

Surrealism in Contemporary Kuwaiti Art

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Abstract

This paper explores some examples of surrealism in contemporary Kuwaiti art. By analyzing the works of prominent Kuwaiti artists Mohammed Al-Sheibani, Yousef Albagshi, and Nawaf Al-Hmeli, the study highlights how surrealistic elements reflect the dynamic socio-cultural shifts in Kuwait. These artists use surrealism to address themes of identity and power – and the abjection of identity by power – in the context of rapid economic and societal transformations. Also discussed in the paper is the impact of censorship and the digital revolution on artistic expression in Kuwait, revealing how artists overcome constraints to critique societal and political issues. Through a comparative analysis with European surrealism, the unique application of surrealism in Kuwait is illustrated as a means to explore and express cultural, social concerns, and trauma, contributing to a broader understanding of contemporary Arab art. The paper reveals a vibrant and challenging body of surrealist work being produced in the nation.

Keywords: Surrealism, Contemporary Kuwaiti Art, Mohammed Al-Sheibani, Yousef Albagshi, Nawaf Al-Hmeli, Digital Art, Identity and Nationhood, Power and Abjection, Trauma in Art

Introduction

Surrealist elements and influences are prominently in evidence in contemporary Kuwaiti visual art. Influenced by global trends and local cultural and political contexts, the movement's emphasis on the subconscious and the irrational (Kyung-A, 2008) is evident in the work of Kuwaiti artists who often use surrealistic elements to critique and subvert official narratives of nationhood and identity (Hamid, 2020). This is in line with the broader use of surrealism in North Africa and Western Asia, where it has been employed to challenge dominant discourses and explore individual and collective identities (Bellan, 2021). In the specific case of Kuwait, the use of surrealism in visual art reflects a broader trend in contemporary Arab art, where artists are

increasingly using their work to explore and express cultural and social concerns (Al-Abbas, 2020).

In the mid-20th century, European surrealism emerged as a revolutionary artistic and literary movement responding to the tumultuous societal and cultural changes of the era. This period was marked by the aftermath of World War I, the rise of industrialization, and the onset of World War II, which collectively engendered a profound sense of disillusionment and existential crisis. Surrealist artists and writers such as Salvador Dalí and André Breton sought to challenge the existing norms and perceptions of reality, using surreal imagery and irrational juxtapositions as a means to express the subconscious and critique the prevailing rationalist and materialist worldviews (Breton, 1924). Contemporary conditions in Kuwait present an analogous situation where rapid economic and societal transformations have led to a re-evaluation of traditional values and identity (Al-Nakib, 2016). Just as European surrealists used their art to navigate and respond to the chaos and uncertainty of their time, contemporary Kuwaiti artists are finding surrealism a suitable medium to explore and comment on their rapidly changing society. The surrealists' emphasis on the irrational and the dream-like aspects of human experience resonates with the current Kuwaiti context, where the juxtaposition of modernity and tradition, wealth, and cultural heritage creates a similarly surreal landscape (Al-Qasimi, 2019). This paper provides an introduction to some of the primary trends in surrealism in contemporary Kuwaiti visual art by considering the works of some of the movement's most prominent figures: Mohammed Al-Sheibani, Yousef Albagshi, and Nawaf Al-Hmeli.

Literature Review

The literature on surrealism is extensive, with the movement originating in the early 20th century as a revolutionary artistic and literary endeavor. Surrealism emerged as a response to the disillusionment with societal norms and the aftermath of World War I. André Breton's "Manifesto of Surrealism" (1924) defined the

movement's emphasis on the subconscious, dreams, and irrationality as a means to challenge rationalist and materialist worldviews. This foundational perspective provides a backdrop for understanding the diverse applications of surrealism in various cultural contexts.

Surrealism's impact has nevertheless been global, influencing artists far beyond its European origins. Kyung-A (2008) discusses the movement's emphasis on the subconscious and irrational, which has found resonance in various cultural settings, including North Africa and Western Asia. Bellan and Drost (2021) highlight how surrealism in these regions has been employed to challenge dominant discourses and explore individual and collective identities. This broader regional application is essential for contextualizing surrealism in Kuwait, where rapid socio-economic changes provide fertile ground for such artistic explorations.

Al-Abbas (2020) notes a growing trend in contemporary Arab art where artists use surrealism to address cultural and social concerns. This trend is particularly relevant in Kuwait, a nation experiencing dynamic socio-cultural shifts due to its rapid modernization and economic transformation. The works of Kuwaiti artists reflect these changes and use surrealistic elements to critique and subvert official narratives of nationhood and identity.

The specific case of Kuwait is marked by a unique blending of traditional values and modern influences. Al-Nakib (2016) explores the impact of rapid urbanization and economic development on Kuwaiti society, suggesting a parallel to the existential crises that fueled early European surrealism. Al-Qasimi (2019) further discusses contemporary art in the Gulf, emphasizing how artists navigate the tensions between modernity and tradition. This context is crucial for understanding the works of Kuwaiti surrealists like Mohammed Al-Sheibani and Yousef Albagshi.

Mohammed Al-Sheibani is a key figure in contemporary Kuwaiti art whose work embodies the dynamic socio-cultural shifts in Kuwait.

Al-Khalidi (2014) describes Al-Sheibani's perspective on the role of art in society, emphasizing its importance in times of distress. His artworks frequently address themes of power and its abjection, using surrealistic techniques to create compelling visual paradoxes. Bate (2004) discusses the use of caricature in surrealism, which Al-Sheibani employs to critique societal structures and the nature of power.

Yousef Albagshi is renowned for his versatile use of animation and visual arts to reflect societal realities. His works, such as "For the Love of Yousef" and "Second Floor," adopt surrealist strategies to depict violence and authority, blending reality and imagination. Al Rashid (2020) highlights Albagshi's ability to convey complex cultural fascinations with violence, while Rabaté (2002) discusses the psychological dynamics of surrealism that resonate in Albagshi's exploration of trauma and power.

Censorship plays a significant role in shaping artistic expression in Kuwait. Hamid (2020) explores the constraints artists face and their strategies to navigate censorship, often resulting in oblique and indirect modes of expression. The parallel between political censorship and psychological repression, as discussed by Rabaté (2002), helps explain the prevalence of surrealism in Kuwaiti art. Additionally, the digital revolution has transformed the landscape of art sharing and expression. Al-Nakib (2016) and Al-Qasimi (2019) discuss how digital platforms enable artists to bypass traditional gatekeepers, fostering greater creativity and innovation.

Research Gap

While significant research has been conducted on surrealism's influence in North Africa and Western Asia, and its role in addressing socio-political issues, there is a notable gap in the literature specifically focusing on the unique application of surrealism in contemporary Kuwaiti art. Existing studies often overlook how Kuwaiti artists like Mohammed Al-Sheibani and Yousef Albagshi adapt surrealism to reflect their country's rapid socio-economic transformations, cultural dynamics, and the impact of censorship and digital media on artistic

expression. This study seeks to address this gap by exploring how these artists use surrealism to critique power structures and explore themes of identity and trauma. To do so, the following research questions are addressed.

Research Questions

- RQ1: How does contemporary Kuwaiti surrealism respond to its socio-political context?
- RQ2: How does this response differentiate Kuwaiti surrealism from the surrealism of other geographic areas?
- RQ3: What light does Kuwaiti surrealism shed on the art form's socio-politically critical potential?

These questions aim to provide a comprehensive understanding of the distinctive characteristics and broader implications of surrealism in Kuwaiti art. They will be answered by employing the methods spelt out in the following section.

Methodology

This study employs a multi-method qualitative approach to explore the role of surrealism in contemporary Kuwaiti art, focusing on the works of prominent artists Mohammed Al-Sheibani and Yousef Albagshi. This approach integrates visual analysis, contextual examination, and comparative study to understand how surrealistic elements reflect socio-cultural shifts, critique power structures, and address themes of identity and trauma.

The research begins with the selection of artists and specific artworks. Mohammed Al-Sheibani and Yousef Albagshi were chosen due to their significant contributions to the Kuwaiti art scene and their distinctive use of surrealism. Specific artworks were selected for detailed analysis based on their representative use of surrealistic techniques and their thematic relevance to the study's objectives.

Visual analysis forms the core of this methodology. Each selected artwork is examined in detail, focusing on composition, color, form, and symbolic elements. This analysis emphasizes how surrealistic techniques such as juxtaposition, distortion, and dream-like imagery are employed to convey deeper meanings and critique socio-political issues. Visual analysis is appropriate for this study as it allows for an in-depth examination of the visual elements and symbolic language used by the artists, providing insights into their creative processes and thematic concerns.

In addition to visual analysis, the study includes a contextual examination of the artworks within the broader socio-cultural and political landscape of Kuwait. This involves reviewing relevant literature on surrealism, both globally and regionally, to understand how the movement has been adapted and applied in the Kuwaiti context. The historical and contemporary influences on the artists and their work are also considered. Contextual examination is essential for this study as it situates the artworks within their specific cultural and historical milieu, offering a deeper understanding of the external factors shaping the artists' expressions.

A comparative analysis is conducted to draw parallels between the selected Kuwaiti artworks and key examples of European surrealism. This comparison highlights both the universal aspects of surrealism and its unique manifestation in the Kuwaiti context, providing a deeper understanding of the distinctive features of Kuwaiti surrealism. Comparative analysis is appropriate as it allows for the identification of unique and shared characteristics across different cultural contexts, enriching the understanding of surrealism's global and local dimensions.

The impact of censorship and digital media on contemporary Kuwaiti art is another crucial aspect of this study. The role of censorship in shaping artistic expression in Kuwait is explored through a review of existing literature and an analysis of the artists' strategies to navigate these constraints. Additionally, the influence of digital media is examined by studying how artists like Al-Sheibani and Albagshi use

digital platforms for the creation and dissemination of their work. This aspect of the methodology is vital as it considers the practical challenges and opportunities faced by artists in a censorious environment and the role of technology in expanding artistic expression.

Interviews with the artists, where available, and secondary sources such as critical reviews, exhibition catalogs, and academic articles provide additional insights into the artists' intentions and the reception of their work. These sources enrich the visual and contextual analysis, offering a comprehensive understanding of the artists' perspectives and the socio-cultural environment in which they operate. Including interviews and secondary sources is appropriate as it adds depth to the analysis by incorporating the artists' voices and critical viewpoints.

Finally, the findings from the visual, contextual, and comparative analyses are synthesized to identify recurring themes and motifs in the artworks. This synthesis aims to draw connections between the use of surrealism in Kuwaiti art and broader socio-cultural and political dynamics, contributing to a nuanced perspective on the role of surrealism in contemporary Kuwaiti visual art. By integrating multiple qualitative methods, this multi-method approach provides a comprehensive and nuanced understanding of how surrealism is utilized by contemporary Kuwaiti artists to explore and express complex issues related to identity, power, and trauma.

Findings and Discussion

Mohammed Al-Sheibani

Mohammed Al-Sheibani, a prominent figure in the contemporary Kuwaiti art scene, stands out as a significant surrealist artist whose work reflects the dynamic socio-cultural shifts in Kuwait. His approach to surrealism is not merely an aesthetic choice but a reflection of his perspective on the role of art in society. In a world rife with violence, destruction, and emotional turmoil, Al-Sheibani views art, particularly

beautiful arts, as crucial for restoring a sense of spiritual balance and humanity (Al-Khalidi, 2014). He emphasizes the need for artistic expression in times of societal distress. Through his art, Mohammed Al-Sheibani not only explores the surreal but also comments on the broader socio-political context of Kuwait and the wider Arab world.

A theme that occurs with some regularity in Al-Sheibani's work is the potential for the abjection of power. For example, in the untitled work shown in Figure 1, the central figure, a gorilla dressed in a suit, is a compelling symbol that fuses animality with the trappings of civilization. The gorilla, typically a symbol of raw strength and primal instincts, clad in the formal attire of a human, creates an immediate visual paradox. This surreal juxtaposition speaks volumes about the nature of power and its often primitive underpinnings despite the veneer of sophistication and order that societal structures aim to project. The suit, an emblem of professionalism and human societal status, contrasts sharply with the inherent wildness and untamed might of the gorilla, suggesting a critique of how power is exercised in human societies. It hints at the notion that beneath the civilized exterior, the exercise of power may still be governed by basic, primal instincts—aggression, territoriality, and dominance. Moreover, the gorilla's presence in such attire at the center of the painting, on a raised platform, further emphasizes the absurdity and at times, the performative aspect of power dynamics; it's a masquerade of civility laid over the brute force that often drives authoritative actions. The background is equally telling, with two doorways flanking the central figure, suggesting paths of entry or exit, yet guarded by smaller figures in suits, indicating bureaucracy or perhaps the 'gatekeepers' of power. The red curtain and checkerboard flooring evoke a stage or game, hinting at the performative nature of power and the strategic moves often involved in political and social arenas.

The abjection of power is thus represented by the gorilla's animality, which is at odds with the order and control that the suit symbolizes. A crucial element in the representation of the abjection of power here is the use of caricature, and its ability to conjure both

intimidating and absurd affective valences (Bate, 2004). Al-Sheibani's painting is a powerful surrealist exploration of power's facade and the underlying vulnerabilities that accompany it. This painting can be interpreted as a powerful statement on the nature of power itself—instinctual, potentially chaotic, and dressed in the illusion of order and control.



Figure 1: "Untitled," Mohammed Al-Sheibani,
<https://www.instagram.com/p/BiZbl5Bhi09/>



Figure 2: "Untitled" by Mohammed Al-Sheibani,
<https://www.instagram.com/p/CRzKQAYL1qs/>

Similar themes are apparent in the untitled painting illustrated in Figure 2. The composition is dominated by the figure of a soldier, whose body has been truncated at the waist, an unsettling representation that suggests the baselessness of power. The soldier's decorations, which should denote honor and service, are directly pinned onto his bare chest—a canvas of flesh—suggesting a raw and painful attachment to the symbols of military achievement. The sneering expression on the soldier's face conveys arrogance and disdain, which, when juxtaposed with the state of his severed body, creates a powerful contrast between the perception of power and its potential reality. The abjection in Al-Sheibani's painting is vividly

portrayed through the shocking visualization of a soldier figure cut off at the waist, which starkly signifies a disconnection or castration from the very source of his power. The body, a traditional symbol of agency and strength, especially in military terms, is here rendered powerless, unable to stand or act.

The soldier's shirtless state with medals pinned directly onto his skin is a similarly abject parody of military honor. Rather than being worn on the clothing, which provides social identity and definition, these decorations are embedded directly into the soldier's flesh, suggesting a painful and burdensome relationship with the very ideals they are meant to represent. This inversion of honor into something that literally wounds speaks to the abjection of power—how the external signs of authority and respect can become instruments of self-inflicted suffering and humiliation.

The overturned wine glasses, amidst the soldier's sneering demeanor, further evoke a sense of degradation. There is an implication of revelry turned sour, a feast that has turned into a scene of disarray, symbolizing the vulnerability of power to succumb to its excesses and vices. The red tablecloth, reminiscent of both regal luxury and spilled blood, underscores the dual nature of power—it sustains as much as it destroys. The sneer on the soldier's face, meant to intimidate, instead becomes a grimace that betrays his abject state. He is not standing over a battlefield but is instead displayed on a dining table, an object among other objects, which implies his reduction to a mere spectacle. Al-Sheibani's painting serves as a critical examination of power's potential for debasement. This artwork forces the viewer to confront the visceral and often uncomfortable truth that the trappings of power, and the exercise of it, can result in its own form of abjection.

Consideration of the role of censorship in the Kuwaiti context is crucial to a full appreciation of the meanings and strategies of these works. In Kuwait, the visual arts can be subject to censorship for a variety of reasons, often rooted in cultural, political, and religious considerations. The government, through its Ministry of Information

and other regulatory bodies, may exercise control over the arts to ensure they adhere to social norms and values. Artists must therefore be mindful of the risks of excessively explicit critique, and adopt oblique and indirect modes of expression. Such a situation of censorship creates a situation parallel to the psychological dynamic that generates the dream work, for example, as understood in the Freudian scheme. That is, in both, there is a latent content that must be reconfigured into form that can get past the censor (whether political or psychological), and which gives rise to the manifest content (Rabaté, 2002). The relatively consistent awareness, on the part of artists, of the presence of the censor may help account for efflorescence of surrealist approaches in contemporary Kuwaiti art.

Although, of course, the constraint of censorship is only half the story. The other half is the emergence of novel media for the creation and dissemination of art, which has opened pathways whereby content can be gotten past the censor. The advent of digital technologies and the proliferation of online platforms have significantly transformed the landscape of art sharing and expression in Middle Eastern countries, where censorship often restricts traditional media. Digital platforms enable artists to bypass conventional gatekeepers of culture and censorship. Social media networks, online galleries, and virtual exhibitions have emerged as vital spaces for artists to showcase their work, connect with global audiences, and engage in cross-cultural dialogues. Furthermore, digital tools and mediums, such as digital painting, 3D modeling, and virtual reality, have opened up new avenues for creative expression, empowering artists to innovate and experiment in new ways. All these developments are demonstrated in the work of the next artist considered here: Yousef Albagshi.

Yousef Albagshi

Yousef Albagshi is a distinguished name in the realm of animation and visual arts in Kuwait, renowned for his versatility and self-reliance in bringing animated narratives to life. His portfolio encompasses a range of creative works, from award-winning short films such as *Sanderah*

(2014) and *Naqlah* (2017), which he painstakingly illustrates solo, to paintings that candidly reflect societal realities. Like Mohammed Al-Shebaini, Albagshi's work is marked with strongly surrealistic elements. A characteristic that the two artists have in common is a preoccupation with power, and a frequent depiction of power in ways that evoke the abject. Two striking instances of this are presented by the short animations *For the Love of Yousef* (2019) and *Second Floor* (2012).

For the Love of Yousef depicts a child's experience of representations of violence, adopting surrealist strategies such as a blurring of the line between reality and imagination, dreams and waking consciousness. A central figure in the animation is a golem-like figure who pursues the eponymous Yousef, threatening him with dismemberment and death. The golem figure represents, in an encapsulated form, a broad-based cultural fascination with violence that vacillates between romanticization and horror – and often experiences both at the same time. This ambiguity and contradiction is apparent in Albagshi's depiction of the creature, imparting a strongly abject dimension to its realization (see Figure 3 and Figure 4).

Second Floor similarly engages with questions of the depiction of violence in society generally. The short animation depicts a classroom in which a teacher supervises two students. The teacher, the figure of authority, is rendered abject by Kafka-esque association with non-mammalian lifeforms: at the beginning of the animation, his tongue shoots out and catches a fly, like a frog or chameleon would do, before devouring it with evident relish ().



Figure 3: The golem from "For the Love of Yousef"



Figure 4: The golem pursuing Yousef.

The departure of the teacher from the classroom, however, in fact presages a descent into deeper levels of horror, as the one student turns on the other in a frenzied outburst of violence (Figure 6). This representation of violence calls to mind the surrealist films of Luis Buñuel, such as *Un Chien Andalou*. In *Second Floor*, the incongruity of the jaunty music played over the attack of the one student by the other achieves similar effects to those Buñuel aspired to in his juxtaposition of image and music, and Albagshi has in common with the Spanish surrealist also a fascination with the abject body, as is evident throughout his work.



Figure 5: The teacher from *Second Floor* **Figure 6: Violence in *Second Floor*.**

A further connection to Buñuel is provided by Albagshi's frequent use of insects and vermin in his work to suggest the abject nature of power, evoking associations of contamination and infection. As with the depiction of the teacher in *Second Floor*, figures of authority and power are frequently linked in the visual idiom to flies, rats, and cockroaches, all creatures associated with the spreading of disease. For example, in *Sandarah* (2015), one of the Iraqi soldiers who carry out the search of a family home is depicted with a rat on his head (Figure 7). The logic of the association in this particular case is made clear in a shot from the beginning of the animation: the hand of a corpse that extends out into the road, in a scene of wreckage amid the Iraqi Invasion of 1990 (Figure 8). This history helps explain the strong association between abjection and power (and specifically military power) in the work of Albagshi and Al-Sheibani.



Figure 7: Rat and soldier, from Sandarah.



Figure 8: Hand and flies, from Sandarah

The Iraqi Invasion of 1990 continues to exert a powerful shaping force over the Kuwaiti socio-cultural imagination. Surrealist representations of the abjection of military power, such as those of Albagshi and Al-Sheibani, demonstrate the lasting trauma of the experience, and the way in which contemporary artists are reimagining it as a means of metabolizing the event. Surrealism offers a unique and potent medium for grappling with and metabolizing trauma. Surrealism's distortion of reality conveys the disorientation and confusion that often accompany trauma. The juxtaposition of the ordinary and the extraordinary conveys the intrusion of traumatic events into everyday life, highlighting how such events can disrupt and transform one's sense of normality. Surrealism's flexibility, symbolic depth, and connection to the unconscious make it an effective tool for artists to process and express traumatic experiences. Through surrealist art, artists can confront and articulate complex emotions, offer commentary on their experiences, and promote healing and understanding both for themselves and their audiences. All such dimensions are evident in the work of the artists considered in this paper, and help explain the vibrant and challenging employment of the surrealist idiom in contemporary Kuwaiti visual art.

Nawaf Al-Hmeli



Nawaf Al-Hmeli, “The Affliction,” oil on canvas, 100 x 80 cm.

Nawaf Al-Hmeli is an acclaimed contemporary Kuwaiti artist known for his evocative and thought-provoking works that often blend surrealism with socio-political commentary. Born and raised in Kuwait, Al-Hmeli has developed a distinctive artistic style that reflects both his cultural heritage and his keen observations of global and local issues. His work is characterized by its vivid imagery, symbolic depth, and the ability to evoke complex emotional responses from viewers. His works often address themes such as identity, power, and societal transformation, using surrealism as a lens to explore and critique these complex topics. This approach places him within a broader tradition of surrealist artists who use the fantastical and the irrational to use the powers of the subconscious to challenge prevailing narratives.

Nawaf Al-Hmeli’s painting “The Affliction,” created during the COVID-19 pandemic lockdown in Kuwait, serves as a poignant surrealist commentary on themes of dislocation, fear, and the collective response to imposed safety measures. The artwork resonates deeply with the

public's varied reactions to face masks during the pandemic. Set against a foreboding scene, the dark sky roils with pollution, symbolizing the contamination risk posed by the virus. A Chinese-style bowl in the foreground, complete with chopsticks and a bat's wing protruding from the soup, alludes to the virus's origin in China and the hypothesis that it may have been transmitted to humans from bats in a Wuhan market. The objects in the painting are coated in a mucous-like substance, referencing the virus's impact on the human respiratory system. The moon is eclipsed by a giant virus, emphasizing the pandemic's cataclysmic consequences.

In the midst of this apocalyptic landscape floats a house, borne aloft by a face mask as if it were a parachute. The house, in a state of disrepair and coated in the same mucous-like substance, has its door sealed shut, symbolizing the lockdowns that confined people to their homes. Despite its dilapidation, the house serves as a focal point of hope in the image. A pair of hands extends out of a window in prayer, and the parachute-like mask allows the house to float above the ground, out of reach of contamination and away from the encroaching pollution.

In Al-Hmeli's representation, the face mask becomes a symbol of salvation, protecting against the dangers of the coronavirus. The act of prayer within the house it bears aloft further underscores this hope. The house, which also functions as a prison cell with its barred windows and blocked door, finds its only possibility of mobility through the mask. This linkage of the mask to flight juxtaposes archetypal notions of freedom and liberty against Western conceptions, where the mask (like the veil) often symbolizes repression and constraint. In this imaginative construction, the mask is transformed into an emblem of freedom and hope, offering a stark contrast to the perilous landscape characterized by the threat of contamination.



Nawaf Al-Hmeli, "Parachute" oil on canvas.

Al-Hmeli's unique approach to complex socio-political themes through symbolic and dream-like imagery is further exemplified in his painting "Parachute" with its intricate surreal composition. This painting provides a forceful critique of the precarity of contemporary society, and the anxieties that result from this. The painting represents a chaotic tangle of monstrous chairs and structural beams, with a corresponding sense of disorientation and precariousness being created as a result. In the scene depicted, the characters struggle to climb the structure that is created by these elements, with themes of desperation and survival being implied. One figure clings to a beam, another attempts to scale the structure, and a third figure parachutes down using a chair as a makeshift parachute, these actions symbolizing attempts to respond to crises and the uncertainty of their environment.

The use of everyday objects like chairs in such unconventional and surreal scenarios highlights the surrealist theme of juxtaposing the ordinary with the extraordinary. Chairs, typically symbols of stability and rest, are here transformed into elements of instability and peril, reflecting the upheaval caused by the pandemic. The parachuting figure, using a chair as a parachute, suggests a creative but precarious attempt to navigate through turmoil and find a safe landing. The dark, cloudy background and the eerie, unnatural lighting add to the

painting's sense of foreboding and uncertainty. The figures seem to be suspended in a liminal space, neither grounded nor entirely airborne, indicating a state of transition and unpredictability. This evokes a pervasive sense of dislocation and fear, alluding to the conditions of late capitalism and the social atomization that go along with it.

In this work, Al-Hmeli uses surrealism to comment on societal realities, particularly the dynamics of power and qualification in professional settings. The figures strive for high positions and success, with the empty boxes for their heads perhaps symbolizing a lack of knowledge or qualifications. The man and the woman clinging to the beams and climbing the structures represent those who are trying hard to achieve their goals without having the necessary skills or experience. The empty boxes on their heads emphasize the superficiality of their efforts, highlighting a critical perspective on meritocracy. The man with the parachute heading towards a chair—a symbol of a job or a position of power—represents those who achieve success through external help rather than personal merit. Despite having an empty box for a head, indicating a lack of qualifications, he is still able to secure a good position, suggesting the influence of connections or nepotism. This surreal depiction critiques the reality where personal connections and external assistance often outweigh actual competence and qualifications.

Nawaf Al-Hmeli's "Parachute" is a powerful surrealist piece that captures the themes of instability, adaptation, and survival in the face of societal upheaval. Through his imaginative use of everyday objects and surreal imagery, Al-Hmeli invites viewers to reflect on their own responses to crisis and the complex interplay between support structures and the chaos they seek to mitigate. By incorporating symbolic elements that critique the superficial attainment of power and success, Al-Hmeli uses surrealism to offer a profound commentary on contemporary societal dynamics.

Conclusion

The literature provides a comprehensive foundation for understanding the role of surrealism in contemporary Kuwaiti art. The works of

Mohammed Al-Sheibani and Yousef Albagshi reflect the dynamic socio-cultural shifts in Kuwait, using surrealist elements to critique power structures and explore themes of identity and trauma. The impact of censorship and the digital revolution further shape their artistic expression, situating their work within both a regional and global context. This study builds on these insights to offer a nuanced perspective on the vibrant and challenging employment of surrealism in contemporary Kuwaiti visual art.

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