My name is Ala Younis. I was trained as an architect in Amman and I am a research-based artist. I work a lot with, and in, archives. I’m working with these archives finding stories.

The name of the project, Plan for Greater Baghdad, is taken from Frank Lloyd Wright’s proposal for the commission that he was given to design an opera house in Baghdad. And this project was canceled, basically, after the events of 1958. It is because the project was never realized, also, that the title works well with all these fragments of stories and all these attempts that appear in the project.

The main event that started this was finding these 35mm slides posted online on an Artnet website. I found this gymnasium that is named after Saddam Hussein, and is designed by Le Corbusier, and it’s in Baghdad, and these images were taken by Rifat Chadirji.

This history was gathered from different places, because I couldn’t go to Baghdad. I would’ve loved to, but I couldn’t go. So part of this was researched in Beirut—I met Rifat Chadirji. I also went, to the Le Corbusier Foundation twice. So the documents became rather essential. So there are all these documents, all these facts, and the names come in and out all the time—and there is some sort of a pattern. But there is also this decision of “performing power” through master plans, or through architecture, or through monuments.

There are missing things in the documents—there are stories that are not there as images. This is when I thought, if I want to produce images, they should be something from this. And then I thought of this idea of small monuments. I call them models, or figures. So I produced these gestures, or models, of the men performing things. They are caught in movement—like a frozen moment—as if they were going somewhere, or saying something, or doing something related to what appeared in this history. For instance, Le Corbusier is raising his hand as if he’s swimming backwards. And that’s related to many things like, for instance, his meeting with an Iraqi official, back in ’57, when they discovered that they had a mutual interest in aqua sports. And he was suggesting to him a swimming pool with waves, like artificial waves, because that was the most advanced solution for pools at the time. And then there is a gesture for Saddam, who’s holding a hammer. So I was trying to get this position where he looks like something between a constructor and deconstructor.

The model is not necessarily an exact copy of the original building, because it’s just another player within this installation. And the scale is not really true. I mean, the figures are much bigger; they don’t relate necessarily to the size of the building. So each one of these is basically an element that is performing a little bit of the story.

There is a timeline that is related to the Gymnasium, how it was commissioned in the ’50s, how it was almost finished as a design, ’58, how the system changed, which caused another change in the plans, and the designs of the sports center as a whole, not just the gymnasium—the gymnasium was only one part of the bigger project.
The timeline on the wall—that upper line is basically for the Gymnasium, and the middle one is basically for what was happening in Baghdad. And then there is also like a line of ideas that’s just trying to mix these two lines together.

It was interesting to read the recent history of the city from these elements, like, if one is look at how the master plan was changing, or how the monuments were coming up and down—these monuments appear, or disappear based on who has the power to say what. You’re trying to understand how things happened from the different sources, in a way. But it’s also an art project, too. I allow for the space of fiction within the work, though it might also appear very subtle at the same time. But yeah, I believe that this space of fiction is also interesting, because it reflects the elements that built this project—like, not just my project, I mean the bigger project of Baghdad, and its master plans, and it’s all these architects, and troubling systems, and everything.