

countered — and still experiences — has always moved his work.

He lost a brother to gunfire, and he has not seen members of his family since 1991. Bilal's hope is to inform people through art about the complexities of the war and how important it is to end conflict through non-violent means.

"(Iranian artist) Shirin Neshat said that people who cross the ocean are people who live on the bridge. No matter what side they cross to, they're nostalgic for the other side. More than that . . . you're heartbroken because you have a loyalty for both countries," he said.

"NO HUMAN FACE ON THE ISSUE"

When no one wanted to touch political art, Bilal said his work stood out. Now that the issue has come home — as the American death toll grows bigger and citizens grow more disappointed — "the situation requires us to act," he said.

While political art has become more acceptable and mainstreamed, Bilal says that as an Iraqi immigrant and artist, most people don't know much about his culture, making his work more difficult.

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the issue, and that's what I'm trying to bring here," he said. That's why he didn't wear a mask when he was being shot at with paintballs.

Bilal's other work, while not explicitly about the war, takes similar risks. Last year, he and co-collaborator Shawn Lawson presented "Bar at the Folies-Bergère (after Manet)" at the Dean Jensen Gallery. The piece was displayed at the Milwaukee Art Museum earlier this summer.

Edouard Manet's 1882 piece portrays barmaid Suzon at the Folies-Bergère music hall in Paris. The video installation features Suzon interacting with museum viewers. "What happens when you walk into the gallery is that you are in the frame. The barmaid in the piece morphs to life and interacts with the viewer, based on the position of the viewers and people in the frame," Bilal said.



Built with a blue screen, a model was given 16 or 17 different ways to interact. Bilal and Lawson morphed these scenes to the original artwork, so that when the viewer walks into the piece, a camera takes a reference frame and incorporates the viewer into the piece. "It brings the artwork to the present but pushes the viewer to the past," Bilal said.

Manet is the peg for another of Bilal's controversial work, "Midwest Olympia." The hourlong video installation featured an obese, naked woman on a couch. Owned by the Museum of Contemporary Photography in Chicago, "Midwest Olympia" represented various concepts — perceptions of reality, temporal space, isolation and chaos.

Aside from the MAM, Bilal has other local ties. With Alan Labb, he co-curated and is part of a Dean Jensen Gallery group show opening this weekend that showcases 11 photographers who have roots in either Chicago or Albuquerque, N.M. He is working on re-creating an Iraqi hut called Aldar Al-Iraqi and lifestyle in Montalvo Arts Center in California. "I want to try to communicate what it is like to live in Iraq these days," he said.

So is performance Bilal's medium of choice? "One thing I have been working on is the corporal language. I think the body has its own language that gets impacted by movement of the body and its physical structure.

"The project I'm doing is incorporating the virtual and the physical with the language that the body understands. All of this combined impacts us as if we live that situation," he said.

This May, Wafaa Bilal performed "Domestic Tension" at the FLATFILE galleries in Chicago. Bilal moved his personal belongings into the gallery and lived there for for 31 days. Visitors to a Web site could shoot a semiautomatic paintball gun at him and talk to him in a chat room. PHOTO BY C.TAYLOR



Wafaa Bilal created this interactive video installation of Manet's "Bar at the Folies Bergères" with Shawn Lawson, which places viewers in the painting and programmed responses to viewers' reactions. It's currently on display at the Milwaukee Art Museum. MILWAUKEE JOURNAL SENTINEL FILE PHOTOS