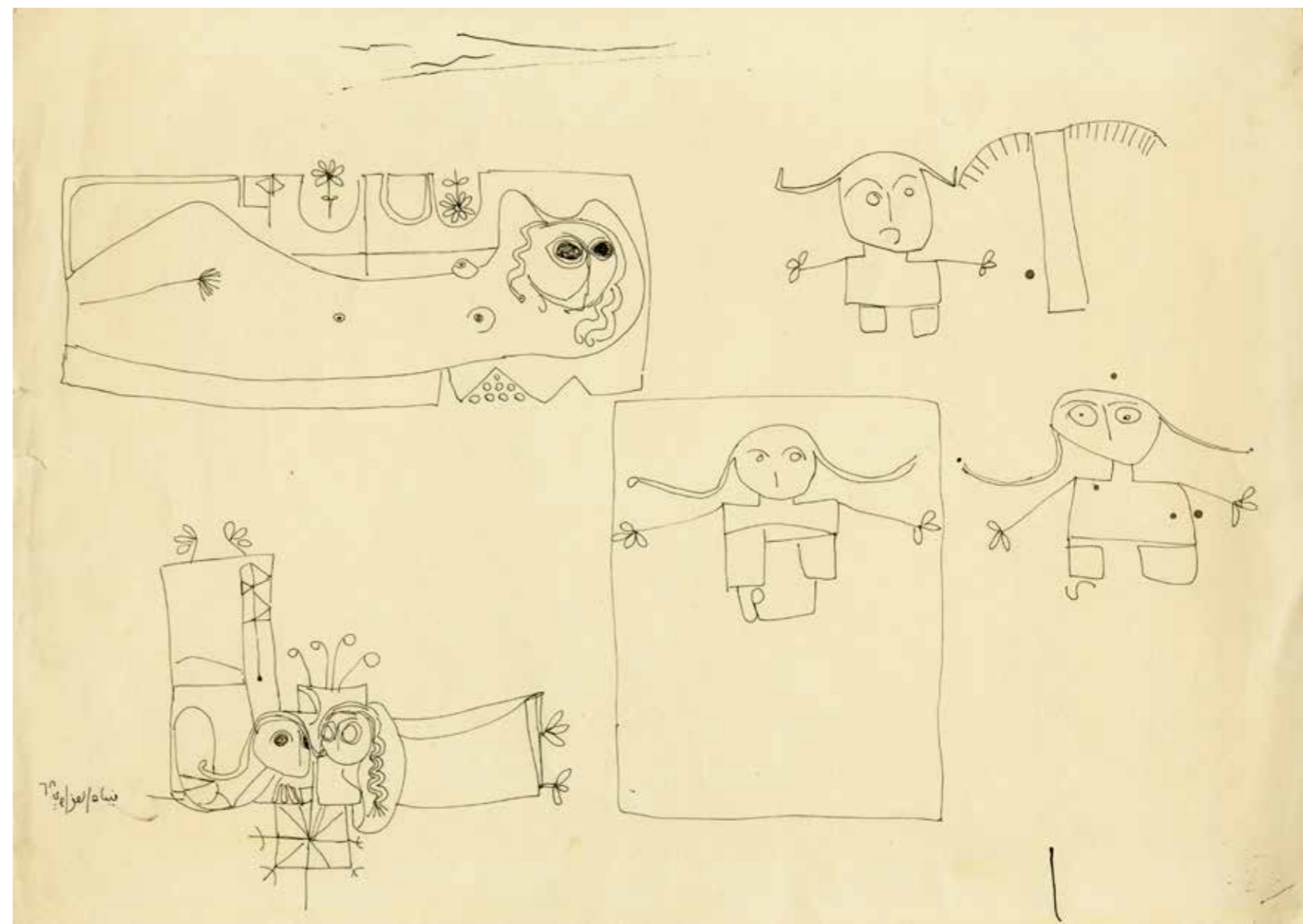
Excursion Across Time

Richard Saltoun Gallery presents *Excursion Across Time*, a historical overview of the career of British-Iraqi artist Dia al-Azzawi (b. Baghdad, 1939), curated by Louisa Macmillan from the Azzawi Studio. This exhibition marks half a century since Azzawi moved to London, although it is only his second solo show in the city he calls home (the first was in 1978). The presentation is centred around recurring themes that shaped his early practice and continue to inspire his work. Through a range of artworks – paintings, works on paper and sculptures from seven decades – in addition to archival material from the artist's studio, this exhibition tells the story of how Azzawi obsessed over the question of identity both as an Arab and as an Iraqi throughout his long career. He first helped shape Iraqi modernism through research into archaeology and ethnography in the 1960s, and later expanded his quest for identity to explore shared cultural themes that would resonate with fellow Arabs at a time when pan-Arabist politics had failed.

The exhibition opens with a large emblematic diptych called *Oriental Window*, which embodies Azzawi's signature polychromatic abstract painting style, displayed in juxtaposition to two monochromatic works on paper from the 1960s, shown here for the first time. These early drawings show Azzawi blending motifs from everyday Iraqi life – architecture, vessels, triangular textile patterns, talismanic symbols and prayers for health, as well as people, flowers and trees – into experimental compositions and vignettes. This includes one of Azzawi's earliest surviving nude figures, featuring the wide, dark eyes of Sumerian statues, which he knew from his studies in ancient history and archaeology, as well as his subsequent work as a museum curator across Iraq.



Amulets: Ya Shafi Ya Kafi Ya Allah, 1966
China ink on paper, 24.5 x 30.5 cm



Untitled, 1968
China ink on paper, 24.5 x 34.5 cm

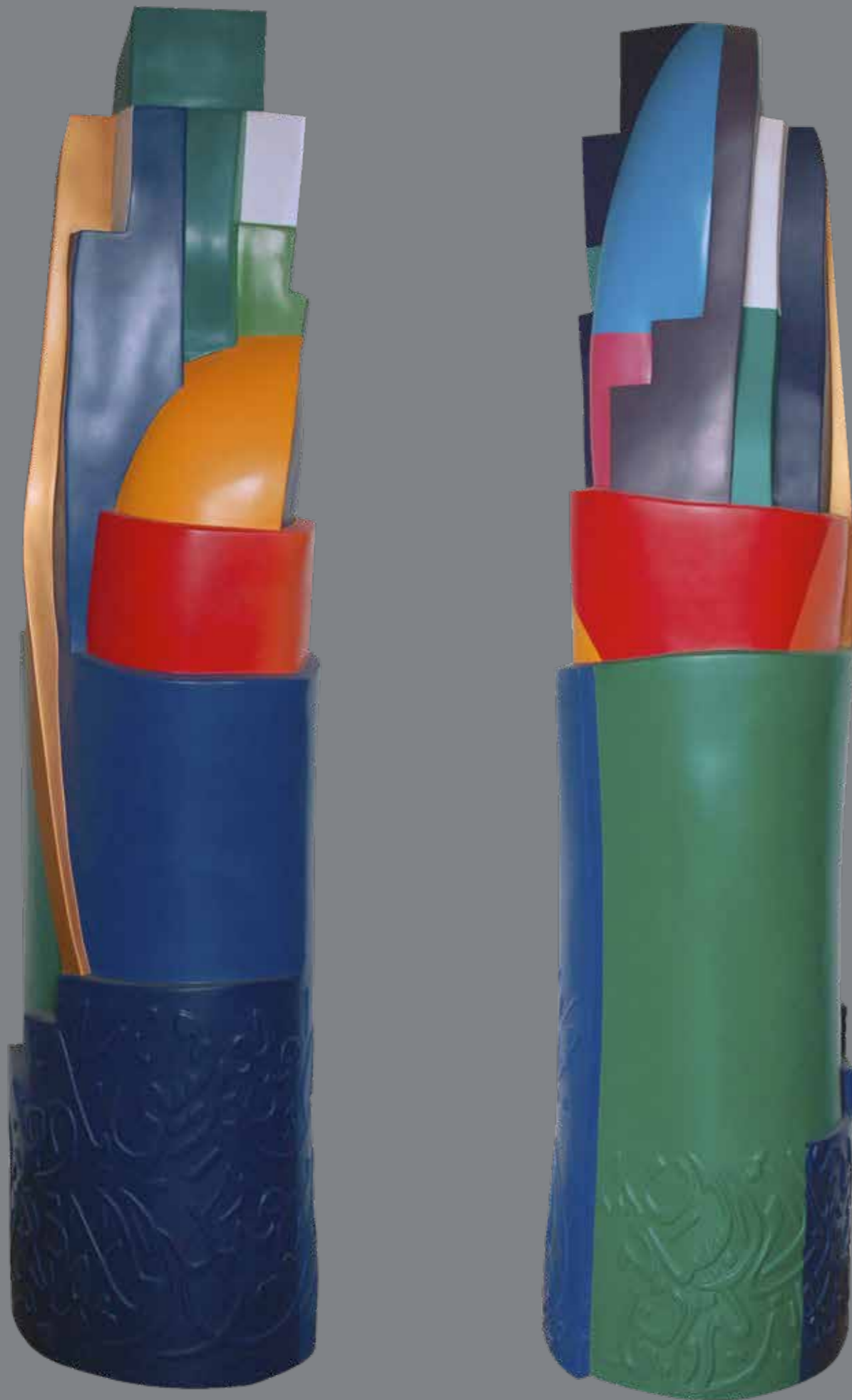
A Picture of Poetry

In the alcoves, two artworks focusing on Arabic literature are exhibited. *O Blessed Tigris* (2005–06) is a colourful obelisk adorned with lines by the celebrated Iraqi poet Muhammad Mahdi al-Jawahiri (1899–1997), originally conceived for the 2006 exhibition *Word into Art* at the British Museum, during which a monumental version of this sculpture was exhibited in the Great Court. Displayed opposite, the *daftar* (artist's book) *Excursion Across Time* (1991) is based on the poem of the same name by Lebanese author Talal Haidar (b. 1937) and lends this exhibition its title. This *daftar* represents the culmination of Azzawi's long engagement with Arabic literature, a vast body of artworks inspired by listening to poetry and other texts, and the focus of a solo exhibition at the Ashmolean Museum, Oxford (2022–23) and a recent publication (*A Picture of Poetry: the Artist's Books of Dia al-Azzawi*, published in 2023).



Excursion Across Time: Talal Haidar, 1991
Hand-coloured lithograph on paper, 38.5 x 55 cm, edition of 10 + 2 AP





(Above) Double spreads from *Excursion Across Time*: Talal Haidar, 1991
Hand-coloured lithograph on paper, 38.5 x 55 cm, edition of 10 + 2 AP

(Opposite) *O Blessed Tigris*: Muhammad al-Jawahiri, 2005–06
Car spray paint on polyester resin 205 x 49 x 49 cm, edition of 8 + 2AP



Drawing Consecrated to Love: Waddah al-Yaman, 1972
China ink, gouache and graphite on paper, 38 x 38 cm

Sharing a New Vision

In the second gallery, there is a wall of framed works on paper inspired by Arabic storytelling and poetry, ranging from *A Thousand and One Nights* and the tragic love story of Waddah al-Yaman to modern Arabic verse. This includes poems by the Sudanese-Egyptian writer Muhammad al-Fayturi (1936–2015) and Palestinian poet Mahmoud Darwish (1941–2008), the latter published in a collection called *Body's Anthem* (1980) containing artworks by Azzawi and poetry by Darwish, Taher Ben Jalloun and Youssef al-Sayigh, written in response to the infamous 1976 massacre of Tell al-Zaatar. In these works, illustrative subject matter and lines of Arabic script (sometimes partial, obscured or layered) are treated equally as artistic motifs, designed to trigger nostalgic memories of childhood storytelling and poetry recitals, especially for an Arabic-reading audience.

After publishing the *Towards A New Vision* manifesto (1969), Azzawi helped forge artistic connections across the Arab world while exploring shared Arab identity in his work. His shift from lines of poetry to the isolated Arabic letter can be seen in a drawing and two paintings from the 1970s and 1980s, while fragments of everyday textiles from the region are collaged onto a more recent canvas based on folk poetry, *Southern Verse No. 1* (2007). These textiles include vivid floral designs from South Asia, purchased in weekend markets in the Gulf, and the distinctive black-and-white keffiyeh, a functional garment that is common across the Arab world, particularly in Iraq and the countries of the Levant.





A Thousand and One Nights: And the King Said to Him...., 1967
Watercolour on paper, 68 x 48 cm



A Thousand and One Nights, 1987
Gouache on paper, 63 x 49 cm



You Are the Storm: Muhammad al-Fayturi, 1989
Lithograph on paper, 66 x 50 cm, edition of 10 uncoloured APs



Tell al-Zaatar, 1979
Silkscreen on paper, 65 x 65 cm, edition of 100 + 10 AP



Southern Verse No. 1, 2007
Acrylic and fabric on canvas, 122 x 122 cm



Arabian Motif No. 1, 1983
Mixed media (acrylic, gel medium and sand) on wood, 93 x 70 cm



Arabic Letters, 1970
Oil on canvas, 94 x 81.5 cm



Ishtar, 1994
Silkscreen on paper, 86 x 76 cm
Edition of 10 + 3 AP

Mesopotamia and Modernism

The final gallery opens with the newest work in the exhibition, *Folk Carpet* (2025), inspired by the characteristic triangles of embroidered textiles from Samawa in Southern Iraq (a prevalent ornament in Azzawi's work), shown alongside *Remains* (2009), which is based on the painstaking, object-based practice of archaeological excavation. This is further represented in the vast painting *Archaeological Plan of the Old Kingdom* (2023), in which a modern-day dig complete with red artefact markers is overshadowed by the silhouette of a large ziggurat, reminiscent of ancient Mesopotamian sites such as Dur-Kurigalzu (modern-day Aqar-Quf). In a 2018 sculpture, a gilded desert rose sits on top of an outsized cylinder seal and its impression, depicting the dying lioness from the lion hunt reliefs from the palace of Ashurbanipal in Nineveh, which can be seen in the British Museum.

The remaining works in this gallery demonstrate how Azzawi has returned time and again to the wide, dark eyes and prominent eyebrows of Sumerian sculptures, not only in the face of the Mesopotamian goddess Ishtar (1994), but also three untitled drawings (1970) that combine natural motifs with nude figures – some of which bear the traditional dotted tattoos of villagers in the countryside of Iraq – based on the poetry of the pre-Islamic slave poet Suḥaym, as well as the legendary lovers Layla and Majnūn (part of a wider collaboration in 1994–95 with the Bahraini poet Qassim Haddad, b. 1948), and a character from *A Thousand and One Nights* (1986).



Remains, 2009
Acrylic on canvas 76 x 61 cm



Folk Carpet, 2025
Acrylic on canvas, 77 x 61.5 cm



Majnoun Layla: Qassim Haddad, 1995
China ink on paper 71 x 104 cm



Dialogue, 1994–95
Acrylic on canvas 56 x 46 cm



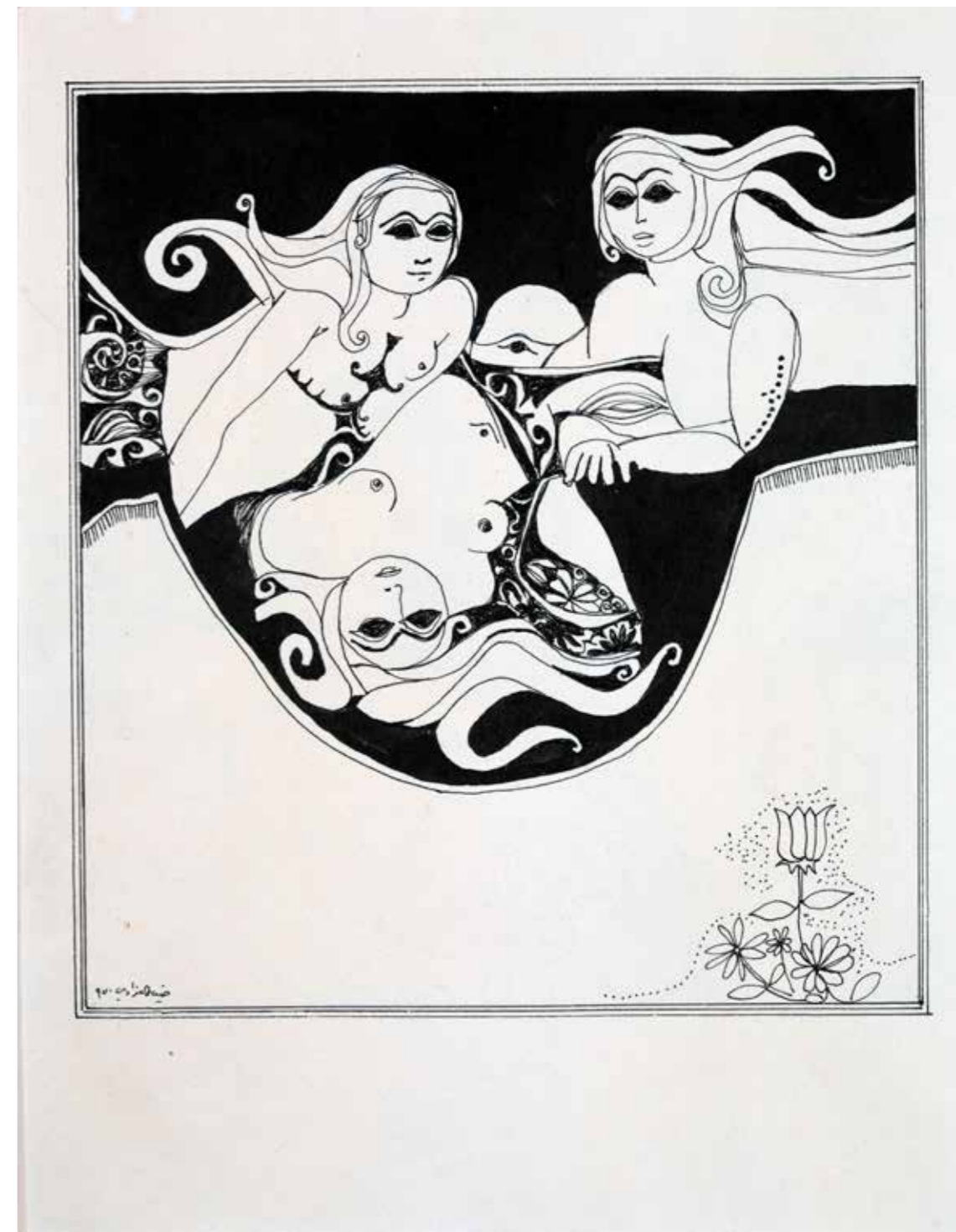
A Thousand and One Nights, 1986
Lithograph on paper 65 x 49.4 cm, edition of 30



Untitled, 1970
China ink on paper, 31 x 25 cm



Untitled, 1970
China ink on paper 31 x 25 cm



Untitled, 1970
China ink on paper, 31 x 25 cm



Misfired Target: Iraqi Cylinder Seal, 2018
Bronze and plaster, 58 x 95 x 31 cm, edition of 2

Archaeological Plan of an Old Kingdom, 2023
Acrylic on canvas, 270 x 400 cm



It has long been characteristic of Azzawi's practice that he seamlessly blends motifs from across millennia in a single work, inspired as much by his archaeological training as by the lived experience of listening to live and recorded poetry recitals. By switching between themes ranging from the ancient to the Islamic and modern ages of the region, Azzawi encapsulates the everyday experience of millions of Arabs and their neighbours living among the remains of several ancient civilisations.

This exhibition foregrounds Azzawi's multi-faceted practice, bringing together historically significant works and pieces never publicly exhibited before. Marking his first solo presentation in London in nearly fifty years, it offers a rare and timely opportunity to gain insight into Azzawi's personal journey through the decades, and also peer across the deep history of the Arab world and beyond.

Dia al-Azzawi

Dia al-Azzawi was born in Baghdad in 1939 and lives and works in London. From 1968 to 1976 he was a curator at several museums across Iraq, including the Iraq Museum. From 1977 to 1980, he worked at the Iraqi Cultural Centre in London where he curated numerous exhibitions. He has exhibited extensively including solo exhibitions at the Ashmolean Museum, Oxford (2022); Mathaf: Arab Museum of Modern Art and Al Riwaq, Doha (2016); Abu Dhabi Music and Arts Foundation (2009) and Institut du monde arabe, Paris (2001) as well as many group shows worldwide. He is the recipient of numerous awards, including the Necib Fazil International Culture and Art Prize (2025), the Great Arab Minds Award (2024) and the Nile Prize for Creativity (2023). In 2021, the Dia al-Azzawi Prize for Public Art was created in his honour by Tamayouz Excellence Award. Additionally, in 2024, he was awarded an Honorary Doctorate of Arts by Coventry University in recognition of his work as a pioneer of Arab art.

Azzawi's search for identity has defined his practice, first focusing on local, folkloric motifs from daily life in Iraq and later embracing literature as a unifying culture common across the Arabic-speaking world. In particular, his vast collection of *dafātir* (artist's books) are based on poems, which he sees as 'the pillars' of his practice, in a range of formats, some blurring the line with sculpture. Fusing calligraphic script with expressive mark making, they are intended to be viewed rather than 'read', drawing analogies to the centrality of poetry within Arab culture and to the aural experience of its recital.

Richard Saltoun Gallery

Founded in 2012 in London, and with locations in Rome (2022) and New York (2024), the gallery's program focuses on rediscovering historically important artists, combined with representing a younger generation. The gallery has a yearly program of exhibitions, publications and events, and participates in art fairs worldwide. In 2019, the gallery held a year-long initiative titled '100% Women', addressing gender inequality in the art world. The gallery showed only women artists at both its gallery and at art fairs for the entire year.

In 2021, the year's programme was dedicated to the philosopher Hannah Arendt, confronting complex socio-political issues, accompanied by a series of significant talks and a scholarly publication. The gallery is seen as a leader in exhibiting women avant-garde pioneers. It represented four such artists at the 2024 Venice Biennale. It also preserves legacies through estate representation including Helen Chadwick, Bertina Lopes and Jo Spence amongst others.





Catalogue designed by Dia al-Azzawi
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Biographies courtesy of Richard Saltoun Gallery
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