

LETTERS TO MY FATHER
SALAM ATTA SABRI

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RUYA FOUNDATION
S.M.A.K.

FOREWORD

Shwan Ibrahim Taha, *Chairman, Rabee Securities*

The past forty years have witnessed the complete destruction of Iraq, as a country, as a society, and as a people. 'Letters to my Father' touches the heart in the right places.

Many Iraqis were uprooted from a place they knew, that they held dear, that is generally regarded as the cradle of civilisation. They have had to disperse around the world to survive. The social and cultural fabric of Iraq has been eroding, slowly but surely, to the verge of becoming non-existent.

Today's Iraq has lost all resemblance to the Iraq that our fathers knew. Salam and I belong to the same generation that witnessed the collapse of our country and the disappearance of everything we were engraved with that was 'Iraqi'. Many times, I contemplated talking to my father and telling him that the country he taught me to love no longer exists. Alas, it is a one-way conversation. Through *Letters to My Father*, Salam has managed to capture this conversation and mood through his unique drawings, expressing that sense of pain and loss.

I am sure that our fathers would mourn with us, to see where Iraq has ended up today.



“I DO MISS YOU VERY MUCH”

Tamara Chalabi

Tamara Chalabi, PhD, is a co-founder and chair of The Ruya Foundation. She is a curator, author and historian based in London and Beirut.

“I do miss you very much” is a sentence that the artist Salam Atta Sabri has used in several of his drawings addressed to his late father. They form part of the series ‘Letters to my Father’. It is an emblematic phrase that applies to Salam’s world, and particularly to his childhood in Baghdad in the 1950s. It is also a mantra for so many Iraqis of Salam’s generation, whose lives have been

shaped and traumatised by a brutalising homeland. Once a leading modern country with a future, then a brutal dictatorship, today Iraq is a fractured violent entity, marked by decades of war, sanctions, terrorism, and continuing uncertainty.

Reconstructing Salam’s life through the series ‘Letters to my Father’ is not unlike an archaeologist’s task in uncovering history via newly excavated artefacts: each piece adds evidence to the story. These drawings need to be approached in a similar way, in order to understand how the artist, his work and his world are enmeshed in the squares and triangles of his drawings. Detail is squeezed into every sheet of paper, yet the series also conveys a strong impressionistic viewpoint that communicates powerful emotions of filial love, profound nostalgia and a deep sense of loss. It is a search for a man’s identity among the ruins of his childhood.

These drawings are best viewed as visual letters with textual insertions to a much-loved father. They are an intimate snapshot of a one-sided conversation between the artist and his father, which is universal in its familiarity to anyone longing for a deceased parent. They are both biographical and historical, the combination of a diary and correspondence. They are both private and public, making the viewer at times a confidant and at others a trespasser.

A cosmopolitan world emerges from *Letters to my Father*—or, at least, an Anglo-Saxon one, with London and Los Angeles on the one side and Baghdad on the other, with some brief stops in Venice, Ghent, and the southern Netherlands, where Van Gogh grew up. It is also a world where the artist’s memories serve as the timeline, but not one that follows any sequential order apart from the order in his mind. Years become condensed into shapes, and places are ascribed to different years according to when Salam first recalled them being woven into the fabric of his father’s stories, but also depending on when he later visited them in person.

Salam Atta Sabri comes from a family that was quintessentially Iraqi in its layered identities and centres of influence. He also comes from a family of artists. His paternal grandfather, Hassan Sami, was an artist who trained in miniature painting and calligraphy while at the military college in Istanbul in the early 1910s. He arrived there from Kirkuk, a predominantly Kurdish city that was then part of the Ottoman Empire, as were the other provinces that made up Iraq.

Sami’s world collapsed in the wake of Turkey’s defeat in World War I and the dismembering of the Near Eastern provinces of the Ottoman Empire by the French and British governments. Iraq was midwived by Britain as a multi-ethnic state with a monarchy and the potential for a cosmopolitan future. The country had a solid agricultural base, oil fields (then largely untapped), and an emerging and dynamic urban middle class. Their gaze was towards London, the centre of the British Empire.

It was in this new constellation, as the drawings tell us, that Atta Sabri, Salam’s father, came of age. In one drawing, Salam writes: “Dear Father I remember you with good things”. He attended the newly established College of Fine Arts in Baghdad, where his talent was recognised, and in 1946—with the help of a government scholarship system set up to enable this emerging class to thrive—he was sent to food-rationed and war-fatigued London to continue his education. At the Slade School of Fine Art, Atta Sabri studied alongside Jawad Selim, himself a pioneering modern Iraqi artist, and Selim’s wife Lorna.

Featured among Salam’s drawings are the places key to his father’s world in London. Atta Sabri lived at 40 Prince Arthur Road, Hampstead, NW3 and was friends with the Bury family, Shirley, Morley and Mathew, who lived nearby. Certain place names pop up repeatedly in the drawings, such as Hampstead Heath, where his father had an open-air exhibition in 1948, and the Camden Arts Centre. There’s also a fish and chip shop on a Finchley Road packed with angular double-decker buses, near to the London Underground station depicted with its signature circular sign.

Produced over the course of several years, the 145 drawings in this book share a consistent style. They are mostly in black ink on paper, though some are made with coloured pencils. The density of the black ink lines varies with each drawing, as do the shapes that describe the subject of the drawing, but they maintain a grid-like structure throughout. Salam has defined a signature geometric template of circles, semicircles, squares, rectangles, triangles, lines, and undulating shapes. The influence of Paul Klee, an artist he was introduced to by his father, is also evident. He quotes directly from Klee in the works—another aspect of Salam’s determined attempt to keep his father’s memory alive. The drawings of a dutiful artist son for his artist father.

The works can be divided into several sections, like the parts of a book: the artist’s Baghdad in the present; the Baghdad of his father and his own childhood; the artist’s own travels abroad; and his father’s travels and education in London. After Atta Sabri’s time in London, the drawings take us (albeit not in chronological order) to the artist’s own childhood in 1950s Baghdad, alongside some details of his father’s work there. References emerge to Iraq’s rich archaeological heritage, thanks to Atta Sabri’s time working with antiquities at the Iraqi Museum. We read of the Temple of Uqair and the excavation of Eridu by Seton Lloyd, a British archaeologist and friend of Atta Sabri, as well as trips north to Kurdistan. The Orient Express, Gertrude Bell, Lawrence of Arabia and his book *Seven Pillars of Wisdom* all make an appearance in the form of scribbled words, jotted down for the sake of remembering.

The first references to Salam's own childhood are found in several drawings of the Khayyam Cinema in Baghdad, and the first film that his father took him to see, which was *Lust for Life* (1956), starring Kirk Douglas as the troubled painter Vincent Van Gogh. The Khayyam Cinema was new and magnificent, with a colourful stained-glass decor that was inspired by the poet Omar Khayyam and left a strong and lasting impression on Salam's memory. He saw this film as his first exposure to the wider world of painting, beyond that which he had seen in his father's studio. Van Gogh was an emotional lodestone for Salam, though more for the link with his father than for any direct influence on Salam. In his drawings, there are several quotations taken from letters Vincent wrote to his brother Theo, a relationship that functions as a parallel to the way that Salam writes to his father. These Van Gogh drawings are less geometric, highlighted by thick tree trunks, wavy branches and empty skies. A similar mood is evident in the drawings Salam made when he visited Van Gogh's birthplace in 2017, many years after seeing the film at the Khayyam Cinema.

In one drawing, Salam writes that his father was his father and his friend. He draws the family home from the exterior, but talks only about his father's studio, where the man would give the boy paper and pencils to allow him to draw by his side.¹

The drawings of California among the series of 'Letters to my Father' are intriguing, as they come from Salam's time as a student of ceramic art at California State University, Los Angeles in the early 1980s. This is also the first period referred to in the drawings in which he is an adult. His situation worsened as the Iran-Iraq War persisted, making it difficult for Salam to communicate with his family. Letters were censored, the postal system was dysfunctional and telephone lines were blocked. More problematic was the lack of funds after money transfers were stopped. These drawings reveal a distinctly American context: empty white spaces depicting wide streets, block-shaped buildings, large cars, and the Mobil gas station in Pasadena where Salam found work. He draws his classroom, with a list of his professors and the head of the fine arts department. His mentor was Henry Takemoto, a glazing specialist of Hawaiian-Japanese descent.

1987 is a year that is mentioned repeatedly here and there in these California drawings, some of which include a sentence on the war in Iraq, but nothing more. In a recent conversation, Salam explains that 1987 was the year his father died, a fact he only discovered several months later when a family friend arrived from Baghdad with a letter from his mother informing him of the news. He suggests that he was frozen in time by the shock of his father's loss and the impossibility of ever seeing him again. The fact that he never actually saw him leave is also one of the reasons why Salam continues to talk to his father in his work.²

Via the drawings, Salam shares other episodes from his life with his father, such as his marriage and the birth of his two daughters, as well as his return to Baghdad in 2005, a move fuelled by a sense of missing the place of his childhood, and because he also nurtured hope for what a Saddam-less Iraq might bring.

Salam also uses the drawings to tell his father of his delight and pride in representing Iraq at the 56th Venice Biennale in 2015. This was an extremely significant moment for him on a personal level, as his father's son and as an Iraqi artist isolated in a fragile, unstable country. It came as a big surprise to Salam, especially as the works selected for the Biennale were in a medium he had hitherto avoided as an artist; until then he had used drawing only in a solitary private practice.

These works came out of a period of imposed isolation. In 2006, barricaded into his apartment on Haifa Street in Baghdad, the site of vicious sectarian fighting, Salam resorted to his daughters' colouring pencils in a bid to find calm, to survive, to breathe. He produced the first series of drawings, 'Letters from Baghdad', as an SOS, a desperate attempt to raise his voice among the bullets.

"My return to drawing and departure from ceramics was my longing for my childhood", Salam says. "The most wonderful thing for me was sitting on the floor, with paper, poster paint, and crayons. Now I have returned to coloured pencils and black ink. I hope I can draw like a child with the imagination of childhood."

Salam's decision to take up pencil and paper establishes the circular, non-linear pattern of these drawings, which have no beginning and no end. Salam Atta Sabri received wider recognition as an artist through drawing—the medium used by his father, who was a painter—rather than as a ceramicist.

Why did he choose to study ceramics and not painting?

It was because of his father. He wanted to be known as his own person with his own work and style, and not just as the son of his father. In several conversations over the years, Salam acknowledges that in his mind, his guiding principle was the rejection of his father's medium of painting.³

In the end, it was his father who also freed Salam to draw, because of the lasting memory he left, or the memory imagined inside Salam's mind. Yet in the context of his childhood and of Iraq, the lament for his father is also a lament for a lost identity and a lost homeland. Nevertheless, his father's voice and memory has been a compass for finding himself. Salam is not alone in this. William Blake (1757–1827), British artist and poet, wrote in 'The Little Boy Lost':

"Father, father, where are you going?
O do not walk so fast!
Speak, father, speak to your little boy,
Or else I shall be lost."⁴

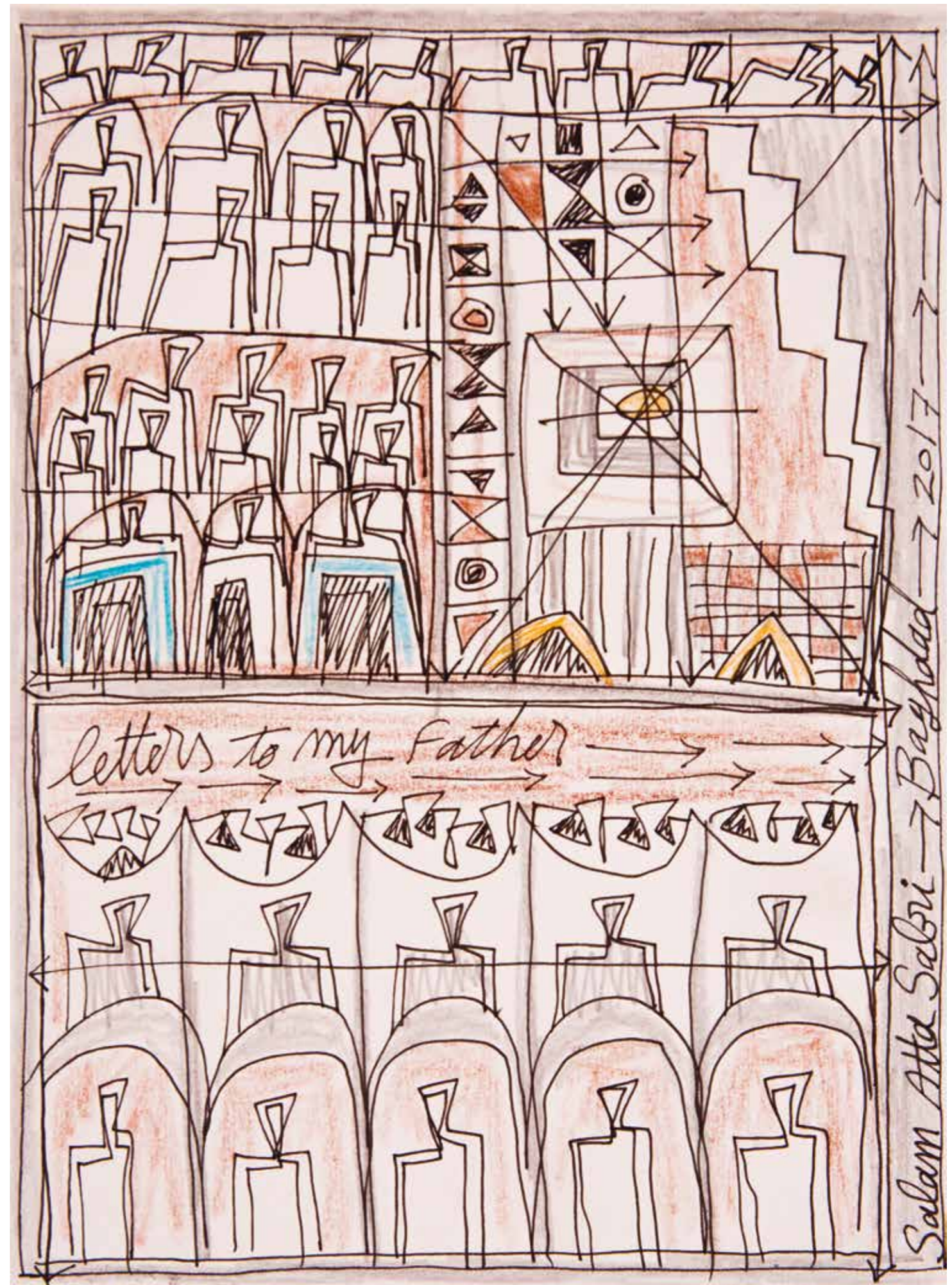
1. Interview with Salam Atta Sabri, May 2017.
2. Conversation with Salam Atta Sabri, October 2020.

3. Conversations with Salam Atta Sabri, November 2014, March 2016, March 2020.
4. William Blake, 'The Little Boy Lost', from *Songs of Innocence, Songs of Experience* (1789).

LETTER TO: SALAM ATTA SABRI

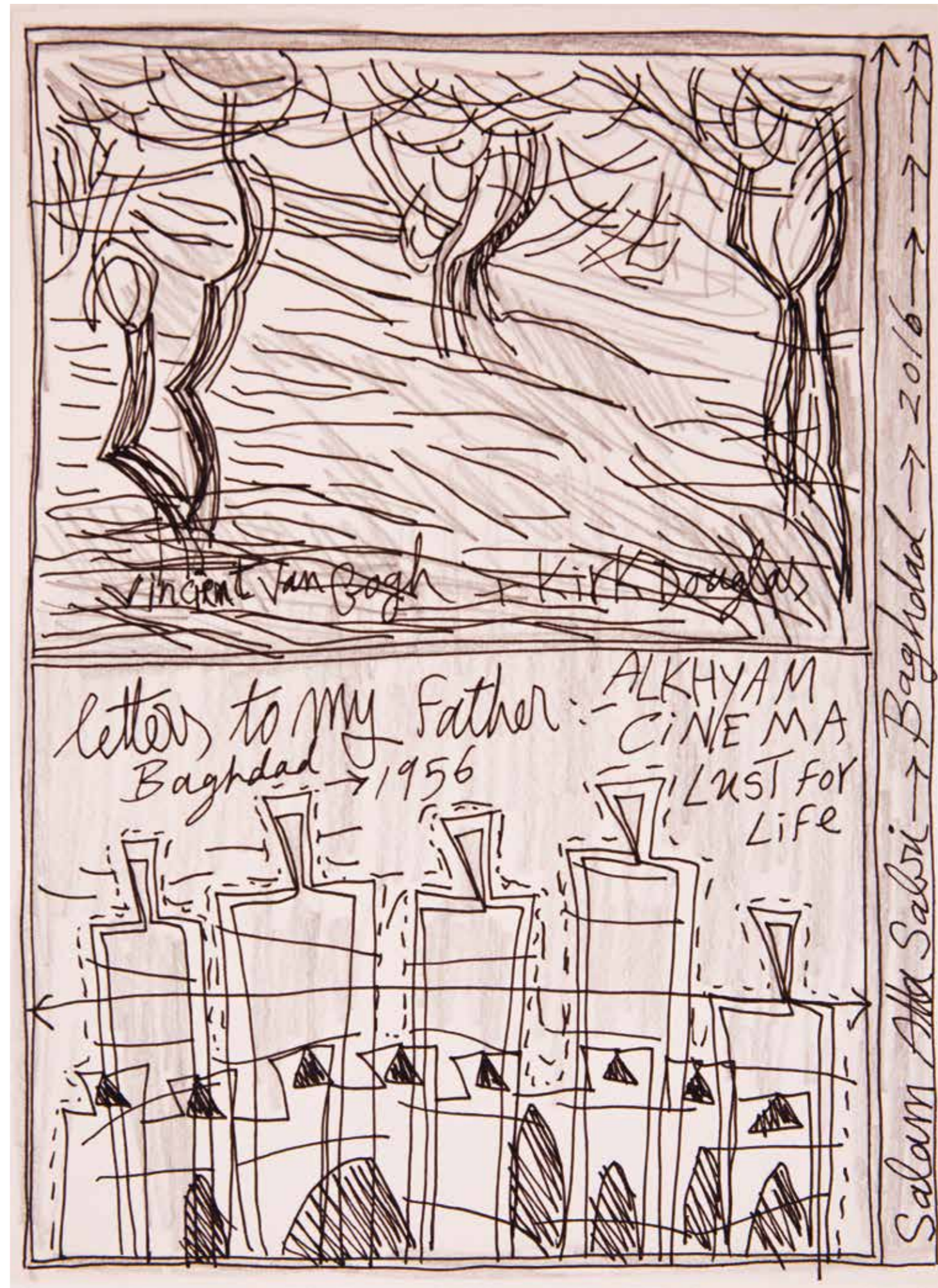
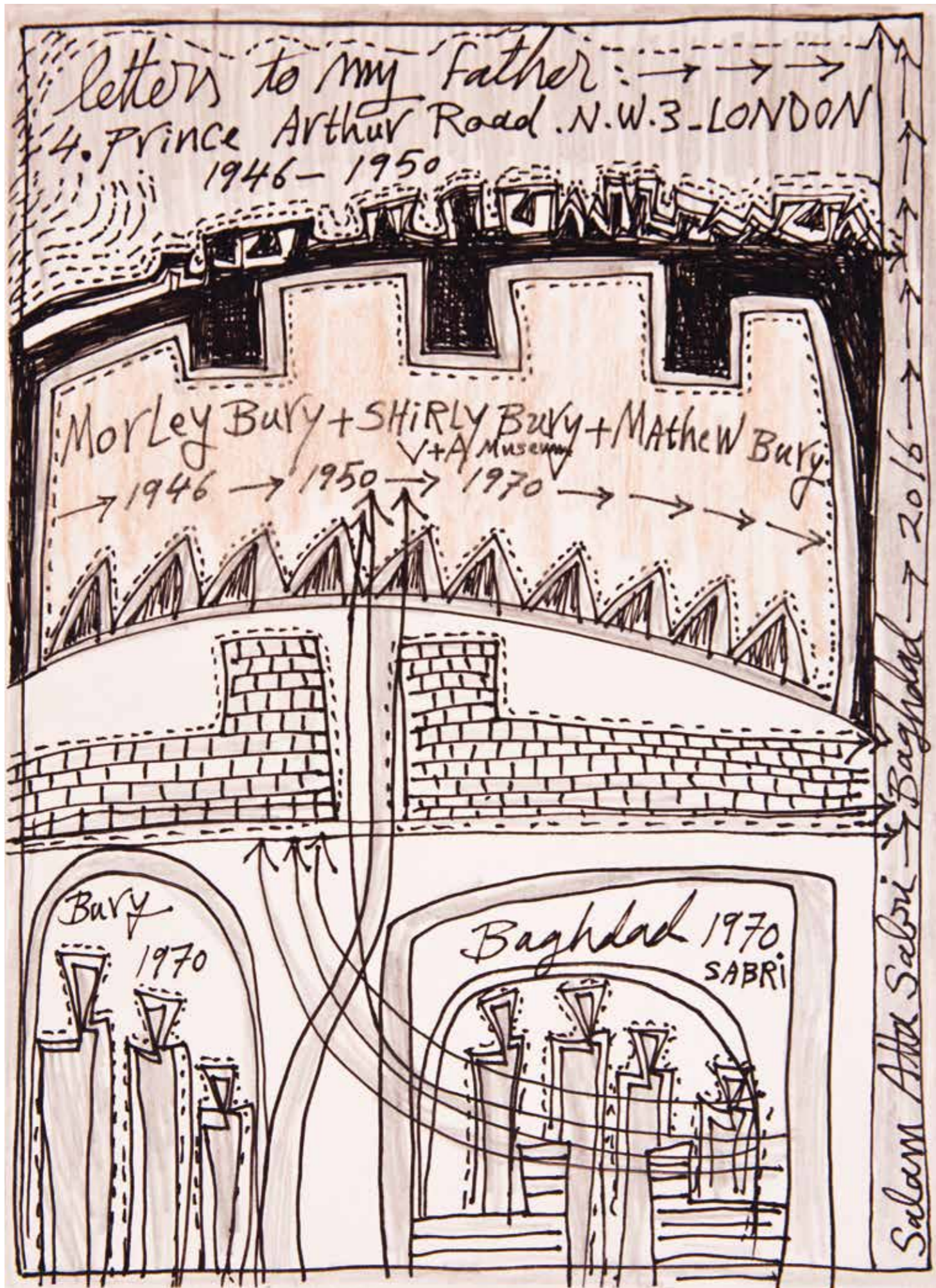
Our first encounter must have been back in December 2014. I had travelled to Baghdad to prepare what was to be the exhibition *Invisible Beauty* in the Iraqi pavilion at the Venice Biennale the following year. I remember vividly your disbelief when I told you I wanted to show your *Letters from Baghdad* in Venice. Since then the drawings have travelled around the world: Venice, Ghent, Erbil, Kathmandu, Abu Dhabi... Why are these drawings so important? What makes them so special? I find it hard to approach the drawings from an objective angle. For I know the maker so well, and time and again I'm carried away and moved by his story, a tale of a tragic life—in this instance the life of an artist, but it could have been anyone's life. Let me try to describe the drawings. Sabri nearly always uses more or less A4-sized sheets of ordinary drawing paper, though he uses paper of varying quality. Most drawings have been made with a black felt-tip pen. Sometimes there are traces of pencil or fluorescent highlighters on the sheet. Most drawings look nervous, like quickly drawn, braided fabrics of black lines. These are testimonies, drawn records of fictitious conversations. Time and again, the endless number of drawing sheets is covered all over with marks, signs, writings. Repetition as a remedy against forgetting, as a means to highlight the importance of something, of personal or historic events. The drawings reveal a necessity, an obsession, a mania. As if only in drawing does the artist find a way to get his own history and that of his country out of his system. One drawing leads to another one, which in turn carries in itself the framework of the next, which in turn... Sabri's drawings proliferate like his thoughts incessantly proliferate and spin around. Things seem to acquire meaning and life only when the artist endlessly explores a motive: the history of Iraq, his personal biography through cities and places, dates as chronological anchors, names of illustrious predecessors in the modern art of Iraq, formal references to the great civilisations between the rivers Tigris and Euphrates... These and many other elements describe Salam Atta Sabri's thinking-through-drawing. Some people would call the written drawings nostalgic. There's this continual looking back at times long gone, times that will perhaps never return. But isn't nostalgia our only hope in a political and social context that is torn apart by violence, conflict, corruption and war? Isn't it the only thing that's left to Sabri? For Sabri, this longing for the past is a way to survive, a way to lend shape to different truths. The quick movement of the hand over a sheet of paper makes it possible to control a semblance of reality that doesn't relate to any reasonable form. Just as, in the early twentieth century, two diplomats divided the Middle East with a few lines, Salam Atta Sabri divides his drawing sheet with an endless play of lines that don't divide, but attempt to link the memory of a past with today's broken reality.

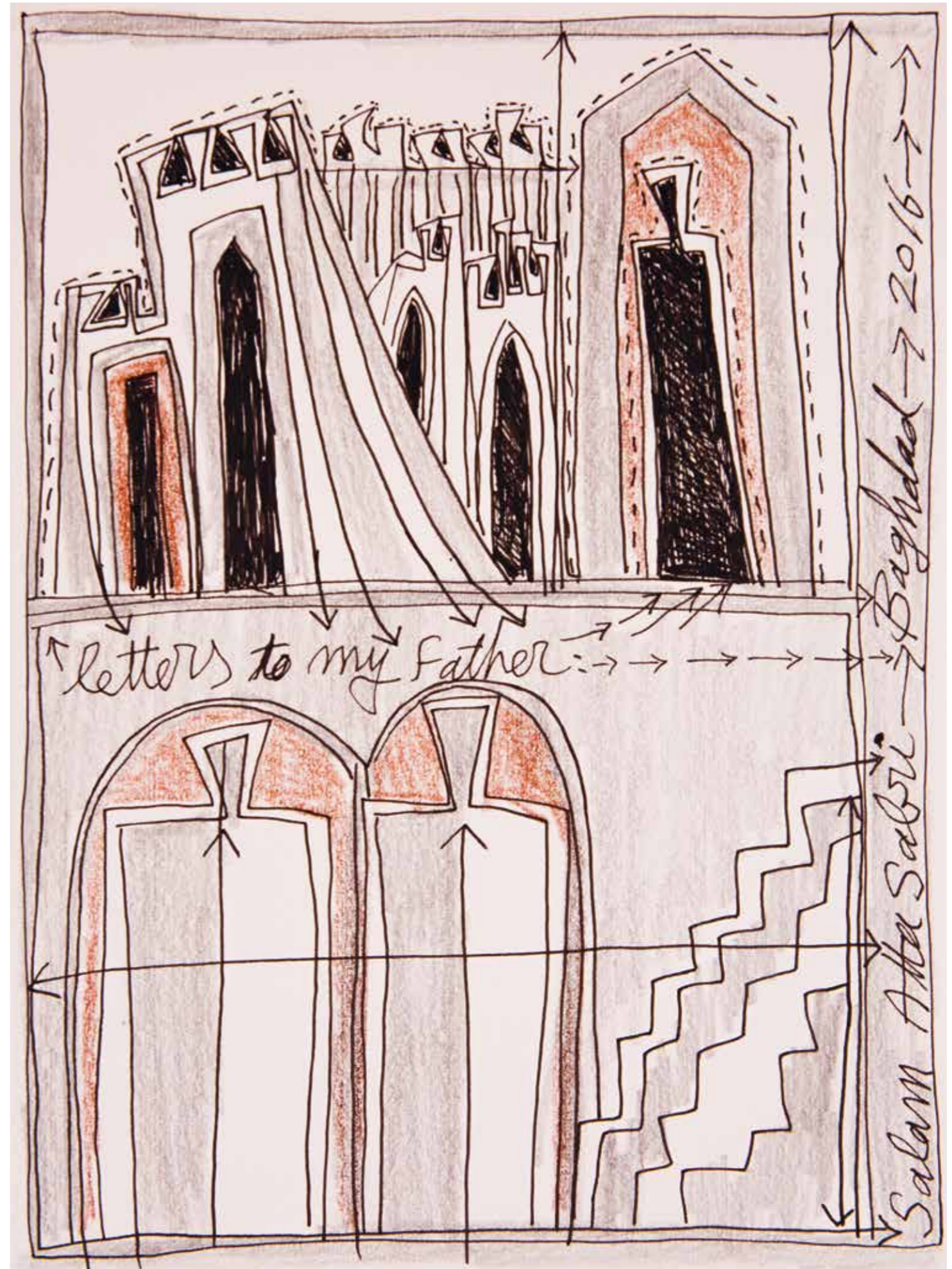
Philippe Van Cauteren
Calais, 16.12.2020

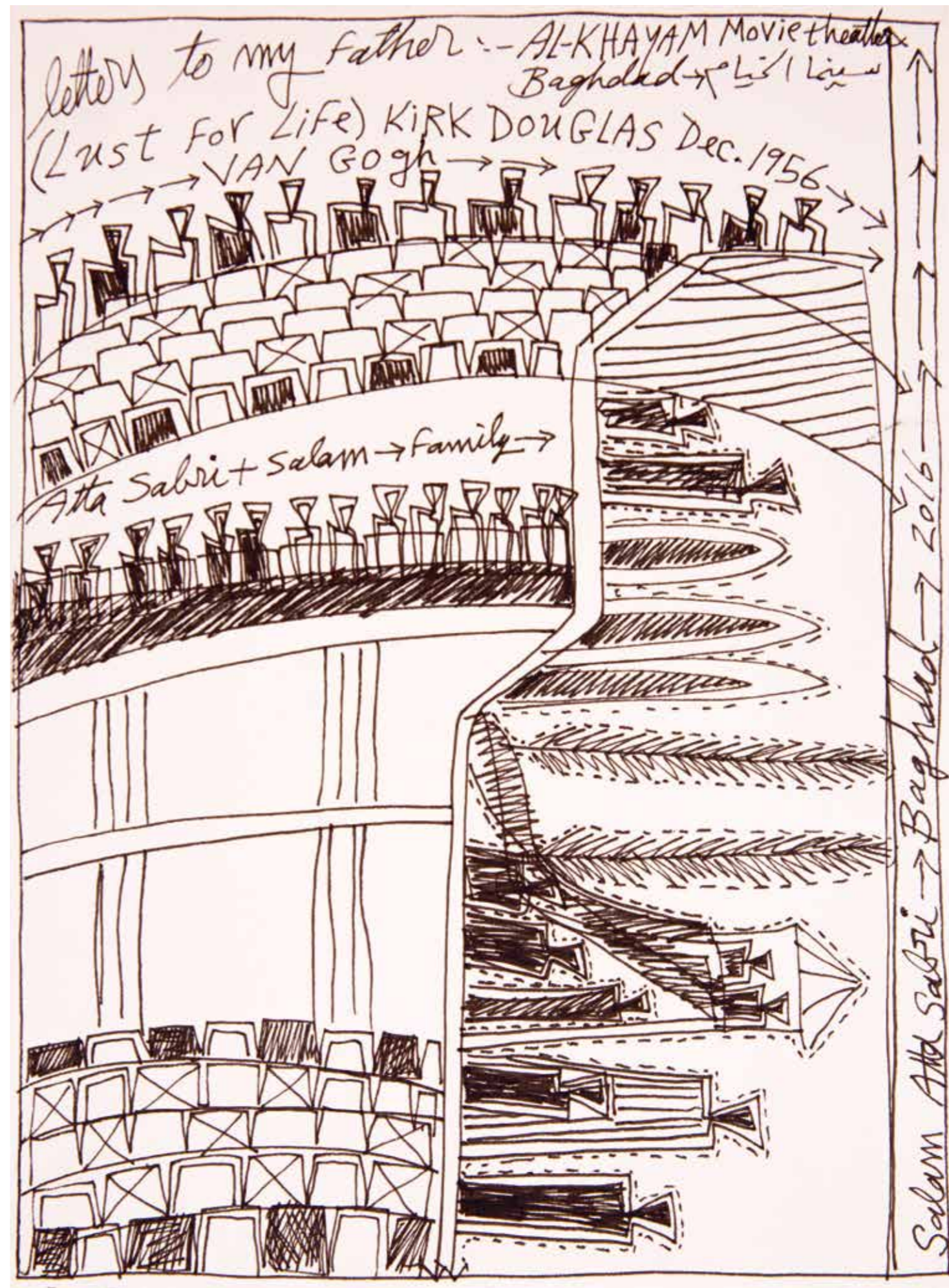


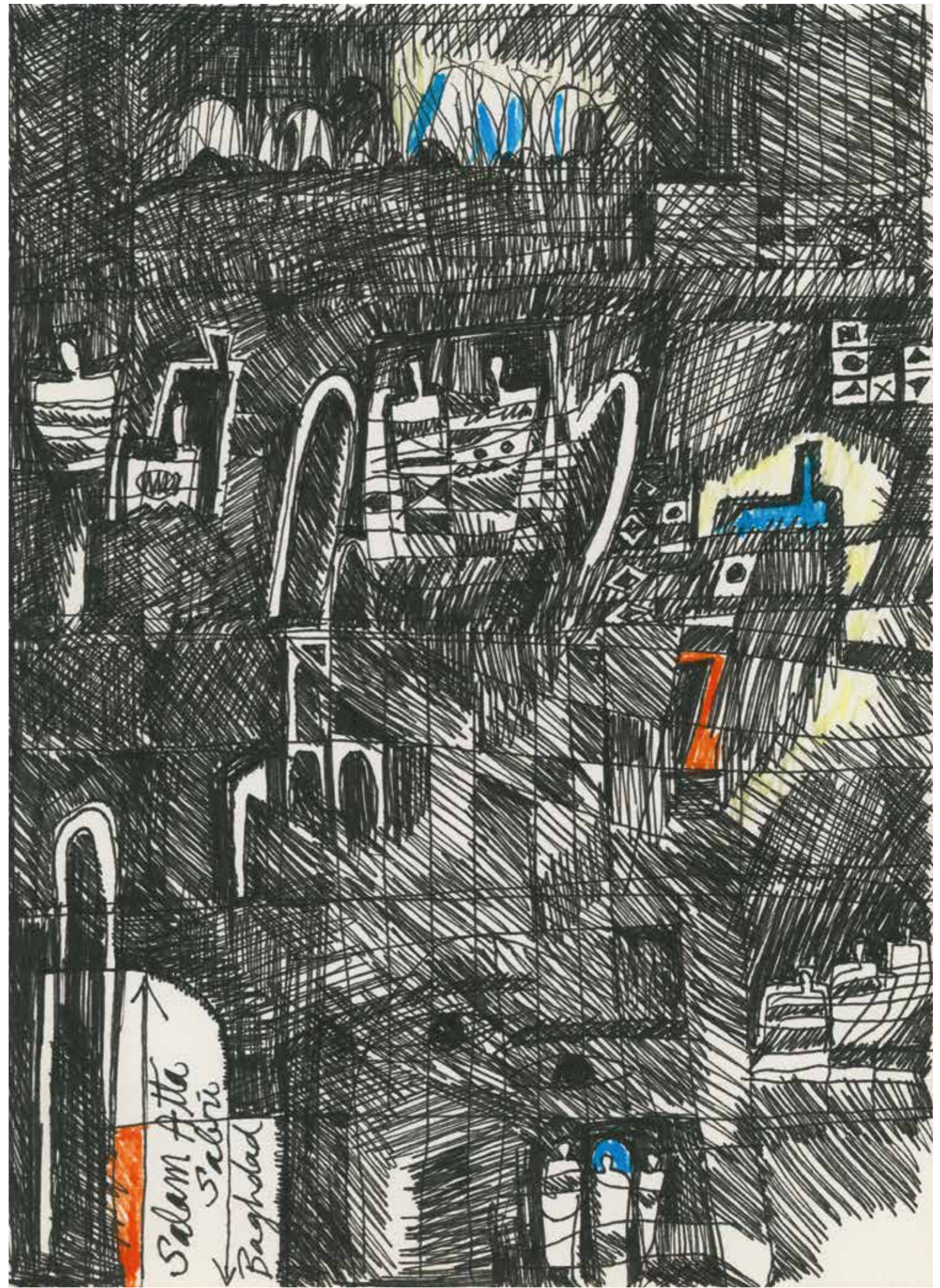
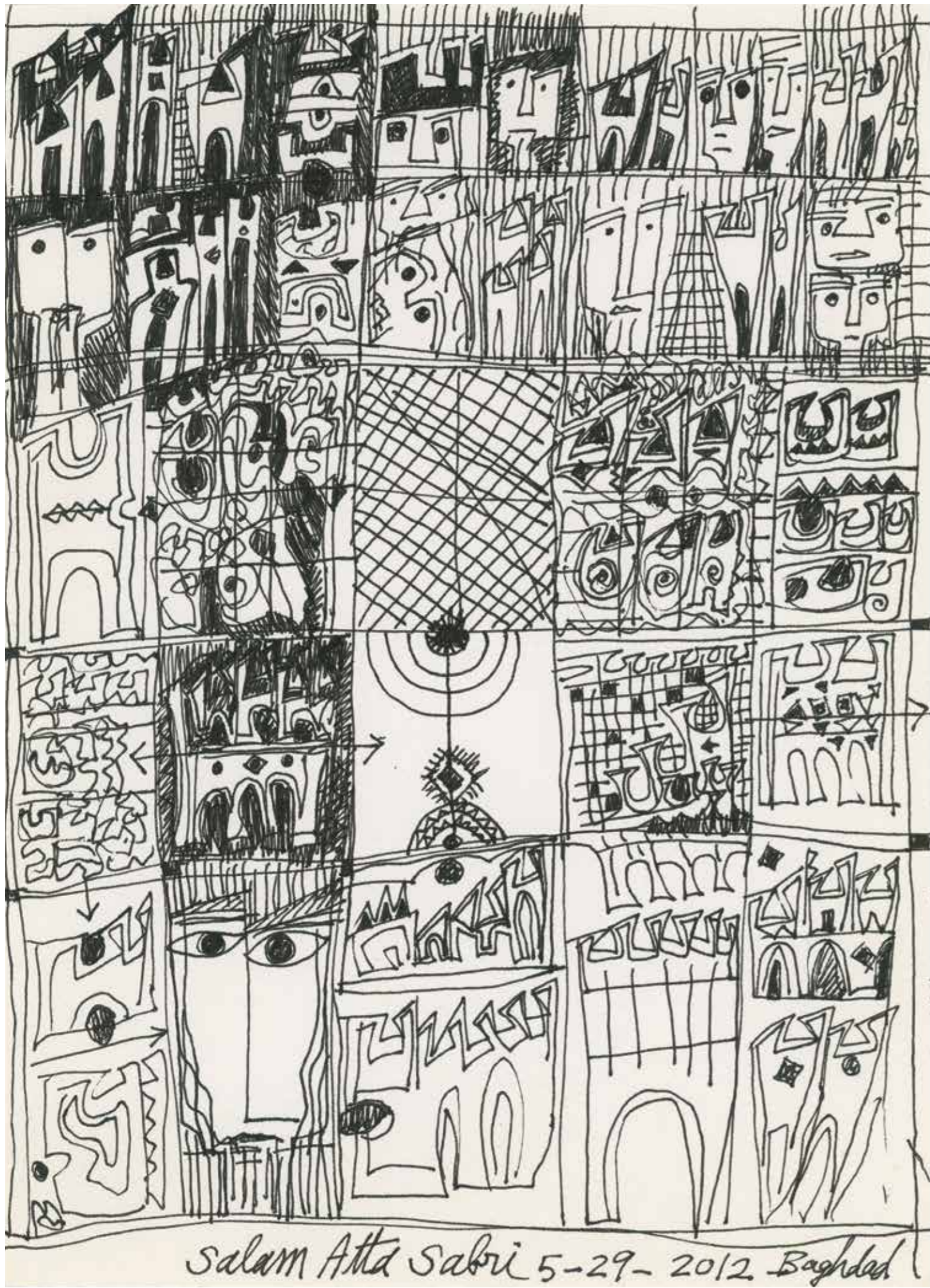
'Letters to my Father', 2010-2019
Mixed media on paper, 210 x 297 mm

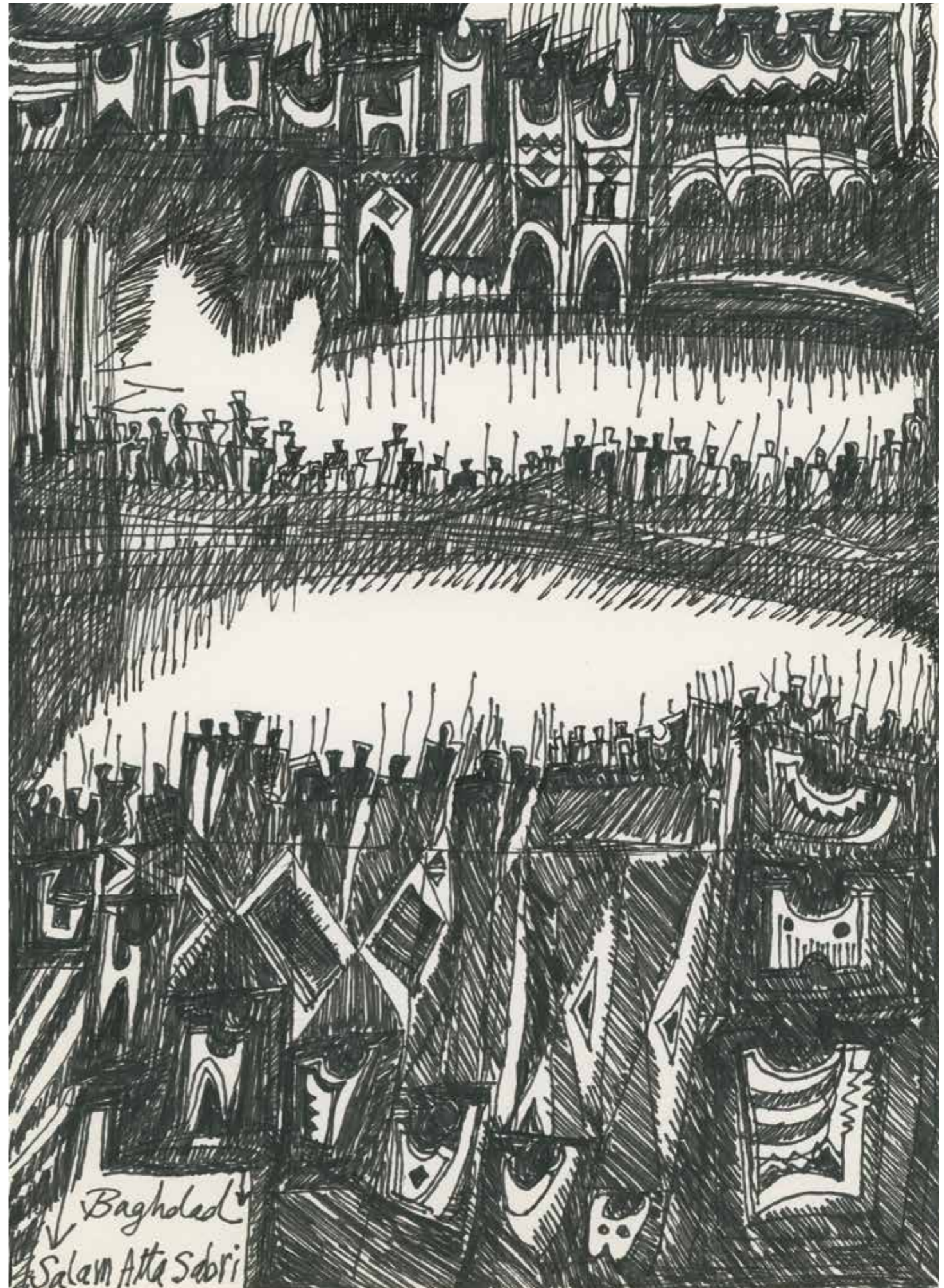


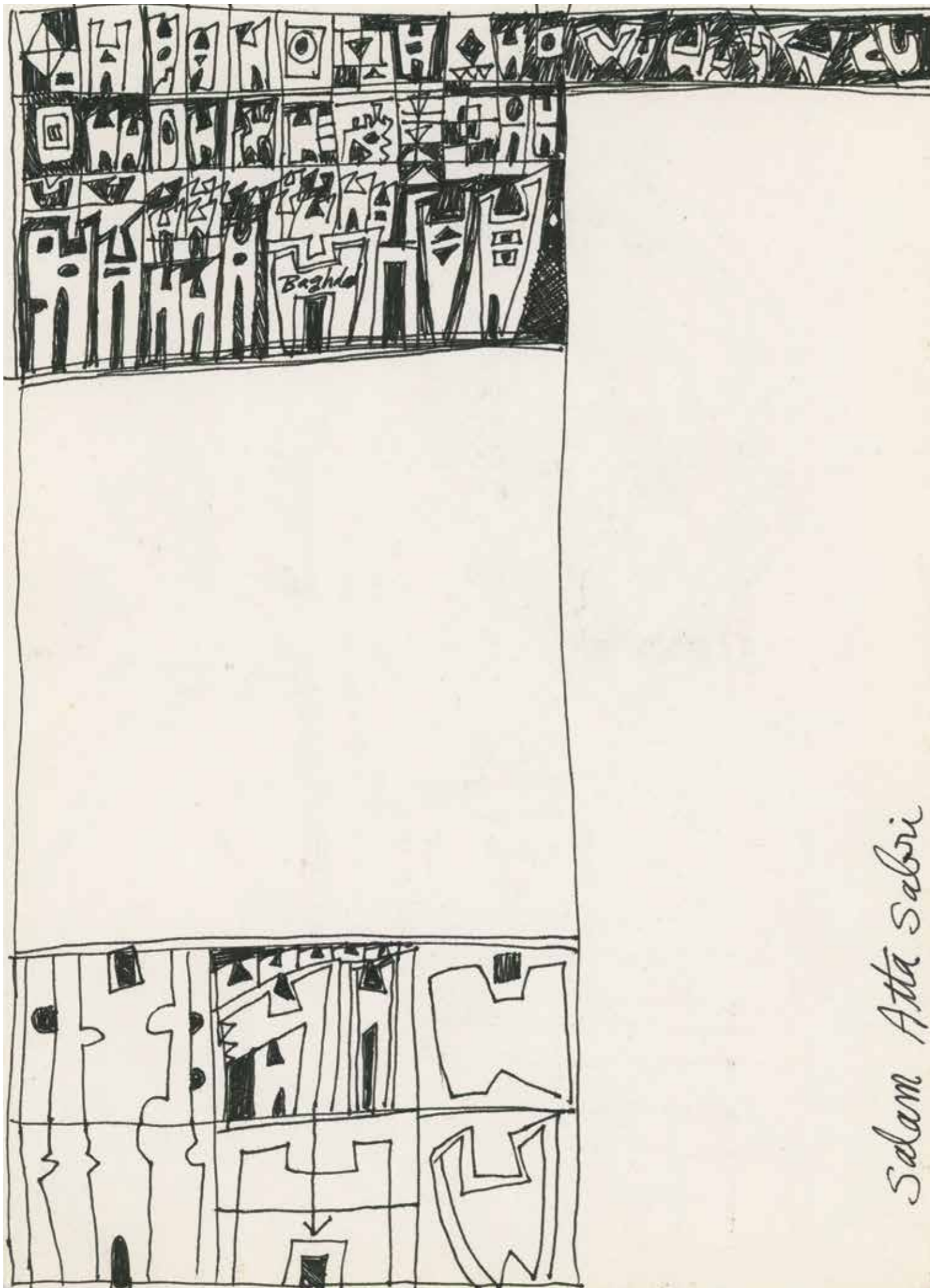










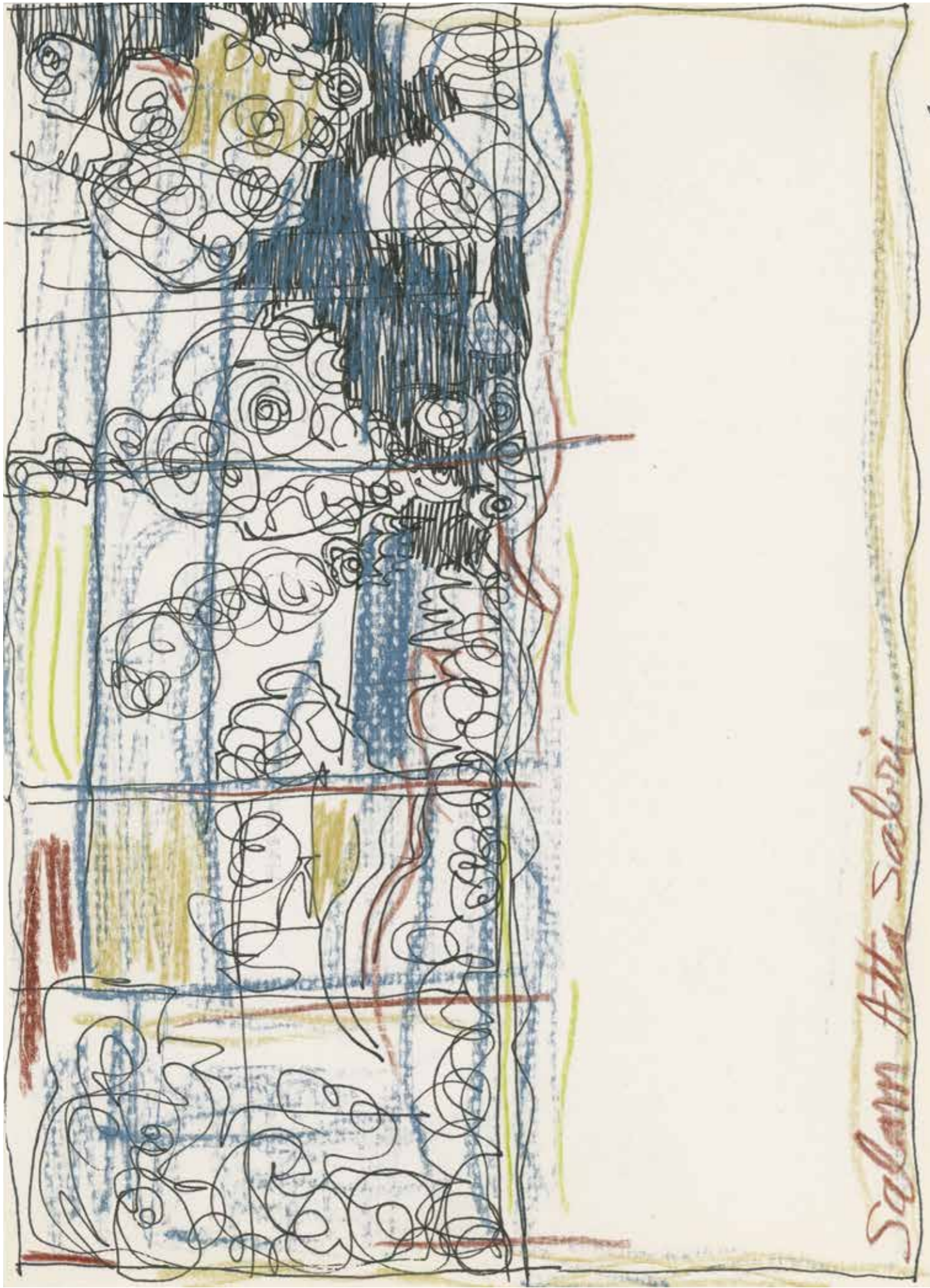


Salam Atta Sabri

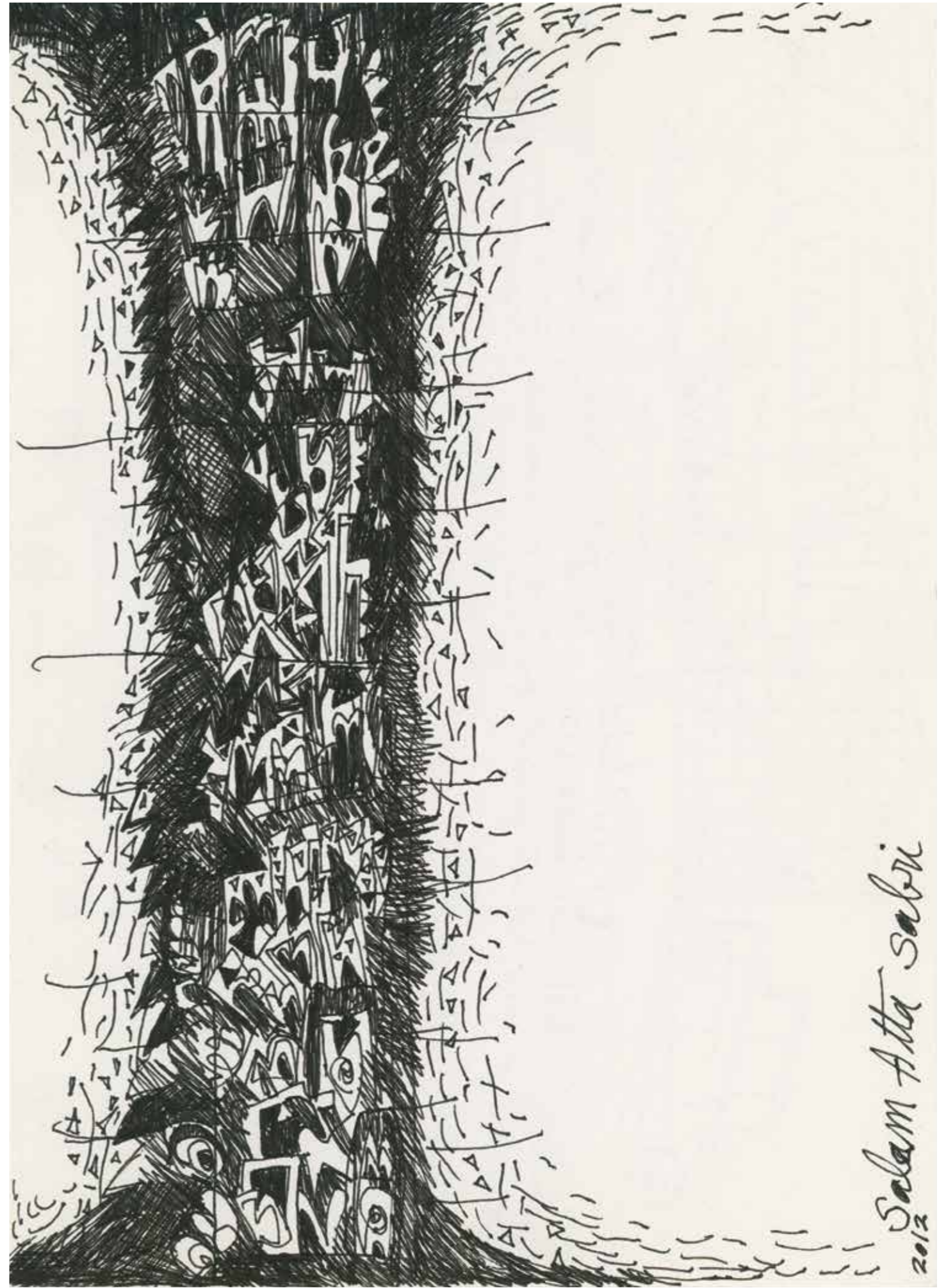


Salam Atta Sabri

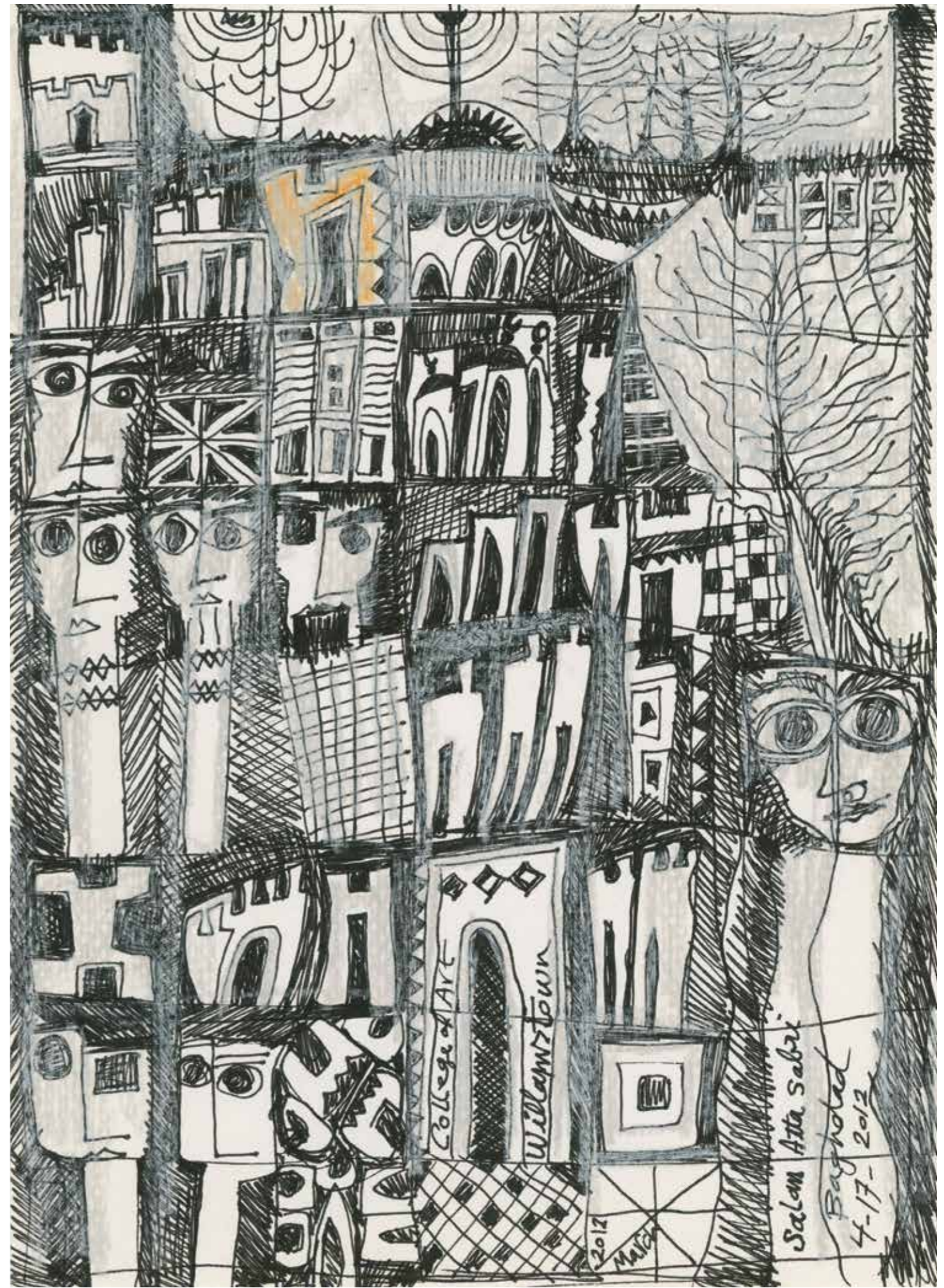
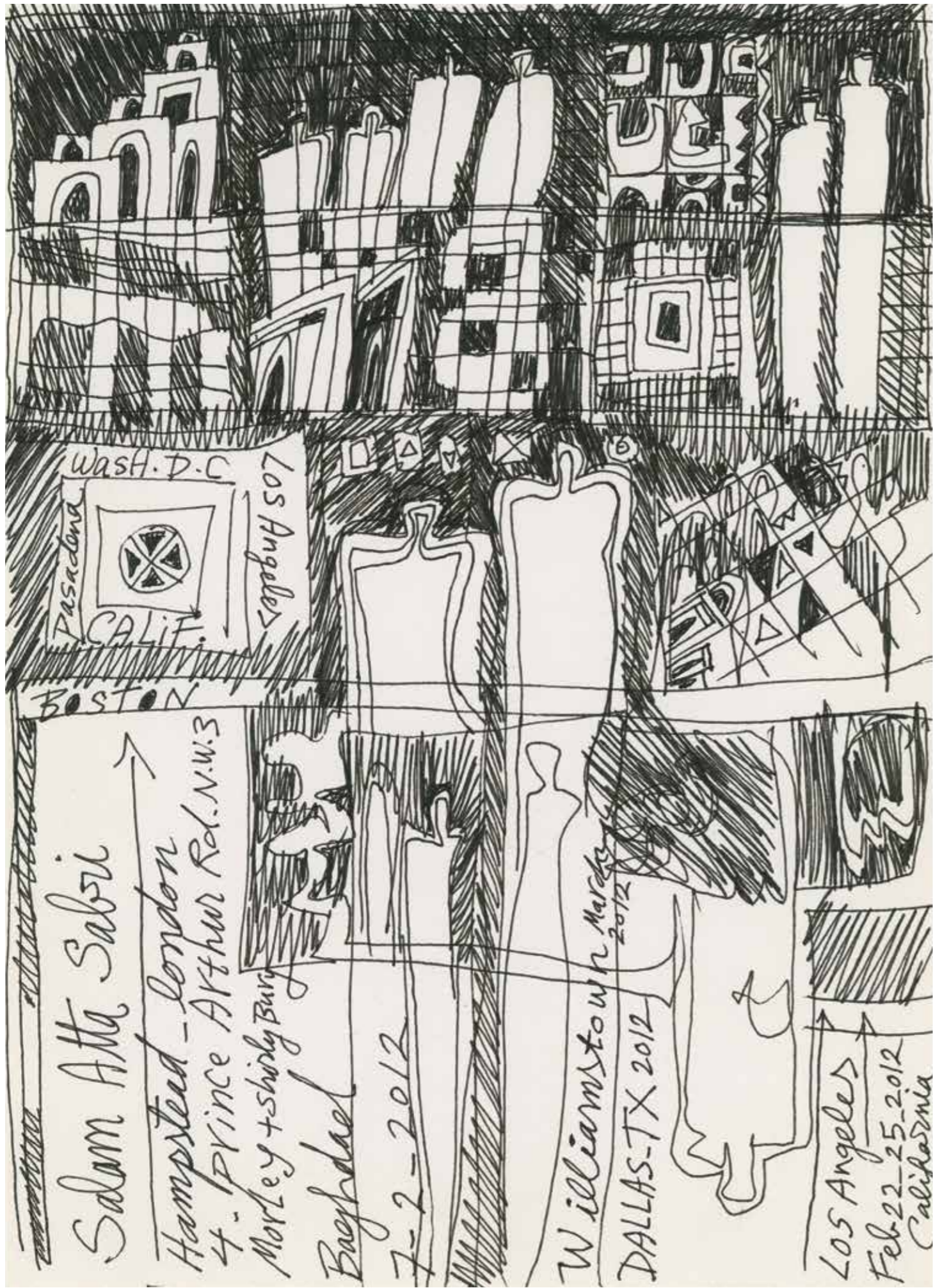
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