



**Artist Residency & Exhibition**  
Iskandar / Alina Gallo / On going  
until June 30, 2017

**thejamjar**

# Iskandar / Alina Gallo

*Iskandar* is a large-scale painting cycle that sets the story of Alexander the Great in the contemporary Middle East. Through corresponding geographic locations, archeological sites and events, this work establishes a series of parallels between the historical legend of *Iskandar* and the unfolding events in the region post 9/11 to the present day - questioning the ideas of empire, occupation and religious fervor compounded by the quest for self-realization and utopian civilization.

The painting created at thejamjar is an episode from this larger project and depicts the looting of National Museum of Iraq during the first weeks of the American invasion in 2003. The mural is a non-linear composite reality including both historical references and legend, such as old artifacts from the archeological sites of Nimrud, Nineveh and Hatra - actually present in the museum collection - and broken columns from Persepolis (rising up through the floor of the storerooms) referencing the destruction of the ancient city by Iskandar's forces in 330 BC. Within the painting can also be found a U.S. military tank, a helicopter crash survivor, Assyrian, Hellenistic and Persian reliefs and a large snake- a symbol of Iskandar's relationship with the goddess Athena.

Much of the inspiration for this project comes from a work of literature called the *Alexander Romance*, a mythic biography written shortly after his death, partly attributed to Alexander's court historian Callisthenes. In this collection of legends, the historical Alexander is depicted as a protean character, able to embody some of the deepest fears and longings of the human condition. The *Alexander Romance* went on being rewritten, expanded and modified throughout antiquity and forms the basis of an enormous subsequent body of literature on Iskandar that was produced in the Greek East and in Arabic, Persian and Indian traditions.

This mural is created with classical egg tempera paint prepared by hand, a painting technique and application that offers a contemporary approach to a traditional medium.

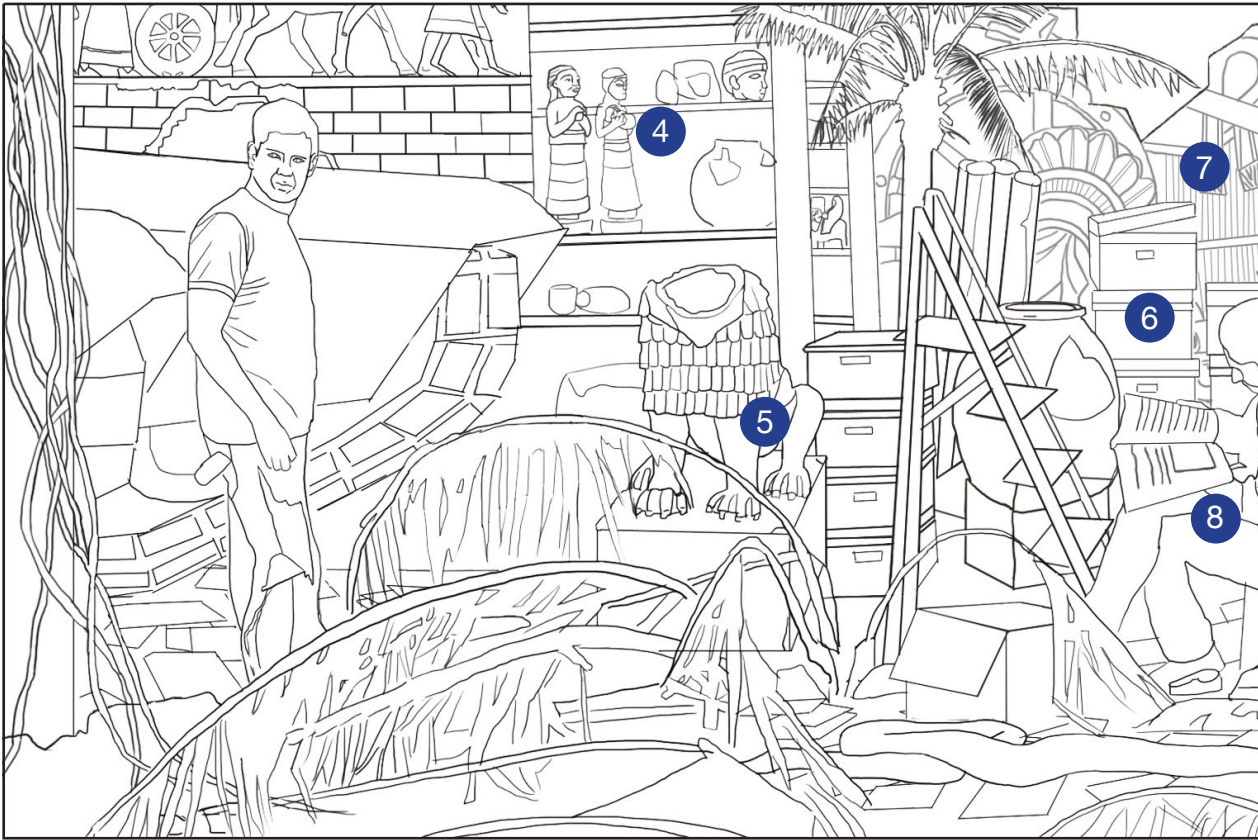


1 The National Museum of Iraq's facade. The museum was badly damaged and looted after Baghdad fell to U.S. troops on April 10, 2003. Ancient clay scrolls and pottery littered the floor. Looters made off with everything from gold bowls and ritual funeral masks to elaborate headdresses. Because the museum's inventory was never completed, it's uncertain how many pieces were stolen, but the number is estimated at 15,000 pieces. The entrance was slightly damaged following a hit by a tank shell.

2 An American tank. In the months preceding the American invasion of Iraq in 2003, various antiquities experts, including representatives from the American Council for Cultural Policy asked the Pentagon and the UK government to ensure the museum's safety from both combat and looting. The theft and vandalism took place between April 10 and 12, 2003. After the

insistence of officials at the British Museum in London, the White House sent tanks to be positioned to protect the museum on April 16, 2003. "Stuff happens" was among the statements that former Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld made when asked to comment on the US failure to protect the museum from looting.

3 Photographer Moises Saman. Saman was on assignment for TIME aboard an Iraqi Air Force helicopter on August 12, 2014 when it crashed. The helicopter crashed after take off during a rescue mission in the Sinjar Mountains. Also onboard were dozens of Yazidi refugees who had been stranded in the mountain for days sheltering from ISIL militants. Iraqi parliamentarian Vian Dakhil was also among the survivors of the crash.



4

Ancient Sumerian votive statues (2750 - 2400 BC). Limestone sculptures like these were often made for temples of deities and were originally painted in bright colors. They are thought to represent a priest praying, with hands folded in front of the body, an open right hand enclosing a clenched left fist with the right thumb placed behind the left, which experts believe to be a praying gesture of the time.

5

In April 2003, a terra cotta statue of a lion (circa 1800 BC) was destroyed by looters of the Iraq National Museum. The lion decorated the main temple of Tell Harmal, an archeological site, which lies within the borders of modern day Baghdad.

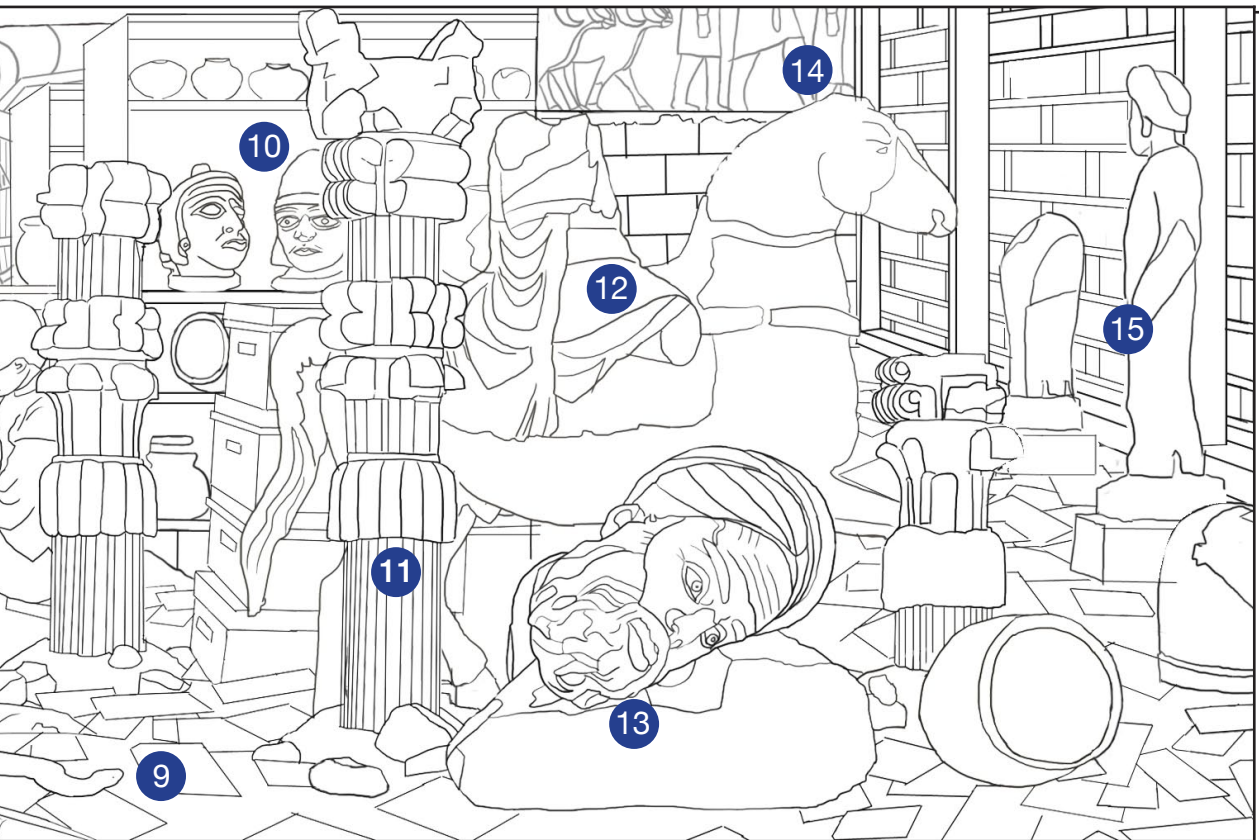
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The center of this mural is a depiction of the ransacked underground storage rooms of the museum. The thieves stole an estimated 10,000

easily transportable and valuable small objects, including 5,000 Sumerian cylinder seals. Iraqi archeologist Lamia al-Gailani, who worked for the museum for 8 years documenting and making impressions of the ancient Sumerian seal collection, said that nearly 2,500 small items have been recovered.

7

Marble reliefs showing military spoils, including captured weapons, armor and a chariot wheel, from the sanctuary of Athena at Pergamon (c. 180 BC). Pergamon was an ancient Sumerian city and kingdom of western Asia Minor in modern-day western Turkey. It passed to Rome in the second century BC and was noted for its sculpture and its library, which Mark Antony gave to Cleopatra. The reliefs are thought to be sculpted under the direction of Eumenes II (197-159 BC). The entire sanctuary is now located in the Pergamon Museum in Berlin.



**8** An Iraqi museum custodian reads papers at the entrance of the museum's vault. The archive of the museum was primarily on paper, never have been fully digitized. The imagery of the man reading here was inspired by an Associated Press photo of a museum employee reading in the storerooms, as well as another photograph of Mushin Hasan, the deputy director of the National Museum of Iraq, seated on a broken artifact in the museum with his head in his hands.

**9** The goddess Athena's snake. In 334 BC Alexander crossed the Hellespont, the narrow strait separating Europe and Asia, and went to Troy where he dedicated his armor to Athena and laid a wreath at the tomb of Achilles, the legendary hero and champion of the Greeks in the Trojan War, symbolizing his role as a new Achilles liberating the Greek cities of Asia Minor from Persian rule. The goddess Athena was often

depicted with a snake or snakes. The snake here also references Iskandar's mother, Olympias, who was a member of a snake-worshipping cult of Dionysus and was known as a snake handler. Plutarch wrote that Iskandar's father, King Philip II of Macedon, was once frightened to see a snake in bed with Olympias. In one version of the Iskandar legend this snake is said to have been the Egyptian god Ammon, one of Iskandar's divine fathers.

**10** The facial features and large eyes of early Sumerian limestone sculptures are very expressive and characteristic of the period. Originally, the eyes were inlaid with a fragment of a seashell or ostrich eggshell. The pupil consists of a drilled hole, which was also filled up originally. The inlay of the eyes and eyebrows was affixed with bitumen, a natural tar. In ancient Mesopotamia bitumen was used as a glue and

as a filler. Some bitumen pits are still in use to this day, situated along the Euphrates, in the vicinity of the town of Hit, about 150 km from Baghdad. One theory is that these sculptures were created to stand in for people worshipping the gods. It is thought that the eyes of temple sculpture had to be large to communicate with the god or goddess. These head fragments were among ancient artifacts that the Iraqi Security Forces recovered on December 16, 2008, during raids in northern Basra.

showing the destruction of 3,000 year old sculptures in Mosul. Fortunately, some of the sculptures from that site had been previously moved to the National Museum of Iraq. These stone figures are now some of the only remaining statues of the Kings of Hatra, which were destroyed along with many other ancient artifacts and sites in Iraq and Syria. After the recent destruction of cultural heritage sites by the Islamic State group, the collections at the National Museum of Iraq in Baghdad have become even more important.

11 Ruins of the columns in Persepolis, the capital of Persia that was looted by Alexander the Great in 330 BC. It is said that Iskandar described it to the Macedonians as their worst enemy among the cities of Asia, and gave it over to the soldiers to plunder. He also held games and feasts in honor of the victory and while celebrating the city caught on fire and was destroyed. Greek history Diodorus of Sicily, author of the Library of World History (60-30 BC), wrote that one of the women present (an Athenian named Thais) declared that it would be Alexander's greatest achievement to burn royal palace as revenge for the Xerxes' previous destruction of Athens and the Acropolis.

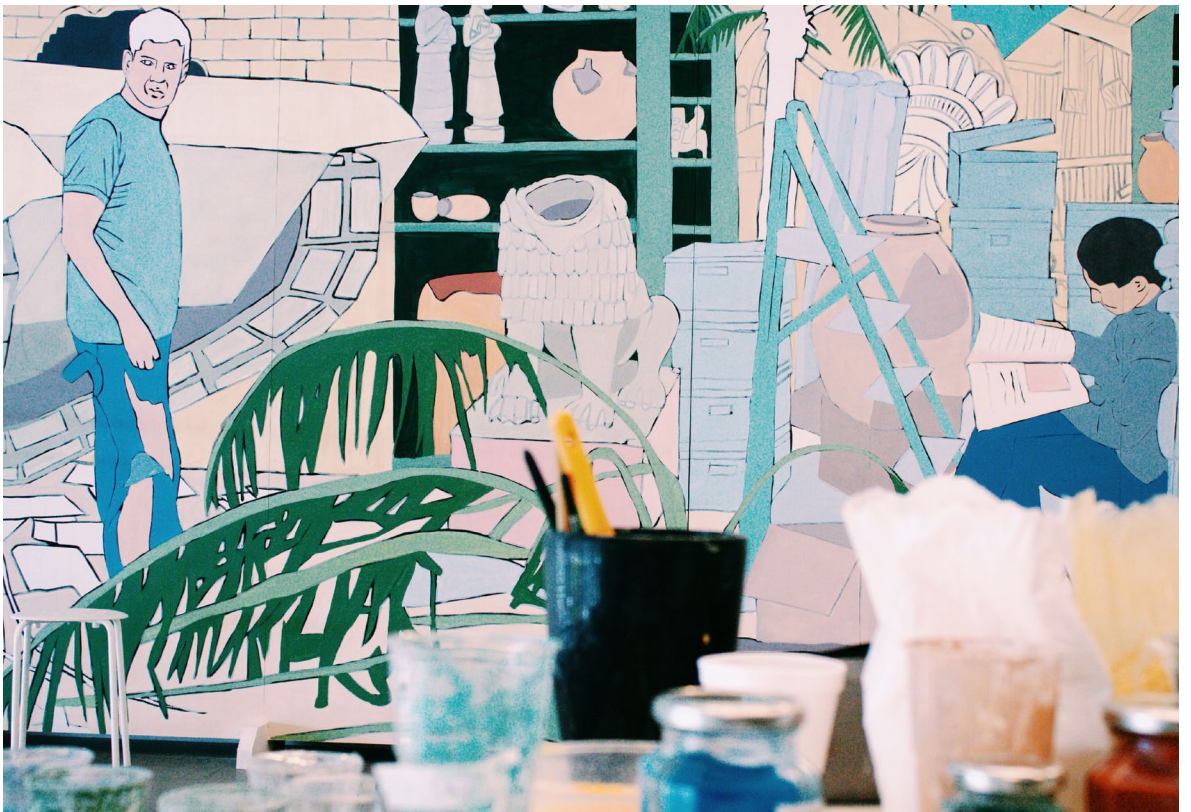
12 A sculpture of an equestrian dating from the Hellenistic period (circa 100 B.C.) This sculpture was found located in Milos, and is currently on display at the National Archaeological Museum in Athens.

13 Part of a beheaded sculpture among rubble in the museum. Here, the head is propped up on a stone, based on a photo taken in a corridor of the museum by Yannis Kontos.

14 Balustrade reliefs from the Western side of the Apadana stairs in Persepolis, which belongs to one of oldest building stages of the city as part of the original design by Darius the Great. Its construction was completed by Xerxes I. Craftsmen and specialists from all parts of the Achaemenid empire came to help building the palace, including Greeks from Ionia, who were well-known for their expertise in sculpture. Here, Assyrian tribute bearers with rams are depicted coming to make an offering to the king.

15 The National Museum of Iraq reopened on February 28, 2015. The opening was accelerated after a video of the Islamic State was released





# thejamjar

Founded in 2005, thejamjar is a community arts space that promotes artists and supports the development of UAE's arts scene through its extensive arts programme, educational initiatives, and community projects. thejamjar has moulded itself to the needs of the community and prides itself on making art accessible to all creating a platform for dialogue and interaction amongst like-minded individuals, artists, researchers, writers and creators.

## About the Artist

Alina Gallo is an Italian-American artist living and working in Rome, whose large-scale installation paintings and contemporary miniatures have chronicled key Middle East and North Africa region events and their representation in the media. Her work samples and combines imagery and information from a multitude of raw-footage, photographs and documentary snippets, as well as from traditional media outlets, reflecting both a fragmented understanding of these accounts and the conscious and unconscious attempts to recompose a potential reality.

Upcoming projects include "In the Grand Departure I love you more," a large site-specific painting installation at SomoS Gallery in Berlin and "Land of Darkness," a painting installation at Naropa University in Boulder, Colorado. To learn more about her work you can visit [www.alinagallo.com](http://www.alinagallo.com).

## Special Thanks

*Thank you to thejamjar for the opportunity to return and realize this new project, Iskandar. Through the years, you have been an important support to my development as an artist. My Artist Residency at thejamjar in 2013 allowed me to paint for the first time at a large scale, an approach that has now become one of my primary ways of working.*

*My appreciation goes out to the wonderful team at thejamjar for welcoming me as I took over the Cloud space, for picking up paint brushes during breaks to help, and the educators who will help visitors and students to start conversations and interpret this work. A very special mention for artist Victor Sitali who volunteered many hours of his time to help bring this painting to life. Finally, thank you to artists Nori Elhami and Nirupama Sibal for coming by the space and painting with me, and to my husband Giuliano for his support from Rome.*

Alina Gallo