

Walid Siti's
mesmeric
paintings of
the River Zei in
Iraqi Kurdistan
are powerful
social and
political
metaphors, says
CHRISTINE
LINDEY



EXHIBITION PAINTING

Indelible water marks

Walid Siti: *The River Zei*
Rose Issa Projects, London W8

BORN in 1954 in Iraqi Kurdistan, Walid Siti left his homeland to study art, first in Baghdad and then in Yugoslavia. From there he sought political asylum in Britain because of his opposition to the Ba'athist government in Iraq. He has lived in London since 1984.

Horrified by the ravages of the Iraq-Iran war, especially the chemical attack on the Kurdish people of Halabja, like other exiles over the last 30 years Siti has had to contend with the knowledge of the continuing killings and destruction of his country's institutions and infrastructure.

His parents, siblings and friends still live in Iraq and for Siti the situation goes beyond political analysis and humanitarian empathy. It is also personal.

Siti's work is a response to these wars and political upheavals. While his earlier paintings refer to these events directly, his more recent approach them more obliquely, so that some may dismiss the paintings in this small, unpretentious exhibition by an important artist as mere decorative abstractions. This would be a mistake. They are full of meaning.

Siti engages with that most difficult and important of problems, how to tackle serious issues without didacticism, ponti-

fication or hackneyed and simplistic imagery. His paintings are multilayered—literally so in the complexity of their overlapping surfaces—and metaphorically in the layers of issues to which they allude.

Their subject is water, specifically the River Zei, the Kurdish name for the Great Zab river. The river is seen from above, snaking its way across land and the subject is clearly identifiable. The subject of three other paintings grouped together is more elusive.

An enigmatic, triangular shape emerges from the rivulets of paint streaming down the paintings' surfaces. Is it a rock, a mountain, a gorge or a waterfall seen through mist?

It could be all or some or none of these. Their mystery stems from the way the forms are both defined and partly obliterated by the myriad of narrow lines dripping down the paintings' entire surfaces.

Similar lines also travel down the snaking river paintings. Evoking torrential rain, tears, beaded curtains or semi-transparent veils, these marks also act as themselves—as paint drawn down the paper with a brush.

Their patiently repeated parallel formations are controlled. Yet some individual lines are left free to dribble, like rain drops slipping down a window pane, to create a complex surface of consecutive layers of paint which is both spontaneous and disciplined.

Like all good colourists Siti limits his palette to a few well chosen hues and finds colour in so-called neutrals where it appears not to dwell.

He makes greys sing and, by going beyond the obvious mixing of black with white, he reveals undertones of reds, greens, blues and lilacs in a multitude of subtle greys.

The paintings do not crudely describe a river from a single viewpoint, they allude to its many facets, its essence.

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ing river, the motifs appear to tremble and gently move backward and forward, mesmerising the viewer into a reverie.

Their visual seductiveness leaves such a strong memory that it encourages contemplation about the implications of the paintings' subject in a way that a mere topographical image of the River Zei would not.

Perhaps the intended response is to dwell on the characteristics of water, its fluidity, instability and ability to transmute from solid ice to steamy vapour and its "wetness."

The social and political significance of water as an increasingly scarce resource essential to survival for plants and animals springs to mind, as does the symbolism of rivers as connectors of peoples, as travellers across borders, but also as definers of regional and national boundaries—and potential areas of conflict.

The Kurdistan landscape acts in much of Siti's work as a metaphor for political and social comment. These works are part of a wider project including his installations at this year's Iraqi pavilion at the Venice Biennale. Siti explained that on seeing the River Zei from an aeroplane for the first time he was shocked that many of its tributaries are now dried up river beds.

The same drought caused the Gali Bag waterfall in the Kurdistan mountains to dry up. It is such an important national symbol that it appears on the new Iraqi 5,000 dinar note.

Siti relates that the new regime artificially pumped countless gallons of water to the area to simulate the waterfalls, to present a strong image of the country, thereby further limiting the population's water supply already depleted by drought and war.

The numbing beauty of these images echoes that of their subject. Looking at them is like watching nature crying out to be saved.

Free. Runs until August 15. Opening times: (020) 7602-7700.

