



In their own words:
Mohammed Sami

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*Take the autobiographical as a seed
and make it a tree.*

Involve many leaves in this tree.

Be universal.”



'Displacement' 2017
acrylic on linen

© Mohammed Sami

I was an early starter

From a young age growing up in Iraq my talent drew attention. I talked in metaphors. I was on TV when I was still in primary school, and in 1999 I won a prize worth about £25,000 - a lot of money for a poor boy. I gave it all to my family. This was a prize in itself. After the fall of Saddam Hussein's regime I had solo shows, and later worked at the Ministry of Culture. Crazy things happened. In 2007 I left for Sweden as a refugee. This was the start of the displacement.

I had to start from nothing

I've spent my entire life working out how to create something that doesn't connect explicitly with my experiences. I was just citing the traumatic things I'd seen. I realised I had to remove the 'poster' mentality. I was so tired. I read a lot of books about trauma and memory and empathic vision.

'Displacement' marks the moment I rebelled

I moved from depicting the visible to the invisible. You have to paint something that does not exist: paint the smoke, and that signifies fire.



I was an early starter

Sami aged 15 displays his Arab League prize, 'Most Talented Young Boy in the Middle East', and 'South Sina Prize for Drawing and Painting', 1999.

I'm not afraid of being autobiographical

I talk about personal and accessible things, like how I use earplugs to sleep at night, and how, when I came from Sweden, my plug didn't fit the British socket.

I want the viewer to bring their own experience and reach their own conclusion

People thought 'Displacement' must be about Brexit. Someone told me it made him think about his relationship with his girlfriend, and how they'd not fitted.

This place could be anywhere

I used the same strategies Islamic miniature painting uses to flatten space and make the setting unspecific. That's the combination: make the familiar unfamiliar.

You have to work out what's not said

I was terrible at titles, but I learned from Arabic literature - poets like Mahmoud Darwish, whose works I have on my phone. Poets free their subject matter by what they omit. It's still ambiguous.

I hope it will be noted for posterity that the painting has nothing to do with war

The Government Art Collection bought a painting from an artist who witnessed all these wars and ended up painting an electricity plug. It's funny. Tragedy and laughter.

I wish I knew I would grow up very fast

Time will pass very quickly. Use it well. Set a timeless goal, one you run behind constantly and don't reach. When you say, 'I'm going to make a great painting', you're not going to make a great painting, but you're constantly trying, and in the end you'll have a great result. The journey of trying to make a great painting will take your entire life.

“

Set a timeless goal, one you run behind constantly and don't reach. ”

What now?

**Bring your own experience,
reach your own conclusion**

**It's still ambiguous
(concrete and abstract)**

First, a word about words: nouns are things.

Concrete (countable) nouns are things you can count, pick up, and drop on your foot.

Abstract (uncountable) nouns are things that do not exist as material objects: concepts, big ideas - the kinds of things songs and artworks are often about - Happiness, Liberty, Love... Sami's title 'Displacement' is an **abstract** noun (you can't count it, or drop it on your foot) but the plug and adapter are **concrete** (they are things you can count, or drop on your foot).

Now, take a look at Roger Robinson's poem, 'A Portable Paradise'

If 'Paradise' is an abstract, how can it be kept in a pocket? (Is this perhaps why it's a poem?)

Sami uses the plug and adaptor to help us understand displacement: how does Robinson help us understand Paradise?

A Portable Paradise

by Roger Robinson

And if I speak of Paradise,
then I'm speaking of my grandmother
who told me to carry it always
on my person, concealed, so
no one else would know but me.
That way they can't steal it, she'd say.
And if life puts you under pressure,
trace its ridges in your pocket,
smell its piney scent on your handkerchief,
hum its anthem under your breath.
And if your stresses are sustained and daily,
get yourself to an empty room - be it hotel,
hostel or hovel - find a lamp
and empty your paradise onto a desk:
your white sands, green hills and fresh fish.
Shine the lamp on it like the fresh hope
of morning, and keep staring at it till you sleep.

© Roger Robinson from 'A Portable Paradise'
(Peepal Tree Press)

What's your idea of paradise?

List the concrete things you would include in your own paradise.

Include one for each of the senses - smell, touch, sight, taste, sound.

Use the scaffolding of 'A Portable Paradise' to write your own poem.

Begin with the same opening lines - **And if I speak of Paradise, then I'm speaking of...**

Once you have found your own way in, adapt it and make it your own.

If you share your poem, be sure to credit it ('after Roger Robinson's 'A Portable Paradise')

Developing the idea

Can you get hold of the things (the concrete nouns) you have included in your poem?

Create a still-life painting of them, or photograph them, or use them in a film.

What title will you give it?

**Create your own emojis/
Develop a communication system
to express your feelings :)**



You and a partner (A and B) will each need access to phones with cameras.

A texts B: #HowRUFeeling?

B replies with just an image, sending a photo that expresses (to the best of their ability!) how they are feeling -

Don't use a selfie or an already existing image, or one taken from the Internet.

A then responds with a photo of their own, 'mirroring' what they have understood B to be feeling.

B replies with a 'thumbs up' if they think A got it right (or with a 'thumbs down' if not).

Next time, the roles are reversed.

*This is an experiment, so make some ground rules to return to and revise.

Later, talk about how this went - does it matter if you guessed correctly?

Collect the visuals, and develop them into your personal emotion-ary.

Make the familiar unfamiliar

Take a look at how artist Kim Thornton uses concrete domestic materials in her film 'Stay Alert' to explore the abstract 'anxiety'.

Can you use domestic materials to create a fantasy scenario? What emotions would you explore?



'Stay Alert' (film still)

by Kim Thornton

© Kim Thornton

What next?

Paint the smoke, and that signifies the fire

Sami is interested in how meaning is created and how meaning is communicated.

Here's a short film explaining semiotics:

What's not said

'Wars teach us to love detail: the shape of our door keys, how to comb our wheat with eyelashes and walk lightly on our land.'

Mahmoud Darwish (1941–2008)

Three poems by Darwish

Please be aware that the following material deals with issues that some readers may find upsetting.

Empathic Vision: Affect, Trauma, and Contemporary Art (Cultural Memory in the Present) by Jill Bennett

Young people interview individuals who have sought refuge in the UK as a result of conflict or genocide.