

Midwest

Iraqi-born artist sends a subtle message about the complexities of war

STORY BY **LILLEDESHAN BOSE**
PHOTO BY **C.TAYLOR**

The first time I saw Wafaa Bilal, I tried to shoot him with a semiautomatic.

At the time, he was confined to the FLATFILEgalleries in Chicago. From May to June of this year, a period of 31 days, Bilal performed a piece called "Domestic Tension," in which Web cameras were on him 24 hours a day. Visitors could see him eating, drinking, sleeping, reading. They could talk to him in a chatroom. And with the click of a mouse, anyone could shoot a semiautomatic paintball gun that they could move and point at him at all times.

"In my work, I'm trying to bring attention to social issues," Bilal said. "I'm doing a lot of negotiation between aesthetic pleasure vs. aesthetic pain."

Through this, Bilal says he's trying to send out information through a package that's acceptable (a silly game of paintball) to engage people in the politics of his art (an anti-war protest).

"It's not necessarily delivered right away to the viewer, but there are . . . so many layers hidden in it. It allows us all to impose our own narrative, so . . . instead of didactic art, it becomes an encounter," he said.

In the month of the paintball project, the site drew 80,000,000 visits. The gun was fired about 60,000 times.

"I didn't expect it to be a battleground for so many different



things," Bilal said. Not only were pro- and anti-war camps polarized, but hackers and programmers got involved to the point that by the end of the installation, members of the online audience stayed online 24 hours a day to become a "virtual human shield," which prevented people from shooting at Bilal.

"The timing is right for this project (because) a lot of us are disappointed in our political direction in the country. There's a great injustice (being done) to the Iraqi and American people," he said.

A SECOND LIFE

Bilal, who made the piece to illustrate the continual danger facing citizens in Iraq, is no stranger to being persecuted in the name of art.

Born in Iraq in 1966, Bilal wasn't allowed to study art, even though he continued to do it. He was eventually arrested for creating art that opposed Sadaam Hussein's regime. After leaving Iraq in 1991, he was arrested by Kuwaitis on the suspicion of being a spy, put on trial and almost executed. He was let go, then lived in a refugee camp in Saudi Arabia for two years.

In 1992, he was granted asylum in the United States. He continued to study art at the University of New Mexico, then moved to Chicago, where he now teaches at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago.

"No country was willing to save me and hundreds of thousands of Iraqis except this country. In a way, this country gave me a second life," said Bilal, who is a naturalized American citizen. "After 16 years of living here, I came to learn how great this country is, and how great it is to be a citizen in this nation."

This is why the conflict between Bilal's motherland and adopted country has been the fulcrum for his work since 1992. The hardship that he has en-

If you go

What "Kissy-Kissy: Between the City That Works and the Land of Enchantment," curated by Wafaa Bilal and Alan Labb, featuring works by 11 contemporary photographers.

When Opening reception 4 p.m., Saturday, Sept. 15. Exhibit runs through Oct. 13, Tuesday to Friday 10 a.m. to 6 p.m. and Saturday 10 p.m. to 4 p.m.

Where Dean Jensen Gallery, 759 N. Water St.

How much Free