

GILGAMESH

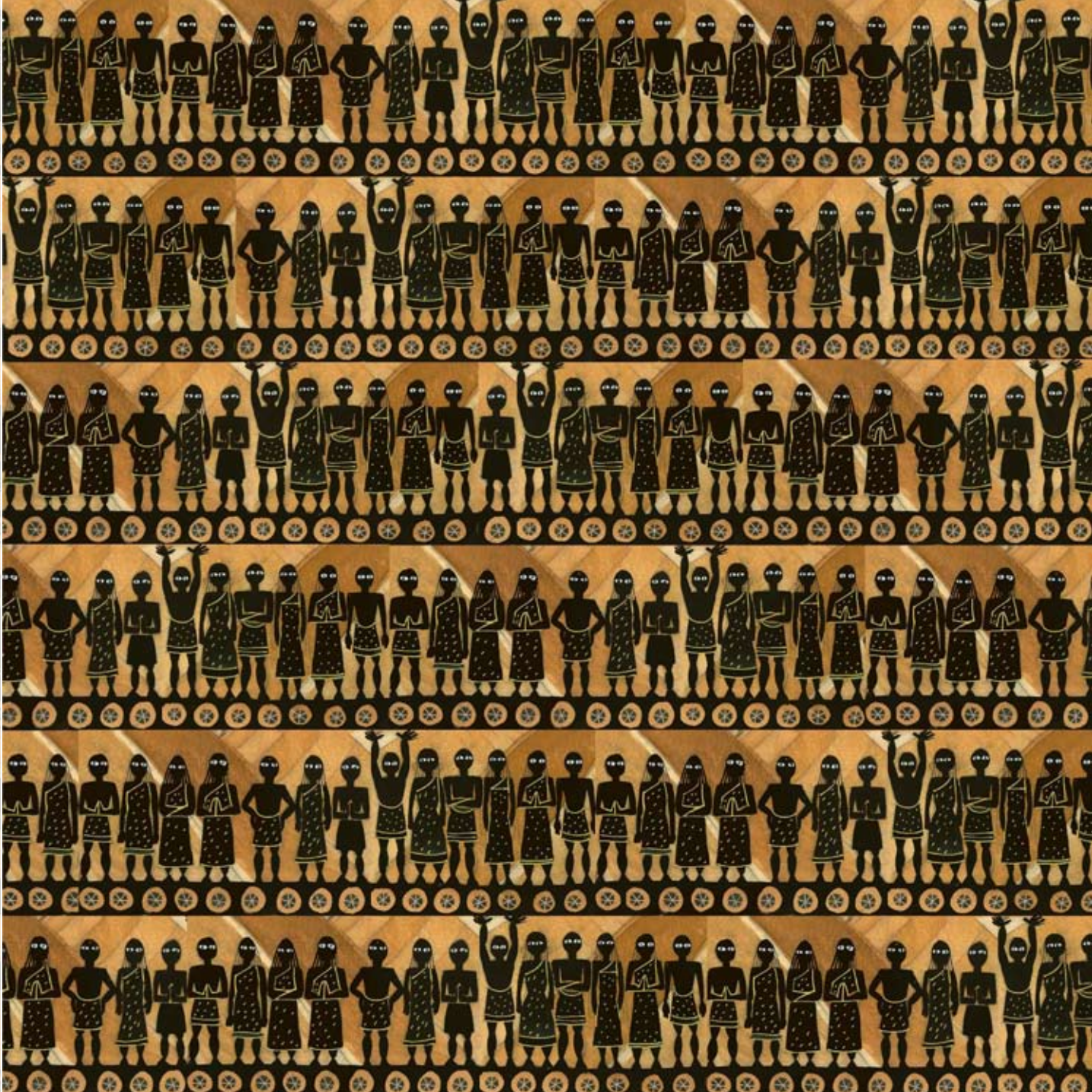
THE HERO OF MESOPOTAMIA



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Attestation of authorship

I hereby declare this submission is my work and that, to the best of my knowledge and belief, it contains no material previously published or written by another person nor material which to a substantial extent has been accepted for the award of any other degree or diploma of a university or other institution of higher learning, except where due acknowledgment is made in the acknowledgements.

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Abstract

This thesis creatively reconsiders the ancient Sumerian *Epic of Gilgamesh* and offers a design of the ancient epic as a contemporary, illustrated text. The work is concerned with notions of heroism, and methods relating to construction of imagery.

The manifestation of this investigation is the illustrated book *Gilgamesh, the Hero of Mesopotamia*, which comprises the principal site of research in the project. It consists of thirty-six drawings that explore cyclic composition as a form of narrative discourse.

Introduction

This project is a creative investigation into a renegotiation of the *Epic of Gilgamesh*. The work is formatted as an illustrated artifact. The thesis seeks to creatively consider the nature of heroism as personified by Gilgamesh and Enkidu in ways that might deviate from much illustrated mythological work. In renegotiating convention, I examine from a personal and historical perspective the impact of the exploitation of power in Mesopotamian culture. Into this consideration I also import the artistic considerations of certain historical and cultural graphic forms.

This exegesis is therefore divided into four chapters.

The first chapter explains the positioning of the researcher. Because of the close relationship of the researcher/illustrator to the project this is helpful in understanding not only the methodological approach adopted, but also the reason the work is underpinned by certain values and treated in distinctive ways.

The second chapter considers the heuristic system of enquiry employed in the realisation of the project. The heuristic approach is useful when a researcher is seeking heightened levels of discovery where intuition and informed subjectivity are used to resolve a series of often changing questions.

The third chapter discusses conceptions of heroism by briefly considering heroism and religion, heroism as a cycle, and the relationship between the hero, the ideologue and the dispossessed. The final chapter of the thesis is formatted as a commentary on the work. In this section specific conceptual, technical and illustrative concepts are discussed in relation to image construction, text formatting and design.

Positioning the researcher

I am a Mesopotamian artist. I have worked for twenty-eight years as a professional children's book illustrator and have in publication over 200 titles with publishers as diverse as Penguin, Reed Publishing, Red Rocket Publishing - New Zealand, Gardens Publishing and Children's Cultural House- International.

I was born in Baghdad. I spent more than half of my life there. I share the same roots as Gilgamesh. Our feet walked on the same soil, we lived under the same sky and ate the produce of the same land. Like him, my life has been a journey from Mesopotamia (Iraq), escaping wars, persecution, feelings of insecurity, sadness and, ultimately, the death of people I love.

As an Iraqi woman I have experienced dictatorship and the misuse of power. Historically Gilgamesh embroiled his people in popular conflicts for which they paid. Saddam Hussein also involved his people in unpopular wars (1980, 1990, 2003). My contemporary world was punctuated by the draping of black cloth that announced the killing of new victims at the front. Our conscripted sons and husbands fought a war for a regime to which they had no allegiance. Anyone who spoke against Saddam faced accusations of conspiracy and betrayal. The punishment was invariably brutal and slow. Generally it was collective and included most of the family members of the accused. As a consequence, today millions of Iraqis are scattered over the world.

Like many others, my family experienced fear and oppression first hand. However this situation was exacerbated by the involvement of the US military in April 2003. The resulting bombings and theft irreparably damaged not only aspects of our history and culture, but also our cities, streets and homes. Our family home was taken in 2006.

However the most profound loss for me was the death of my father. He was killed in terrorist attack in February 2007. After the exhibition of my honours project in November of the same year I received the news of the death of my beloved brother. He was also killed, with four of his colleagues, in a terrorist attack. The grief and loss still walk with me.

Therefore in questioning, as an illustrator, the power and nature of Gilgamesh, I do more than question an epic. I question the morality of conquest and its impact on the lives of ordinary people.

(Figure 1: 1) Family photograph taken in Syria in 1974. Left to right: Lamia Aziz, Abdul Saheb Aziz (my father, who was killed in February 2007), Aziz Aziz (my brother, who was killed in May 2007), Baydaa Aziz, Shrif Agha (my mother), and Ryad Aziz.



Research Methodology

Paradigm

The research is constructed under a paradigm of creative practice. A research paradigm shapes how we perceive a problem. According to Burrell and Morgan (1979, p. 24). 'To be located in a paradigm is to view the world in a particular way.'

The research paradigm influences the processes and outcomes of a design project. It also frames a unique world-view inside which the designer is able to position her research.

In this research project I adopt the position of an Iraqi woman illustrator whose inquiry has been shaped by certain experiences of the use and misuse of power.

Heuristics, the tacit and the self

The project may be understood as creative practice, and in solving problems inherent within the research it employs a heuristic enquiry. Heuristics offers a useful method of increasing the chances of discovery and creative resolution within a project (Scrivener, 2000, 2002, 2004; Garrison 1997, Dineen & Collins, 2005, Ings 2009).

Heuristics is a qualitative¹ system of enquiry that involves the use of intuition, one's own experience, and informal methods of investigation including trial and error, reflection and guesswork (Kleining & Witt, 2000). Schön (1983) also suggests that in such research 'our knowing is ordinarily tacit, implicit in our patterns of action' (p. 49).

Polanyi (1967) in discussing tacit 'knowing' suggests that tacit knowledge may be understood as knowledge we do not consciously know we possess but may draw upon as we encounter problems. It is often deeply embedded knowledge that is difficult to substantiate or communicate. Polanyi believed that creative acts (especially acts of discovery) are charged with strong personal feelings and commitments. He argued that informed guesses, hunches and imagining are part of 'exploratory acts' and are motivated by 'passions'. These passions, he suggested, might be used for discovering 'truth', but they might not necessarily be in a form that can be stated in propositional or formal terms.

Tacit knowing is also related to what Rogers (1959) calls the 'actualised self'. It does not easily lend itself to explanation (in analytical terms), but develops as a consequence of an intuitive 'sense' of what is right.

1. Qualitative research may be understood as that which seeks to discover the nature and meaning of the phenomenon itself and to illuminate it through accounts of individuals who have directly encountered the phenomenon through experience.

Because this research project deals primarily with a subjective interpretation of an existing narrative (*The Epic of Gilgamesh*), the system of enquiry used to realise it involves both the artist and the questions she is asking. In other words the two aspects of the research are inseparable.

Moustakas (1990) describes the research question in a heuristic enquiry as a “personal challenge and puzzlement in the search to understand one’s self and the world in which one lives” (p.15). More succinctly Bullough & Pinnegar (2001, p. 13) say, “Who a researcher is, is central to what the researcher does.”

In this project the nature of the researcher is integral both to how the images are conceived and to the value system through which they are processed. The work is a consequence of a culture in which the illustrator has been immersed in experiences that she has lived. Ideas are generated from a sometimes unaccountable and indescribable store of experiences and these affect images that emerge as a consequence of the research.

Moustakas explains this relationship when he says:

The self of the researcher is present throughout the process and while understanding the phenomenon with increasing depth, the researcher also experiences growing self-awareness and self-knowledge ... the process of discovery leads investigation to new images and meanings regarding human phenomena, but also realisations relevant to their own experiences and lives (1990, p. 9).

A heuristic inquiry validates a source of knowing and analysis that an illustrator cannot access from recorded data. While some external data, like photographs, letters and maps, exist outside of the self, their synergies are processed through immersion and connection with memory. By processing my questioning in an internal pathway of the self, I am able to engage the intangible and exercise connections in very sophisticated ways.

Processing thinking

With a heuristic enquiry I develop ideas and questions in unison. Thus when I create work I ask it questions and it does the same to me. Although I sketch out roughs of work (Figure 1: 2 and 1: 3) these are open at all times to change and chance while I am developing the final works.

Schön (1983) describes this approach in his writing on reflection on practice. He describes it as a process of discovery where a dialogue is established between the practitioner on one hand, and collected material and produced work on the other. This results in identifying connections and correlations through constant revision of material. I find the more material viewed and work produced, the more connections and correlations are established, and therefore the chances of discovery are increased.

(Figure 1: 2) Aziz, L. (2008). Indian ink over a henna background. In experiments conducted at this time I explored techniques for creating characters as symbolic forms.



According to Schön, a practitioner often deals with situations of uncertainty, instability, uniqueness and value conflict. The multi-faceted (and to a certain extent, cross-cultural) nature of my project may result in frequent shifts of focus. To avoid disablement with progress, I have used this reflection on what I am doing as a means of assessing compatibility of ideas and as a form of flexible approach that I can adapt easily to the ever-increasing number of detours and obstacles encountered in the course of my research.

(Figure 1: 3) Models Faissal Hatam (my son) and Anthony Tompkins (June 2008). Auckland. I used photographs of models as reference material for poses in the illustrations. This was done as a method of insuring a sense of subtle dynamism in what could otherwise have been relatively static poses.



Challenges of heuristics

Ings (2009) says,

Because it is so aligned to autobiography, heuristic inquiry is self-exposing. Its journeys through ‘internal pathways of the self’ go far deeper than simply reflecting on actions. Heuristics delves into the researcher’s fundamental concepts of meaning, knowledge and identity. It draws on these in passionate and demanding ways in its pursuit of deeper levels of inquiry (p. 17).

Thus a careful consideration of what heuristics requires on an emotional and intellectual level is important. This is because, when rigorously applied, such an inquiry has the potential to unearth and expose very personal issues to scrutiny. If one is not prepared for this, this exposure may make things very difficult because one is dealing with more than data. One is dealing with sometimes painful memories that may surface unbidden in response to problem-solving within a project.

Another difficulty with heuristics stems from its highly self-referential nature. Although heuristics affirms the personal, it can sometimes offer a deceptively sheltered environment in which critical decision-making is required to function. This can lead to an illustrator failing to address the limitations of internal critique. If one continuously falls back on one’s own terms of reference there is no guarantee that emerging solutions to problems are not being constrained by limitations one doesn’t know one possesses.

Because my work is ultimately concerned with communication I have imported into the enquiry a system of review that allows me to check for clarity and effectiveness. Primarily this involves feedback from external reviewers, including the artist Samer Hatam, artist Lesley Kaiser and illustrator Dr. Welby Ings.

Often this feedback is sought not as a review of a completed illustration but as input into its conceptualisation and refinement. (See Figures 1:4, A and B).



A. Sketch of first experiment, The gods and the people lived all together on the earth .
Aziz, L. (June 2008).



B. Working final sketch for first image, The gods and the people lived all together on the earth. Aziz, L. (May 2009).

(Figure 1: 4 A, B) Aziz, L. (2008). Initially illustrations in the book were 'blocked in' using shapes over which details were tested. Thus, version A was not rendered in henna and ink. This approach afforded me a form of 'shorthand' so I could check coherency and balance. Image B shows changes in my approach after receiving feedback.

Conclusion

I have employed a heuristic enquiry as a means of advantaging and utilising the highly subjective nature of both the topic and treatment of this thesis. The system of enquiry has three distinct advantages.

Firstly, heuristics enables me to connect exterior, secondary references (literature, photographs, archived material, photographs, etc.) with the intangible nature of memory. This means I can connect tangible data with emotions and recollection. This enables me to draw more deeply on unique ideas and resonances in my thinking.

Secondly, heuristics can embrace reflection on practice. This allows me to establish dialogue with my work and the collected data. This enables me to make critical and intuitive decisions about emerging designs.

Thirdly, heuristics is flexible. It is open to change and it accepts that in illustrating a work like this there may not be prescribed formulae. One is instead open to change generated by the process of designing. Because of this, the approach to thinking is fluid and responsive, and this leaves thinking more open to opportunities for discovery.

Critical framework

Introduction

This thesis considers issues of power and how these might be articulated in illustration. It is useful, firstly, to clarify my approach to the concept of heroism in relation to these works before considering the approach to creating the final thirty-five images. Before discussing this, however, it is helpful to understand the narrative I am dealing with.

Gilgamesh the hero

Narrative outline

*The Epic of Gilgamesh*¹ is the story of a legendary king of Uruk who was born fully grown, two parts god and one part human. Suspended thus between divine and human, framed as an immortal god but doomed to die like a human, Gilgamesh was restless and heroic. However his appetite for combat was such that he oppressed his people. He had an insatiable desire for conquest and even when his people appealed to him to desist, he simply continued. As a result his empire grew but the men and women who served him slid further and further into grief and despair.

*He walks around in the enclosure of Uruk
Like a wild bull he makes himself mighty,
There is no rival who can raise his weapon against him*

1. *The Epic of Gilgamesh* was discovered in 1853 in Nineveh (Iraq), in the excavated library of the Assyrian King Assurbanipal.
2. Gilgamesh was a powerful king and a warrior who used his power to bring material benefits to his people and to expand the borders of his empire. However his pursuit of war and the ideology of conquest caused his people to suffer deeply. Through the epic Gilgamesh made significant journeys, experiencing war, fear, sadness, love and death. His greatest endeavor was his search for immortality.

*His fellows stand, attentive to his orders
And the men of Uruk become anxious in... [missing lines from the original text of the epic]
Gilgamesh does not leave a son to his father,
Day and night he arrogantly
...
Gilgamesh does not leave a girl to her mother
The daughter of the warrior, the bride of the young man,
The gods kept hearing their complaints so
The gods of the heavens implored the Lord of Uruk (Trans. Kovacs, 1998)*

Accordingly the gods punished Gilgamesh by sending Enkidu, a wild man, to do battle with him. In Uruk the two men wrestled. When Gilgamesh finally was able to throw Enkidu to the ground he looked at him and loved him like a brother.

As a united force Gilgamesh and Enkidu refused to obey the gods. They killed Humbaba, the guardian of the sacred cedar forest, and they also killed the Bull of Heaven. This sacrilege angered the goddess Ishtar, who had also been spurned by the great king. Consequently she asked the other gods to punish the friends by choosing one of them to be put to death. Eventually the gods decided that it should be Enkidu. So Enkidu was tortured and paralysed by a pernicious illness. Despite his steadfast efforts to cure and comfort his friend, Gilgamesh was unable to save him. Overtaken by grief at his death, Gilgamesh decided to search for immortality. In his delirious roaming he reached the abode of Utnapishtim³, where the warrior king was tested and failed. Utnapishtim assured Gilgamesh that he could only escape death by picking a plant that grew in the bed of the Tigris River. Gilgamesh picked this plant and on his way back to Uruk fell into a deep sleep under a tree. While sleeping a snake appeared and ate the plant.

When Gilgamesh awoke he sadly accepted his fate in losing the plant of life. He returned to Uruk and accepted the advice of Enlil⁴, focusing on the needs of his people and repairing the walls of the city.

3. Utnapishtim is the old Mesopotamian name for Noah.

4. Enlil is the Sumerian god of earth, wind and universal air.

The hero of Mesopotamia and heroism

Gilgamesh in this epic is constructed as a hero, yet it is my interpretation of heroism that has led to a different approach to the story in my illustrated book. Campbell (1949) offers a useful analysis of the ‘hero’ in his book *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*. In this seminal work on comparative mythology he argues that “The hero is the man of self-achieved submission” (p. 16). Heroism is a dichotomy between a hero’s self-inflated ego and his often destructive and brutal actions: this concept is a fundamental aspect of my project, and this contradiction is employed as a method in creating ambiguities and layers in the artworks.

Campbell’s writing is useful in that it offers a view of the hero as a phenomenon that exists inside a fundamental structure, which he calls the mono myth. This structure contains a number of stages, which include a call to adventure, a road of trials, achieving the ‘boon’, a return to the ordinary world, and, finally, the application of the boon. It is through this structure that the journey of the archetypal hero (found in the world in many mythologies and religions) is made.

In the introduction to *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*, Campbell wrote:

A hero ventures forth from the world of common day into a region of supernatural wonder: fabulous forces are there encountered and a decisive victory is won: the hero comes back from this mysterious adventure with the power to bestow boons on his fellow man (Campbell, p.30).

This framing of a hero as something generic offers a challenge to me as an illustrator if I am to move my work beyond the cosmetic. It is my intention to challenge Campbell’s hypothesis and to depict *The Epic of Gilgamesh* as something deeper than a cycle of events experienced by an archetype. In this regard, my recent work *Questioning the Dreams of Gilgamesh* (Aziz, 2007) is a useful forerunner to this project as the illustrations considered the epic as two voices: the first being that of the original epic, and the

second being the illustrator's voice, the voice of an artist who questions warlike ideologies based on her experiences living in Iraq during the wars of the 1980s and 1990s. Thus, in realising this work, personal experiences of war in contemporary Iraq were brought into the discourse with the added knowledge of the consequences of dreams such as Gilgamesh's of quests for power, territory and meaning.

(Figure 2: 1) Aziz, L (2009). Gilgamesh as a consequence of his unchallenged power caused his people to suffer. In this illustration we see the people praying to the gods to help them. With its subtle conversations between henna washes and photographic images from my 2008 trip to Baghdad and Jordan, the illustration creates fused layers that reveal the ancient and recent past of Mesopotamia's history.



Heroism and religion

In this thesis I have also made a connection between religion and heroism. The ancient Mesopotamian people believed in gods, and they built strong relationships between themselves and these gods. Almajdy (1998), analysing the Sumerian beliefs, argues that the Sumerians were among the first civilisations that practised religion and a strong hierarchical order was developed among the gods. He says:

It is likely that the Sumerian religious establishment was the first in the ancient world that is integral and harmonious in its structure and functions. Although the religious establishment was separated into two divisions; the hierarchical system of the gods and goddesses, and the priestly system- the Temples were communion arenas for both the priests and the gods, where they existed and practice their duties, religious traditions and may also been the scene to write and formulate their myths and literature (Almajdy, p. 29).

In comparison to the depiction of heroes in other ancient civilizations, where these men are considered to be the contacting link between the people and the gods, Gilgamesh was the gods' presence on earth. As he was represented in the epic Gilgamesh is as knowledgeable and mystical as the gods, with a similar eagerness to perform great deeds.

*He saw the Secret, discovered the Hidden,
He brought information of (the time) before the Flood.
He went on a distant journey, pushing himself to exhaustion
....
Inspect its inner wall, the likes of which no one can equal!
Take hold of the threshold stone- it dates from ancient times!
Go close to the Eanna Temple, the residence of Ishtar,
Such as no later king or man ever equaled! (Trans. Kovacs, 1998)*

(Figure 2:2) Aziz, L. (2009) People pray for gods to help them.



The cycle of heroism

Although Gilgamesh in the Mesopotamian culture symbolises the pinnacle of heroism (as depicted in art and literature), I believe that Gilgamesh was a leader who performed iniquitous deeds and that this kind of behaviour is generally associated with heroism. Thus in the history of Mesopotamia it has always been the case that many leaders in power have tried to legitimise their acts under the heroism concept. In the epic of Gilgamesh, when Enkidu proposed to Gilgamesh to go on a great adventure, Enkidu used his power to serve his egoistic wants and needs.

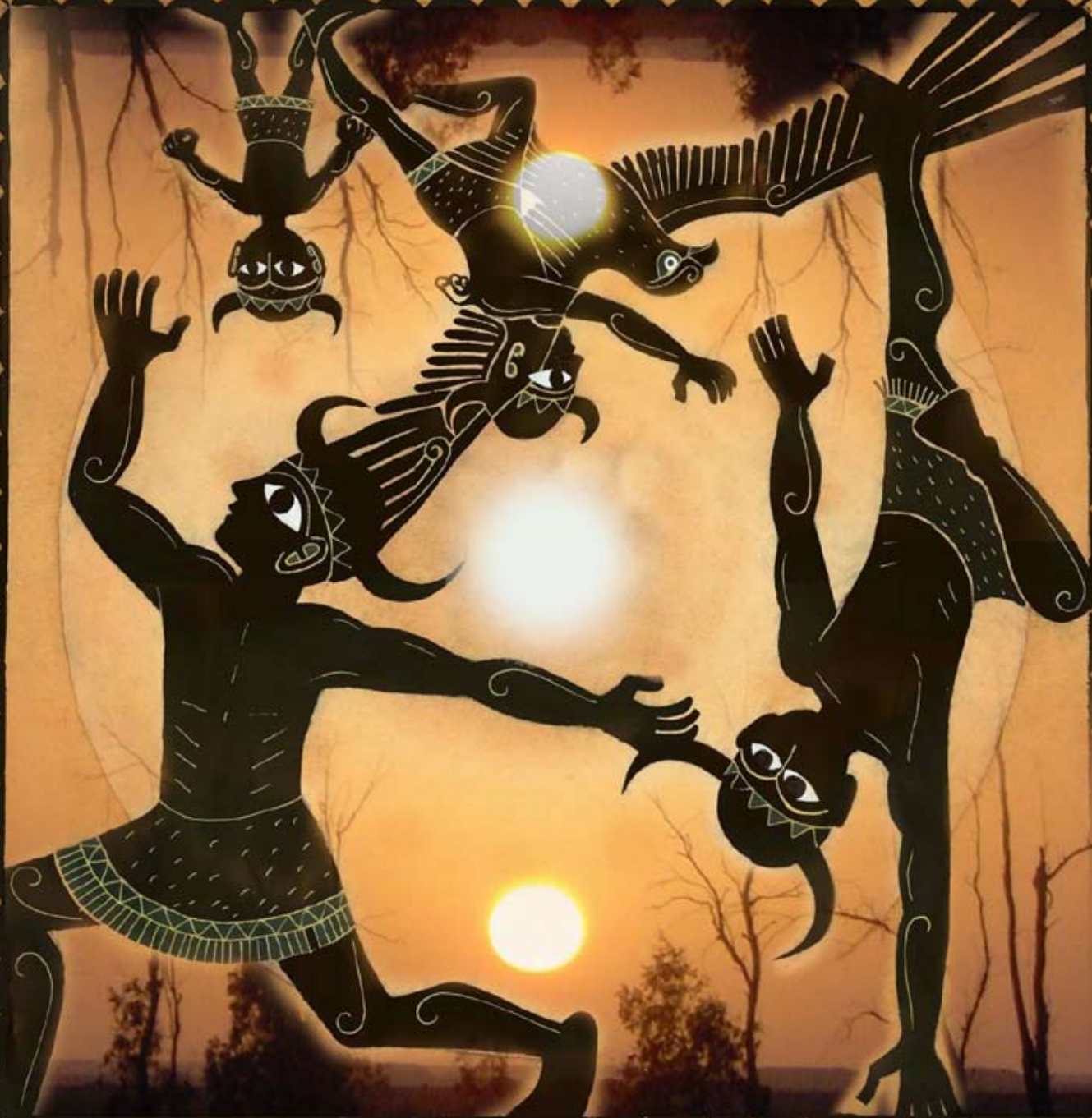
However my project searches deeper and invokes our contemporary history by stimulating the memories of the brutality and the atrocities that happened and are still happening in modern day Mesopotamia. The question many share with me, and the question that I explore in this work, is ‘What is really inside a hero’s mind?’

Campbell (1949) talks about the nature of the hero-cycle in our modern life. He says:

“One knows the tale; it has been told a thousand ways. It is the hero-cycle of the modern age, the wonder-story of mankind’s coming to maturity’ (p. 387).

The history of Mesopotamia has always brought up heroes with malevolent dreams ... heroes who looked at their predecessors as examples, and who, over the course of their rule, fulfilled their dreams of power without considering consequences.

(Figure 2: 3) Aziz, L. (2009). Gilgamesh grew up a strong and powerful king. With its subtle conversations between henna washes and range of red images of the Iraq environment, the illustration reflects the recent war that has destroyed the atmosphere of my country. The illustration creates fused layers that reveal the ancient and recent past of Mesopotamia’s history.



Heroism, the ideologue and the dispossessed

There is a fine line between the pursuit of heroism and the abuse of power.

When the historian and moralist John Emerich Edward Dalberg Acton observed in a letter to Bishop Mandell Creighton in 1887 that “Power tends to corrupt, and absolute power corrupts absolutely. Great men are almost always bad men,” he articulated an observation that has a long history of illustration.

The tension between heroic ‘great intentions’ and the means by which its ideals are realised can often lead to an uncomfortable blurring of the boundaries between heroism and dictatorship.

In the creation of the political hero we often see the employment of propaganda as a means of exaggeration and sanitisation. Events are reshaped and retold so they epitomise ideals, and the problematic behaviours of torture, threat, and the silencing of dissidence are marginalised or removed.

Ideologues as heroes are generally constructions that rely on reworked narrations of their pursuit and maintenance of power. Their ‘humanity’ is generally theatricised. Their deeds are edited and rewoven into grand cycles of quest, success and redemption.

In his book on the new Iraq, Braude (2003) observes that in Iraq ‘a historic morass of intrigue and violence lie behind the birth of a nation.’ ‘Its ideologues [he suggests] weave together a clean national history designed to instill patriotism in young people ... The narration of an essential Iraq through time has been an ongoing project for political ideologues’ (p.6).

(Figure 2: 4) Aziz, L. (2009). Gilgamesh abusing his people's rights. Indian ink and digital imagery. With its subtle conversations between henna washes and (pale blue) images from my personal archives, the illustration creates fused layers that reveal the ancient and recent past of Mesopotamia's history.



Gilgamesh and Saddam Hussein were both political ideologues and both were constructed as heroes. Although the former claimed links to the gods, both saw themselves as ruling by divine consent and both pursued campaigns of war-based expansion as a means of actualising 'nationhood'.

Although they cannot be regarded as duplicates of each other, in my work I am interested in the fragmentary narratives of their oppressed peoples.

When a hero re-tells the story of his rule he makes invisible the inconvenient narratives of ordinary people. Yet ironically his pursuit of a cohesive grand narrative results in fragmented narratives for those over whom he has governance. The unexplained disappearance of people, fragmented pieces of information, and loss of homes, jobs and social patterns as a consequence of war mean that victims are left with fragments of lived but often incoherent experience.

These fragments can be found in my work. The world of war-torn Iraq is one of small fractures. These appear as almost timid elements that surface through my illustrations. They are small and often decontextualised, but in their smallness they are heroic. Their heroism is less one of ideology and more one of survival and the quest for meaning. Their voice in my work is deliberately re-imported into the heroic narrative.

Telling fiction stories of heroes

Dutton (2009), in discussing fictional storytelling suggests that 'Human being across the globe expend staggering amounts of time and resources on creating and experiencing fantasies and fictions' (p. 109).

During the last two years of my research and my long years of working as an illustrator I found that *The Epic of Gilgamesh*, has been either translated, edited and narrated, or researched, analysed and discussed, but very few illustrated versions have been published, and, in general, the illustrated books tell the story of Gilgamesh the hero in literal forms of illustration. In contrast, my project is a retelling of the story, dealing with issues that are influencing contemporary life, exploiting the ancient epic, and then truly identifying the characteristics of a hero. By using a variety of methods, materials and concept in the illustrations, such overlaying multiple images that use different media, I have suggested the ambiguities of heroism: they serve my approach to the epic as an attempt to engage contemporary readers and wide audience.

Dutton describes fiction as a universal pleasure for readers. He says:

That mental involvement in the imagined world of fiction is a cross-cultural universal already suggests that fiction-making is an evolved adaptation. This idea is further supported by the fact that people everywhere find stories intellectually and emotionally arresting, and that they take immense pleasure in hearing them, reading them, or seeing them acted out (p. 105).





Commentary

Introduction

In this commentary I will briefly discuss five specific aspects of the illustrative approach adopted in the realisation of this book. While of course there are many considerations when illustrating a text such as *Gilgamesh, the Hero of Mesopotamia*, and many of these are interrelated, I hope that by discussing the use of colour, theatricalisation of character, cyclic construction, proportionality, and the relationship between text and image, the chapter might serve to make more explicit significant decisions taken in the realisation of the work.

The use of colour

Conventionally one might approach the illustration of the *Gilgamesh, the Hero of Mesopotamia* using a broad colour palette. This approach in the past has been used by non-Iraqi illustrators like Zeman (1995)¹, Debdoib (1997), and Parkins (2003). Conversely, a number of Middle Eastern artists have illustrated of *Gilgamesh* using locally sourced materials and palettes. Belkahia² (2000) uses henna and leather in his artworks, and Faisel Laibi Sahi (2008) employs earthenware clays as a means of referencing the nature of the desert in his sculptural depictions.

In the illustrations for *Gilgamesh, the Hero of Mesopotamia* I chose to use a restrained base palette that orchestrated the colours, of the desert. Inside this I sought relationships that might draw attention to the silhouetted, theatricalised aspect of the characters in the text.

Accordingly, I experimented with a traditional dye used in Mesopotamia, known broadly as henna. The dye of the plant³ is traditionally used to dye hair and skin. Its subtle browns and comparative stability as a pigment meant that I could not only reference a culturally suitable palette but also use very delicate layers of translucent dye on a variety of water-colour papers. The dye bleeds beautifully so I was able to create both clearly defined areas of color and softly blended relationships between them. By utilis-

(Figure 3:1) Aziz, L. (2009). The Homeland. Henna, Indian ink and digital imagery. With its subtle conversations between henna washes and (pale blue) images from my personal archives, the illustration creates fused layers that reveal the ancient and recent past of Mesopotamia's history.

1 Although it may be noted that Zeman employs a rich, warm colour pallet, it is not indicative of the Mesopotamian landscape. In addition her characterisation is essentially 'European Heroic' in nature. By this I mean her depictions do not engage to any significant extent with proportion, positioning, perspective or spatial concerns indicative of traditional Assyrian or Babylonian art.

2. Belkahia, currently work and lives in Morocco. He transforms traditional Moroccan materials like leather by impregnating them with natural minerals, local dyes and herbs like henna and saffron, and then stretching them into large abstract forms, he draws on magical symbols and rituals to make gigantic abstract signs.

3. Principally these dyes are versions of henna (*Lawsonia inermis*). This plant produces a burgundy dye molecule, lawsone that has been traditionally used in the Middle East to dye fingernails, leather, silk and wool.



ing a restrained henna palette I wanted to blur notions of time and space (see Figure 3:1). Thus when we examine many of the images we see forms that are simultaneously distinct and transparent. They exist as both manifestations of the moment and as memories of another time.

This bridging of time is part of my approach to the work as I remain cognisant of the fact that the land that this epic occurred in is also the land that sustained me and my family.

Against this world of fused distinctiveness I placed the characters of the epic. These figures exist as actors in front of a painted world (as we might see in the theatre). Their actions do not permeate the environment; they are the heroes and victims whose stories are played out across and around it.

To emphasis this demarcation I painted all the characters using Indian ink. While not as old as henna this pigment is also an organic medium (carbon black made from soot).

By using henna as a contrasting colour in my illustrations, I was able to emphasise the theatricality of the poses of the characters in the story. As a result they could be dramatically rendered as flattened, gesturing silhouettes. These figures performed a rhythmic, eternal, cyclic narration around, and across the landscapes of the book.



(Figure. 3:2) Henna dyes on canvas. Experiments like this were used to initially explore the potential of the dye as an illustration medium.

(Figure 3:3). Aziz, L. (2009). Images from the personal archives. The calligraphy (1900⁺) is my own grandfather (permission by Saheb Aziz) Images like these formed a personal archive of contemporary texts I drew upon when creating recent manifestations of Iraq in my illustrations.

3. Smith (1992) notes that Indian ink has been used in China since the third century AD, where it was originally called Masi



The use of theatricised characters

Traditionally in an epic there is a hero who is either favoured by or descended from deities. Traditionally this hero is by his nature 'larger than life', yet ironically he is governed by the whims of fate. In his narrative he passes theatrically through a series of cycles of adversity that lead to an eventual transformation. Gilgamesh, Arjuna, Rama, Siegfried, Herakles, Beowulf, Cuchulainn, Odysseus⁴ and Roland all exemplify this journey, and in each case their character and its engagement with the narrative is theatricised.

This theatricisation is essentially an externalisation of reaction, where we see manifested in action and reaction the internal conflicts the hero is suffering. He performs in response to an outside stimulus. These responses play out theatrically on a grand landscape. In approaching the illustration of Gilgamesh's epic I sought to depict this archetypal, externalised character of the epic hero by reducing him and the other players in the narrative to silhouettes. They are defined spatially in relation to each other and the worlds across which their story unfolds. We do not see the intimacy of their internal doubts except through gestures of their bodies. Their faces contain no room for nuance. Their mythical status is preserved. The only windows into their souls are the white eyes that stare disconcertingly out at the reader⁴. This flattened, theatrical treatment of character may be seen as a metaphor of Braude's (2003) ideologue who weaves together a clean national history. In so doing he reduces and is reduced to a 'cut-out' version of life. His people are similarly reduced and are able to be deployed with little suffering of his conscience. Thus terms like 'The Theatre of War' and 'staged battles' become comfortable substitutes for the suffering of ordinary human beings.

As an extension of this we see the characters of this epic almost as puppets. They control or are controlled by each other and, more significantly, by fate. Their stories are reduced to action and their hearts are not exposed.

(Figure 3:4) Aziz, L. (2009). The fight between heroes. With its subtle conversations between henna washes and red images of contemporary Iraq, the illustration creates fused layers that reveal the ancient and recent past of Mesopotamia's history.

4. This approach makes reference to the masked heroes of Greek theatre and the medieval European masks of the mystery and miracle plays.



The use of the cyclic

In this work I consider the idea of life as a cycle, a revolution in time where destinies, hopes and mistakes are played out repeatedly. This is related to Campbell's (1949) concept of the eternal hero's cycle where narratives renew and repeat.

In my illustrations the use of circular compositions prevent the reader from approaching the text from a fixed angle. This is because, although the original epic itself is linear, it is pitted with omissions and loss so it can never be interpreted as a fully known whole. Translators read and interpret it from many angles. It is not a fixed text with a single form.

*The Epic of Gilgamesh*⁵ has a number of different versions, including Layard's Standard version, the Babylonian and Sumerian versions and the Akkadian poem.

In addition it may be seen narratively as a series of cycles of quest and punishment. Gilgamesh is oppressive, so the gods send a rival (Enkidu) to punish him. Gilgamesh rejects the sexual advances of Anu (the sky god's daughter) and is punished by being attacked by the Bull of Heaven.

(Figure 3: 5) Aziz, L. (2009). Henna, Indian ink and digital images. This illustration depicts Gilgamesh asking the gods to bring him victory. The relationship between Gilgamesh and the gods is divine, whereas the relationship between Gilgamesh and Enkidu is that of joint couriers who ferry messages between the gods and ordinary mortals. In this process the heavens are linked to the earth.

The cyclic illustration incorporates a photograph I took in 2009 from an aeroplane flying over Bahrain. (in Sumerian mythology Bahrain is the Land of Heaven.)

5. It also had a number of titles including He Who Saw the Deep (sha nagba) and Surpassing All Other Things (shotar eli shrn).



However, beyond narrative manifestations of the cyclic in my illustrations, I am also interested in the cyclic nature of political/heroic abuse.

The pursuit of ideological utopias based on unattainable ideals has given rise in Mesopotamia to a series of historical repetitions⁶. These have meant that in each recurring cycle ordinary people have suffered.

Accordingly, in my cyclic illustrations neither the hero, nor the gods, nor the people hold a stable position at the presumed top of the page. All images can be turned and all things can topple. Power and position are rotated. As we read time (the progression of the narrative), we turn each image and, in turn, the position of characters rise and fall. We are constantly reminded of the paradox of power; that it entails both temporary control and an inevitable fall.

The hero's quest for power continues a renewal in a cycle that I suggest brings the times of Sadam Hussein and Gilgamesh into related manifestations in a recurring narrative.

6. Although it would be simplistic to suggest that these repetitions are identical, a political archaeology of Mesopotamia reveals a country fraught with quests for, and falls from, power. After the fall of Babylon to the Persians in the year 539 B.C., the neo-Babylon empire perished and a series of foreign dynasties governed Mesopotamia: Umayyad Caliph of Damascus (661-750), the Abbasid caliphs (750 and 1258), the Mongol Il-Khans (1258-1335), Ottoman Rule (1535-1917), birth of the Mandate and Modern Iraq 1917, 1958 and the coup d'état that sought to assert an Iraqi identity rather than an ethnic and Iraq became republic. In 1968 was the Ba'ath Party rising when Ahmad Hasan Al Bakr became the president of Iraq. In 1979 Saddam Hussein named himself the president of Iraq. During his time we had three wars. In 1980-1988 war with Iran, Saddam Hussein became so powerful that in 1990 he invade Kuwait. A UN-backed, US-led military coalition routed Iraq's forces and forced Saddam Hussein out of Kuwait in 1990. On 20 March 2003 a new US-led effort to topple Saddam Hussein, saw Baghdad fell within twenty days.

The use of proportion

Gilgamesh, the Hero of Mesopotamia employs an approach to proportion that has its origins in the bas-reliefs of Mesopotamian culture.

When Assyrian⁷ artistic style began to emerge as the dominant art form in Mesopotamia between c.1500 BC and the fall of Nineveh in 612 BC, this resulted in a number of polychrome, carved stone reliefs that were used to decorate imperial monuments. These precisely delineated reliefs contained images of humans and guardian animals that were proportioned in relation to status. Human figures, although by today's standards comparatively static, were minutely detailed and could be understood (proportionately) in terms of hierarchical societal position.

In my work I have depicted gods as larger than heroes, and heroes as larger than people. We can see this visual hierarchy evidenced in an archaeological work like the Ur-Nina family relief (see Figure 3: 6). With this carving King Ur-Nina (c. 3000 BC) commemorated his buildings and had himself portrayed as a simple bricklayer. However,



(Figure 3: 6) King Ur-Nina and family. Bas-relief (3000-2180 BC), Paris: Louvre.

(Figure 3: 7) Aziz, L. (2009). Gilgamesh and Enkidu are challenging the gods. Henna, Indian ink and digital imagery. With its subtle conversations between henna washes and pale colour, the illustration creates fused layers that reveal the ancient and recent past of Mesopotamia's history.

7. Among the best known of these reliefs are the lion-hunt alabaster carvings depicting Assurnasirpal II (ninth century BC) and Assurbanipal (seventh century BC), both of which are in the British Museum.



although on this relief he carries a brick basket in front of his family, his relative, larger proportion signifies his high status and serves to undermine any reading of his image as that of a slave.

By employing this approach to proportion I have been able to use silhouettes and still maintain easy recognition of character.

Although this use of proportion in the depiction of power may be seen as historical, it was also evidenced during the regime of Saddam Hussein. At this time in Iraq enormous statues and vast murals depicting Saddam Hussein in a range of situations and costumes were erected. Sometimes he would be portrayed as a dedicated Muslim in military uniform, and at others he might appear as a modern-day Nebuchadnezzar mounted on a chariot. Irrespective of the portrayal, emphasis was placed on his proportion. As the 'Leader of the Nation' he towered above or looked 'over' the country. Accordingly, the almost ubiquitous nature of these images has been influential in my approach to depicting power in this book.

The relationship between text and images

The challenge when constructing a picture book for mature children (over 13 years) is that one is always faced with issues of language. By this, I don't simply mean the written word, but also how the language of images and the discourse between image and text might operate so the book does not replicate convention but might help in some small way to broaden notions of reading and understanding of the human condition. What I have sought to do is to create a book that not only speaks to young readers but also go deeper as it asks questions about life.

I am acutely aware that this is a text conceived in one culture that seeks to speak to others. I have drawn upon certain cultural and personal material, not to create a self-referencing document, but as a means of bridging the narratives of the self and the broader stories that may help us to understand universal ideas.

Okri (1997, p. 111) says,

A great challenge of our age, and future ages, it is to do for storytelling what Joyce did for language - to take it to the highest levels of enchantment and magic; to impact into infinite richness and convergences; to make story flow with serenity, with eternity.

Thus when I designed this book, I wanted it to flow. I wanted it to be very beautiful yet disturbed by subtle undercurrents. I did not divorce image from text, because I con-

(Figure 3: 8) Aziz, L. (2009). Gilgamesh and Enkidu killing the Bull of Heaven. Henna, Indian ink and digital imagery.



ceived the voice of the book in quiet dialogue with itself. That said, I wanted the work to speak dominantly through pictures and our physical engagement with them. Accordingly, I designed a layout where these images held dominance and could be read (albeit more enigmatically) without priority being given to the written word.

In an early experiment I considered constructing holes in the centre of pages with the images appearing on the back of the text pages. However this proved problematic as the design became congested and the status of the images was marginalised. A development of this idea was a book whose pages rotated (were cyclical). These pages were pivoted on a buttoned dome that allowed a simple rotation within the bound nature of the text. This system allowed (because the rotating image is larger than its backing) the reader to turn each image freely without striking its corners against the structure of the book.

The written text, however, is not rotated. It remains static and formal. It sits on the page facing the image and is set in a 12 point Times Roman typeface.

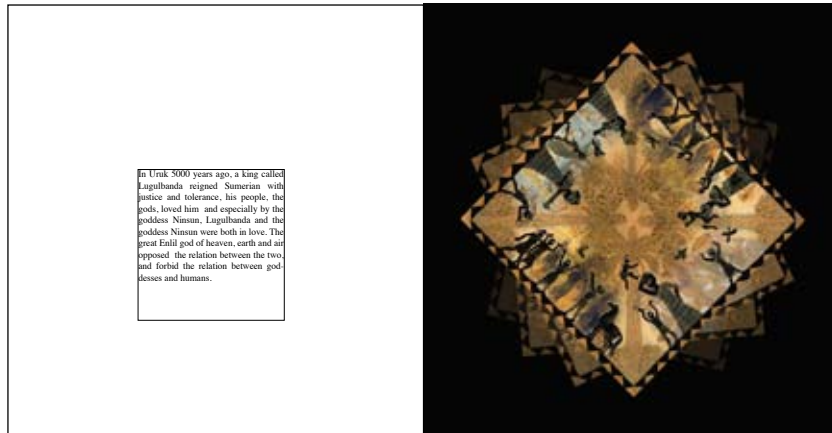
I have used this typeface because of its durability. Although it was designed some time ago (by Stanley Morison and Victor Lardent in 1931), I have selected it (like my images) for its ability to traverse time. Since 1931 Times Roman has served as a dominant typeface across four generations of readers, and it is still ubiquitous in its use.

It has appeared with every copy of Microsoft Windows since version 3.1. It is also used as the default font in many applications, especially web browsers and word processors. Thus children reading and processing language in online environments are familiar with its spoken (visual) tone and ethos.

As a typeface Times is also very easy to read. Its serifs, ascenders and descenders are so designed that words can be read from the composite shapes they form. This is why this typeface was originally designed for a newspaper that presented information in large blocks of text.

However, because of its comparatively small point size in *Gilgamesh, the Hero of Mesopotamia*, the voice of this typeface is relatively quiet and unobtrusive. It operates as a facing dialogue that narrates in support of the images.

As a body of copy on each page, written text also draws attention to the space in which it operates. Generally it appears as a square of text within a square of space. It is these dimensions that bring it into harmony with the square shape of the image on the facing page (see Figure 3:9).



(Figure3: 9) Aziz, L. (2009). The layout of the illustrated book, *Gilgamesh, the Hero of Mesopotamia*.

Conclusion

Okri (1997) stated,

To poison a nation, poison its stories. A demoralised nation tells demoralised stories of itself. Beware of the storytellers who are not fully conscious of the importance of their gifts, and who are irresponsible in the application of their art; they could unwittingly help along the psychic destruction of their people (Okri, p. 109).

In making this work I have been aware of this. I love Iraq. It is my home and the home of my forefathers. In telling its most famous story I have tried to reach beyond the professional considerations of the illustrator and reach more deeply into the nature of what it means to be part of a culture.

The thesis is subjective. It would be impossible to realise in any other way. Because of this it is also biased, but out of that bias comes a voice that seeks to relate, through loss, some of the beauty and magnificence of what it is to be Mesopotamian.

Accordingly, this exegesis has considered the heuristic methodology employed in developing the illustrations for *Gilgamesh, the Hero of Mesopotamia*. In reflecting on notions of heroism and certain principles relating to how an illustrator might 'talk' with images, I have also attempted to explain the rationale for the fusing of time and iconography in the work.

This work may be seen as the result of two years of part-time study in the thesis year of an MA, or it may be seen as the consequence of a life.

It is my gift to knowledge,
my gift to my family,
and my gift to alternative ways of seeing.

Lamia Aziz October 2009

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