

# An Interview with Mohammed Al Shammarey and Sinan Antoon

**Judy Maloney**

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From September 16 to October 20, 2010, the Juniata College Museum of Art hosted “Rain Song,” an exhibition of Mohammed Al Shammarey’s paintings, prints, and video art that respond to the beautiful and sorrowful poem by Badr Shakir al-Sayyab of the same name. A self-taught artist, Al Shammarey used both nature and technology in this work. He first placed the show’s paintings outside, to be altered in unpredictable ways by rainfall, and then digitalized and reduced the images. After adding Arabic calligraphy by hand, he redigitalized the images, and used ink jet printing to produce some of the final pieces. Within the pain of exile from his native Iraq, Al Shammarey says, “the computer and I form some sort of a constantly-occupied community.” The following interview took place on the eve of the exhibition’s opening.

**Judy Maloney:** This is Mohammed Al Shammarey, the artist who created this beautiful exhibition, “Rain Song,” and this Sinan Antoon, a poet, novelist, filmmaker, and Assistant Professor of Arabic Literature at the Gallatin School of New York University. Before the opening of the exhibition, Sinan will be giving a talk about the poet Badr Shakir al-Sayyab, who wrote “Rain Song,” the poem around which the exhibition revolves. Sinan, could you first read an excerpt from “Rain Song” in English first?

**Sinan Antoon:** Well, I don’t have it memorized, but sure.

Your eyes are two palm tree forests in early light,  
Or two balconies from which the moonlight recedes  
When they smile, your eyes, the vines put forth their leaves,  
And lights dance . . . like moons in a river  
Rippled by the blade of an oar at break of day;  
As if stars were throbbing in the depths of them . . .

And they drown in a mist of sorrow translucent  
Like the sea stroked by the hand of nightfall;

The warmth of winter is in it, the shudder of autumn,  
And death and birth, darkness and light;  
A sobbing flares up to tremble in my soul  
And a savage elation embracing the sky,  
Frenzy of a child frightened by the moon.

It is as if archways of mist drank the clouds  
And drop by drop dissolved in the rain . . .  
As if children snickered in the vineyard bowers,

The song of the rain  
Rippled the silence of birds in the trees . . .  
Drop, drop, the rain  
Drip

Drop the rain

**Maloney:** Thank you. The poem is about loss, death, and hope in the midst of a devastation, and I am wondering if you could tell us what were the circumstances of al-Sayyab's life that gave rise to the poem.

**Antoon:** Well, his life and career, in terms of influences political or otherwise, are divided into three phases. Early on he was more into romanticism but in the middle period of his career he actually joined the Iraqi Communist Party and was a socialist for ten years. I guess for an American audience that warrants some background. At that time in the Middle East, Marxist ideas were very powerful and appealing and the Iraqi Communist Party was very popular. This was a time when a pro-British monarchy was ruling Iraq and while there was a parliament and press, the power (financial and otherwise) was still held by a very tiny elite. While there were some intellectuals and artists who were pan-Arab, most of them were to the left. Now, al-Sayyab himself was being hounded by the secret police in Kuwait in the south of Iraq, so this was written in a time of exile, a time of intense struggle and brutality by the regime against any form of political organization that was calling for more rights for workers and for the disadvantaged. So you see all of these themes in a way woven into the poem. That period in the Middle East and in the Arab world was one where ideas about commitment and literature were coming from France and a sort of new realism and an art that was not of the ivory towers (as al-Sayyab himself said), but art that had to live up to ascetic expectations and was about the material reality of people. So we see in the poem how it is of course very concerned with the suffering of various individuals in society and the struggle of workers, but there is also hope in it, of the bond that is coming to change everything. To me and to many readers, the beauty of the poem is that it speaks to many different readings and I think that all of these concerns are woven seamlessly into the narrative without being too flagrant.

**Maloney:** You told me that Badr Shakir al-Sayyab is the most important Arabic poet of the mid-twentieth century, and I suppose that is for the reasons you've just given.

**Antoon:** You have to go to the background that the twenties, thirties, and forties witnessed increased access to education and massive translation. Al-Sayyab himself had access to really good schools and went to the Higher Teachers College where he studied English Literature. He read English literature in the original and translated Eliot, Yeats, Pound, and so many others. This was also a time

when the poetry of Pablo Neruda was being translated, the poetry of people like Garcia Lorca from Spain. This was a period of fervor in terms of trying to find new forms of expression and new vision. Al-Sayyab primarily, together with a female Iraqi poet, have been given credit for breaking the original forms of classical Arabic poetry by mixing up the meters and fracturing the traditional poem. They were influenced by readings of French, British, and American poetry, but al-Sayyab was the first poet in the Arab world to write in this new form; by now it has become very common, but back then it was revolutionary. It was starting an entirely new genre, and the ideas were not just structural and formulaic. It also produced a new vision of poetry's role in the lives of the people. So yes, al-Sayyab is still considered one of the great poets of the twentieth century. The great poets of the day always paid homage to al-Sayyab because he was the one who opened up all of those horizons for them.

**Maloney:** The poem is not only innovative, but also beautiful: the language, the change in tone, the rhythm.

**Antoon:** Yes--as Mohammed also says in his statement, when I was a teenager and had to read "Rain Song" in school, I didn't know that much about all these things. But for purely aesthetic and acoustic reasons the poem is beautiful. Even if one did not know any of the things that I just said, the poem would still be beautiful. So, it's one of those poems that really is one of those great masterpieces because it really combines and crystallizes everything.

**Maloney:** Mohammed, you told me just now that as a schoolboy you had to memorize the poem and recite it. But as a child you didn't think much about it. It was an assignment but then later it seemed to you to be prophetic and took on huge meaning and so the question is, what does "Rain Song" mean to you now?

**Al Shammarey:** When I was a child life was pretty much simple and there were no concerns and worries. One's view of things is quite narrow. But of course as I got older my vision or horizon of the world widened. It is a coincidence that I had to do my military service in an area very near where the poet was from and where the images were taken. But even then when I would remember and read the opening part of the poem, it didn't mean much beyond that. But later, as I began to read more into the poem, I realized that it's an allegory for the entire country, for the pain of an entire country, but it also has universal human dimensions. As chance would have it, I immigrated out and ended up in Houston, which is in the same latitude of the town where Sayyab himself was from and where the images of the poem are inspired. Same climate, a lot of humidity, except for the hurricanes. When one comes to a new or a different environment, of course, one begins to long for and yearn for all the objects and surroundings of one's original environment. We come with our suitcases full of mementos and albums and things that remind us of our old country, and as much as we want to assimilate and blend in perhaps it would be too difficult for us. Maybe our children will be able to assimilate and blend, but for us we will not be able to

do so, so easily. We start sifting and going through our papers and our belongings and our memories as well. All the paintings I carried with me were already written in this poem. I don't want to compare myself to al-Sayyab because he is of course a great artist but there is similarity in terms of the crisis that one feels. When I first came here I went into solitude, which is what I always do even if I am in Iraq or elsewhere. I have my studio and I go and work in my studio, but I also benefit from being here by learning from the tools and techniques that are out there, and I just started to work on the project using all of these new techniques.

**Maloney:** When I think you got in touch with me, a short email, more than a year and a half ago, I looked at your work and I loved it. It's wonderful. Then after we agreed on the idea of a show here, you created the "Rain Song" series. So I'm just curious, have you been thinking for quite a while about making a work respondent to "Rain Song," or did it just come to you within the last year or so?

**Al Shammarey:** Here one has to be proactive in saying that the idea was already there as a germ, so when I was corresponding with you I had already started to work without necessarily waiting for the positive answer because the project was already there in my mind. Of course the opportunity of exhibiting it would help, but I had already started constructing the idea as you were corresponding.

**Maloney:** Well I'm glad you did, Mohammed. You go through a series of steps, including putting ink on paper, then transferring it to the computer, and at some point you put the works in the rain, then back to the computer, then print on the huge ink jet printer. Can you explain further the process that the works go through?

**Al Shammarey:** It just occurred to me that it is always raining in Houston. So I brought a lot of paper with a bottle of ink in the middle and I left that for a couple of days. I let the rain do the drawing because nature would do much better than I would.

**Maloney:** Didn't you tell me that you put little cups on the paper so that the rain would fill and spill over on the paper?

**Al Shammarey:** Yes. I took the paper and saw that spontaneity and serendipity in nature itself just creates really beautiful things.

**Antoon:** He is a force of nature.

**Al Shammarey:** I then took the papers to the high resolution scanner and started to work. Then I started to scatter words on the papers. I am very happy with my printer. It is really awesome: Epson.

**Antoon:** He keeps telling me this on the phone like it's freaking amazing.

**Maloney:** And you had a friend who did the calligraphy by hand?

**Al Shammarey:** Yes, I have a friend but I am now training myself in Arabic calligraphy so that in the future I can rely on myself and not need anyone.

**Maloney:** So you can have more solitude! Like you didn't have enough.

**Al Shammarey:** Yes, of course.

**Maloney:** I also wanted to ask, how did the two of you start working together? The artist making images for the poet's book covers.

**Antoon:** A common friend of ours is an Iraqi-American and an art historian who teaches in the summer in Texas. At the university where she teaches, she had started exhibits for modern Iraqi art and had invited me to give a talk. In my correspondence with her I told her I wanted to see who the artists are because although I am not a modern artist myself I always follow them. Once I saw Mohammed's work I was really taken with it right away, so I asked her, "Who is this person?" She told me some things about him and I was really taken by that. Right away, because I'm selfish, I thought, "I want this art on my books." When he came to New York with another artist, we met for the first time briefly.

**Maloney:** And what year was that?

**Antoon:** That was about six years ago. Then I had gone to Jordan and met him again there and spent a few wonderful days with him. As I am sure you know many artists who are very aloof, but he's so very generous and very natural. So he designed the cover for the English version of my novel and the publisher was also very taken because it is a beautiful cover. Then I asked to use an image of his for my poetry book. For this last novel that I just published in Arabic, I talked to him about it, he read most of it, and then designed a cover. He is so open and says, "Tell me what you think, we'll keep working on it," but the cover is really stunning. So that's how it started. I am a really big fan of his work, obviously.