

MEI Art Gallery Presents Speaking Across Mountains: Contemporary Kurdish Artists in Dialogue

[Editorial Team](#)



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Video still from *Bütün İsimler / All Names*, 2019 by Şener Özmen. Courtesy of the Artist.

Opening Reception: Friday, December 6 from 6pm to 8pm

Speaking Across Mountains: Contemporary Kurdish Artists in Dialogue, the second curated exhibition at the **MEI Art Gallery** – the Middle East Institute’s new non-commercial art space and the first of its kind in Washington, D.C., is an exploration of contemporary art by ten artists who ethnically identify as Kurdish. On view from **December 6, 2019** through **February 20, 2020**, the show is curated by **Heba Elkayal**, an independent curator and writer based between New York and Cairo.

The diversity in the featured artists' backgrounds, narratives and aesthetic approaches reflects the trans-national reality of the global Kurdish community. The artists, many of whom are living in diaspora, practice and produce work on a variety of themes that are not immediately or explicitly related to the topic of Kurdish identity. Instead, their works examine subjects that touch on history, geography and politics, as well as broader cultural themes of language, exile, gender and displacement that have long dominated the Kurdish experience.

The exhibition aims to go beyond the tragically topical headlines of recent events that limit understanding of the complexity of Kurdish experiences to present, and will instead present personal reflections in a range of media – including painting, video, photography, textile, sculpture and assembled constructions. A nuanced consideration of a group of people who share as many commonalities as they do differences, *Speaking Across Mountains* explores tensions in each individual artist's practice as well as threads of conversation between selected works. An essential aspect of the exhibition is the development of dialogue – both artistic and cultural – that takes place amongst the artists themselves.

Acknowledging the wide-ranging experiences of Kurdish artists and their myriad points of origins, *Speaking Across Mountains* will present works by artists from a variety of Kurdish territories and related countries. Featured artists include **Sherko Abbas**, **Serwan Baraan**, **Hayv Kahraman**, **Kani Kamil**, and **Walid Siti** of Iraq; **Savas Boyraz**, **Zehra Dogen** and **Şener Özmen** of Turkey; and **Khadija Baker** and **Bahram Hajou** of Syria. Iranian Kurds will be represented in a program of films accompanying the exhibition.

Speaking Across Mountains, which will be complemented by panel discussions and film screenings, offers audiences a rare opportunity to engage in conversation about the diversity of Kurdish experiences through the eyes of leading Kurdish artists.

Artist Biographies

Sherko Abbas

Sherko Abbas (b. 1978, Iran) is a Kurdish-Iraqi artist. Born in Iran, where his family lived as refugees, Abbas returned to Iraq when he was two years old. He studied Fine Art in Sulaymaniyah-Iraq and graduated with a Masters in Fine Arts from Goldsmiths College, University of London in 2015.

Employing video, performance, sculpture and sound, Abbas' practice is dedicated to the sonic and visual memory and geopolitical situation of contemporary Iraq. His work is currently on view at MoMa PS1 as part of the critically acclaimed exhibition "*Theater of Operations*". He has participated in many exhibitions internationally, including '*Archaic*', the Iraq Pavilion at the 57th Venice Biennale; *Biennale 'Rencontres Internationales Paris/Berlin'* at the Louvre Auditorium, Paris, France; '*Bagdad mon amour*' at the Institut des Cultures d'Islam, Paris, France; '*Vernacularity*' at the Alternativa International Visual Arts Festival in Gdansk, Poland; and '*Estrangement*' at the Showroom, London, UK.

Khadija Baker

Khadija Baker (b. 1973, Amuda, Syria) is a Montreal-based, multidisciplinary artist of Kurdish-Syrian descent. Baker immigrated to Canada from Syria in 2001. She completed her MFA studies at Concordia University, where she is a core member of the Centre for Oral History & Digital Storytelling (COHDS). She is currently continuing her research creation at the Centre for Interdisciplinary Studies in Society and Culture (CISSC) at Concordia University. Baker's installations investigate social and political themes centered on the uncertainty of home as it relates to persecution, identity, displacement, and memory. As a witness to traumatic events, unsettled feelings of home are a part of her experience. Her multi-disciplinary installations often combine textile, sculpture, performance, sound, and video, and involve participative storytelling and performance to create active spaces of empathy and greater understanding.

Baker has had solo exhibitions across Canada and has participated in many international exhibitions, including the 3rd Istanbul International Triennial, Istanbul, Turkey; the 6th DocuAsia Forum, Vancouver, Canada; the 12th International Exile Film Festival, Gothenburg, Sweden; the 27th Instant Video festival, Marseille, France; the inaugural Syria Contemporary Art Fair, Beirut, Lebanon; the 17th CONTACT Photo Festival, Toronto, Canada; the 2nd Biennale of IZMIR, Turkey; the 18th Biennale of Sydney, Australia; the 6th OFTTA festival, Montréal, Canada; the 10th International Diaspora Film Festival, Toronto, Canada; the 22nd Festival Les Instants Vidéo, Marseille, France; the 1st New York Kurdish Film Festival, New York, USA; the 19th and 13th Festival Accès Asie, Montreal, Canada; the 5th London Kurdish Film Festival, London, UK; and the official exhibition marking Damascus' role as the 2008 UNESCO Arab Capital of Culture, Damascus, Syria – as well as well as group shows in Vienna, Austria; Paris, France; Berlin, Germany; Delhi, India; Beirut, Lebanon; London, UK; New York and San Francisco, USA; and locations across Canada and Turkey. She was also awarded several research, creation and travel grants from the Canada Council for the Arts and the Conseil des arts et des lettres du Québec.

Serwan Baraan

Serwan Baran (b. 1968, Baghdad, Iraq) is an Iraqi-Kurdish artist. He graduated with a degree in Fine Arts from Babel University in Iraq. Baran served as a soldier and war artist in the 1980s and 1990s. His work became more expressionist after leaving Iraq in 2005, as he began addressing his own military experience in grotesque, figural abstractions. Baran is considered among the 'New Generation' of Iraqi Painters.

Baran represented the Iraq Pavilion at the 58th Venice Biennale (2019) with 'Fatherland', a commentary on the masculine and paternalistic dimensions of political culture in Iraq and the region. Since 1991, he has held solo exhibitions in Jordan, Morocco, Iraq, Syria, Japan, and the Dominican Republic, and has participated in a large number of group exhibitions, including the Cairo Biennial (1999), the Kuwait Biennial (2011) and the

Morocco Biennial (2012). Baran has won several awards, including a Gold Medal at the Plastic Arts Festival in Mahres, Tunisia (2002). He lives and works between Beirut, Lebanon and Amman, Jordan.

Savas Boyraz

Savas Boyraz (b. 1980, Istanbul, Turkey) lives and works in Sweden. He worked with Mezopotamya Cinema Collective, Istanbul between 1998 and 2006 and graduated from the Photography Department of Mimar Sinan Fine Arts University, Istanbul in 2009. He completed his Master's in fine arts at Konstfack, Stockholm.

Boyraz focuses on portrait photography, documentary, and fiction narratives. His work straddles the gap between nation state and cultural linguistic entities; he tries to shed light on the overlooked and omitted corners of societies and their history. Intertwining performance, photography, and moving image in his works, Boyraz blurs the line between art and political activism. Throughout his practice he has often explored the struggle of the Kurdish community in the Middle East, as well as his own roots. Boyraz has received awards from the Hasselblad Foundation, the Swedish Arts Grants Committee, and the HSBC Photography Award. He has participated in exhibitions in the Hasselblad Center, Sweden; Foundation 3,14 Bergen, Norway; Art Space Auckland, New Zealand; Kunstlerhaus Bethanien Berlin, Germany; the Aperture Foundation, USA; Les Les Rencontres d'Arles, France; and Michaelis Galleries, South Africa, among others. Boyraz was also featured in the exhibition 'Planet-Kurdistan' during the 53rd Venice Biennale.

Zehra Doğan

Zehra Doğan (b. 1989, Diyarbakır, Turkey) is a Kurdish artist and journalist who graduated from Dicle University's Fine Arts Program. She is a founder and the editor of Jinha, a feminist Kurdish news agency with an all-female staff.

In 2017, Doğan was sentenced to 2 years, 9 months and 22 days in prison

for “terrorist propaganda” because of her news coverage, social media posts, and sharing a painting of hers on social media that depicts the destruction of the Nusaybin, a town in southeastern Turkey, after the clashes between state security forces and Kurdish insurgents. Doğan’s imprisonment prompted international outcry, including a 2018 mural by street artist Banksy in New York. She was released from prison in Tarsus on 24 February 2019. In March 2019, Doğan was nominated for Index on Censorship’s 2019 Freedom of Expression Awards in the Arts category. She was also the recipient of the 2015 Metin Göktepe Journalism Award, named after the journalist who died in police custody in Turkey in 1996; the 2018 Courage in Journalism Award from the International Women’s Media Foundation; and the 2015 Metin Göktepe Journalism Award, one of the most prestigious in Turkey. At the 84th International PEN Congress in India in 2018, Doğan became an honorary member. Her work was exhibited at the 2016 Douarnenez Film Festival, France during her imprisonment and has been exhibited widely internationally following her release including shows in France, Germany, Italy, Spain, and Turkey. She is currently featured in a critically acclaimed exhibition of drawings by incarcerated artists at the Drawing Center in New York, USA, which is on view through January 2020.

Bahram Hajou

Syrian-born German artist Bahram Hajou (b. 1952, Deruna, Syria) left his homeland when he was 18 years old and went to Baghdad to study at the Fine Arts Academy, after which he moved to Prague and later to East and West Berlin before settling down and completing his studies in Muenster, Germany. His love for drawing led him to study archaeology and later to finish his studies at the Fine Arts Academy in Dusseldorf, Germany. Hajou’s works have been exhibited across France, Germany, Hungary, Mexico, Saudi Arabia, Syria, the UAE, the UK, and the USA.

Hajou’s paintings are subtle works of nature and humanity. Inherent among the gentle strokes and original colouring are tales of beauty and love, fear and solitude, forgiveness and understanding, anxiety and furtiveness,

freedom and dependence. His power and strength is reflected in the energy of his works, many of which give the impression of freedom of expression and a readiness for dialogue. He was awarded the Joseph Albers Museum Germany Award (2001) and the Henri Matisse Award from the Château-Musée Grimaldi (2014).

Hayv Kahraman

Hayv Kahraman (b. 1981, Baghdad, Iraq) is an Iraqi artist of Kurdish descent, who studied at University of Umeå, Sweden and Accademia di arte e design di Firenze, Italy, and now lives and works in Los Angeles, USA. A vocabulary of narrative, memory and dynamics of non-fixity found in diasporic cultures are the essence of her visual language and the product of her experience as an Iraqi refugee/come émigré. The body as object and subject have a central role in her painting practice as she compositely embodies the artist herself and a collective.

Kahraman's recent solo exhibitions include shows at Contemporary Art Museum St. Louis; Joslyn Museum of Art, Omaha; Asian Art Museum, San Francisco; De La Warr Pavilion, Bexhill; Susanne Vielmetter Los Angeles Projects, Los Angeles; The Third Line, Dubai; and Jack Shainman, New York; as well as performances at CAM St Louis, Birmingham Museum of Art, Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art and Duke University. She has participated in group exhibitions at the Rubell Family Collection, Miami; Istanbul Modern, Istanbul; Stedelijk Museum Schiedam, Schiedam; Garage Museum of Contemporary Art, Moscow; The Museum of Modern Art, Gunma; Nelson-Atkins Museum, Kansas City; Kazerne Dossin Museum, Mechelen; Sadie Coles HQ, London; Martin-Gropius-Bau, Berlin; Asian Art Museum, San Francisco; and the 2009 Sharjah Biennial. Kahraman was shortlisted for the 2011 Jameel Prize at the Victoria and Albert Museum and has received the award "Excellence in Cultural Creativity", Global Thinkers Forum.

Kani Kamil

Kani Kamil (b. Sulaymaniyah, Iraq) is an Iraqi-Kurdish artist who lives and

works in the UK. Kamil holds a Masters Degree from Middlesex University London and a Bachelor's Degree Fine Art / Ceramic, University of Sulaimany College of Fine Art, Iraq; she is currently a PhD student at Manchester Metropolitan University and a member of the 'Travelling Heritage Bureau' group in Manchester, UK. Kamil employs personal stories, photography, needle-work, archival material, and sound to expose the tension between nature and culture in relation to social issues and the construction of gender in society, using her personal experiences to critique the absence of women's voices. She is interested in revealing forgotten and hidden stories that need to be remembered and frequently uses her own hair as a material in her practice.

Kamil's work has been exhibited at various locations across the UK, including the Victoria & Albert Museum, London and Kurdish House, London. Her work has also been exhibited at the Institute of Fine Art Sulaimany, Iraq; at the Reykjavik Art Museum, Iceland in a project curated by Yoko Ono; and at the 18th international open at WMG, Chicago, USA. She took part in a performance with sound artist Tarek Atoui at the inaugural Yorkshire Sculpture International. She is currently a member of the 'Travelling Heritage Bureau' group in Manchester, a project of the Digital Women's Archive North (DWAN).

Şener Özmen

Şener Özmen (b. 1971, Idil, Turkey) is a Kurdish artist and writer. He graduated from the Department of Painting Education in the Faculty of Education at Cukurova University. With biting irony, sharp humour, a clear aesthetic language, and with an outspoken and provocative critical attitude Özmen questions the certainty of existing conditions and situations, authoritarian structures and existing taboos. His subtle and poetic works focus our attention not only on the perception and the changes in the context of art, but refer mainly to the critical problems of social reality in which the artist positions himself and offers his opinion.

Özmen has had several solo exhibitions and participated in many group exhibitions both in Turkey and abroad, including at Centre Pompidou, Paris, France; Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam, Netherlands; Frac Corsica, Corte, France; Istanbul Modern, Istanbul, Turkey; and Kunsthalle Fridericianum, Kassel, Germany, as part of Documenta13 (2012). His work has also been exhibited in various institutions in Albania, Armenia, Austria, Azerbaijan, Iran, Kosovo, Serbia, Spain, Switzerland, Sweden, the UK, the USA and Yugoslavia; his video works have been shown in the Cologne Art Films Biennial in 2005 and 52th International Oberhausen Short Film Festival in 2006. Özmen's writing has been published in Birgun Newspaper, Artist Contemporary Art Magazine, Sanat Dünyamız, Radikal Kitap and Siyahi. Özmen was selected for the Transfer 07 Artist Exchange Program, which was organized by North Ren Vestfalya Cultural Festival between 2005 and 2007, as well as the Turkish and German City Writer Project, which was organized by Istanbul Goethe Institute in 2008. Özmen is an IIE Artist Protection Fund Fellow in residence at Montclair State University currently participating in the EFA Studio Program and was a recipient of the 2005 Prix Meuly from Kunstmuseum Thun, Switzerland. Currently he lives and works in Diyarbakır, Turkey.

Walid Siti

Walid Siti (b. 1954) was born in the city of Duhok, in Iraqi-Kurdistan. After graduating in 1976 from the Institute of Fine arts in Baghdad, Siti left Iraq to continue his arts education in Ljubljana, Slovenia before seeking political asylum in 1984 in the United Kingdom, where he lives and works.

Formerly trained in printmaking, Siti works extensively in a variety of mediums including, installation, 3D works, work on paper and painting. His works traverses a complex terrain of memory and loss, while at the same time offering an acute insight into a world, which for him has been a place of constant change. The narrative of Siti's experience, of a life lived far from but still deeply emotionally connected to the place of one's birth, is one he shares with many exiles; he takes inspiration from the cultural heritage of his

native land that is crisscrossed with militarized borders and waves of migration. The artist's work considers the tensions between collective identity, interdependence and the constraints placed on the individual by themes of heritage, tradition, homes, borders, mobility and migration. Siti's work is in notable international collections such as The Metropolitan Museum, New York, USA; The British Museum, London, UK; The Imperial War Museum, London, UK; The National Gallery of Amman, Jordan; The World Bank, Washington, D.C., USA; Victoria & Albert Museum, London, UK; The Iraq Memory Foundation, Art for American Embassy program, USA; Museum of contemporary Art, Krakow, Poland; and the Barjeel Art Foundation, UAE.

MEI Art Gallery is located at 1763 N Street NW.

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