

Prisons, Mountains & Survivors' Clothes: How These Kurdish Artists Are Exploring their History

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Kurdistan has long been explored and discussed, not as a nation-state, not even as a region, but as an outlier – a piece of a puzzle that did not seem to fit and thus was removed from the larger picture. This was not just a

discourse or a conversation, but a constant reality for Kurdish peoples, no matter where they are currently settled. A reality of long-term persecution – legal, psychological, and physical.

But no matter what the many discourses surrounding Kurdistan say, many Kurds identify as Arabs, and more than merely “identifying,” they are deeply embedded in the Arab narrative by virtue of geo-political proximity alone – let alone social and cultural. But even as they exist within the conceptual (and literal) bounds of “Arabness,” their realities remain defined by that persecution, their exile, and the trauma that threads through both. Their experience of borders, specifically, is unlike perhaps that of most populations – with many of the issues facing Kurds beginning and ending at that very real, very violent, yet also slippery figure of the border.

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It is only natural that it is those themes – among many others – that feature in Kurdish artists' diverse bodies of work. *Speaking Across Mountains*, an exhibit in the Middle East Institute Gallery in Washington DC, is featuring a bulk of that art, from video and sonic installations to sculptures, produced by nine Kurdish artists from the four different regions that Kurds occupy and are related to (northern Iraq and Syria; Western Iran; and Eastern Turkey), engaging them in dialogue with one another.



Savas Boyraz's project 'The State We Are In' depicts objects destroyed in the war in Kurdish villages and towns in Turkey, against the backdrop of the mountains near the borders. Photo courtesy of Savas Boyraz.

While there have been several exhibits showcasing Kurdish art (in the West) before, none have been done at such a large scale, while including this many different artists from across Kurdish populations. It gathers Serwan Baran, Kani Kamil, Hayv Kahraman, and Walid Siti of Iraq; Savas Boyraz, Zehra Doğan and Şener Özmen of Turkey; and Khadija Baker and Bahram Hajou of Syria. The exhibit also screens films from

Iranian-Kurdish directors throughout.

“Each part has its own issues and problems, but it was the same political situation we lived in the end, and we were marginalized in all the four parts,” one of the exhibiting artists, Khadija Baker, tells us. This is why this exhibit offers something particularly important – an acknowledgment of the transnational, regional nature of political issues facing Kurds, throughout history and until the present day.

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Baker, who is now based in Canada, lived near Syria's northern borders most of her life, yet her work revolves largely around the Anfal massacre – a genocidal campaign reportedly led by former Iraqi president Saddam Hussein and Military Commander Ali Al-Majid that started in 1986, which killed between 50,000 and 182,000 Kurds as well as a couple of thousand Assyrians – and its survivors. That genocide was a tragic, defining moment in Kurdish history and so, of course, its impacts rippled, and were felt by Kurds everywhere.

The work she's now exhibiting in DC, *Coffin/Nest*, is an ongoing textile project, which started with her gathering items of clothing that hold sentimental value to some of the survivors of the massacre, weaving them together in a show of resilience. Evolving over time, the project has become an interactive story-telling endeavor, where people from across different communities, Kurdish or otherwise, bring Baker clothes that are important to them, sharing stories as they do so.



Coffin/Nest by Khadija Baker.

"I remember when the Anfal happened and they started the Kurdish massacre, the effect was too close to us, and at the time we were afraid that they would attack us as well," she remembers. "I wanted to create something in response to that." Many of the mass graves were discovered in the years after the massacre - one was even just discovered in 2019 - and so until they were uncovered, people were merely missing, with no proof of death, no closure. "I wanted to surround my body with these missing people, so I created this thing to hug my body, with their smell, with the smell of clothes, with the smell of people."

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Explaining her choice behind using clothes for the piece, Baker says, "During the massacre, they displaced people and buried them, so quite often [when the mass graves were discovered over the following years] the only way to identify them, because there were around a million people, was through their clothing. Not their DNA, because it was impossible to do for all these people, but their clothing."

It is incidents like these that have made Kurdistan – in the eyes of the public, but often, even in the eyes of Kurds themselves – rife with symbols: the mountains, for instance, are another. The cover image of the exhibit, "A Poem to the Mountain at the Edge of the World," by Walid Siti, an Iraqi-Kurdish artist, is a painted sculpture, shadowed and detailed, representing the importance that the symbol of the mountain holds for Kurds across their (other) various ethnic identities.



Walid Siti's 'A poem to the mountain at the edge of the world.' Photo courtesy of Middle East Institute.

Approximately 35 million Kurds live in a stateless region, concentrated in the border zones of Turkey, Syria, Iraq and Iran. Much of that region is mountainous, and the mountains have been refuge for countless Kurds whose (traditionally) nomadic lifestyles and connection to the land offers them a wealth of knowledge about almost every inch of it.

While now, the Kurdish populations are recognised in both Iraq and Iran – the Kurds in northern Iraq have even successfully established their own autonomous government (the [Kurdistan Regional Government](#)) and the Kurds in Iran primarily inhabit the Iranian province of Kordestan - there are still continuing political tensions between the governments in question and disputes over land (and political rights) continue to impact Kurds' lives in the region.

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Through all of that, Kurds continue to share an identity, "across mountains," that is rooted in their traditions, these symbols, their shared history, and unfortunately their (continued) experience of trauma. The nature of violence of that trauma cannot be overstated – Savas Boyraz, a photographer who's exhibiting at *Speaking Across Mountains*, depicts exactly that through a number of material objects that carry traces of state-led destruction. The photos show the violence inflicted upon found objects - such as a metal door and a satellite TV - from a Kurdish town in Turkey, Yüksekova, which was one of several that were severely affected by the Kurdish-Turkish conflict (or war). As he grew up in Istanbul, distanced from his cultural roots, he "turned art and politics into a vessel to carry myself closer to the missing cultural and lingual elements of my identity, [using] the camera as a shovel to dig deeper into it."

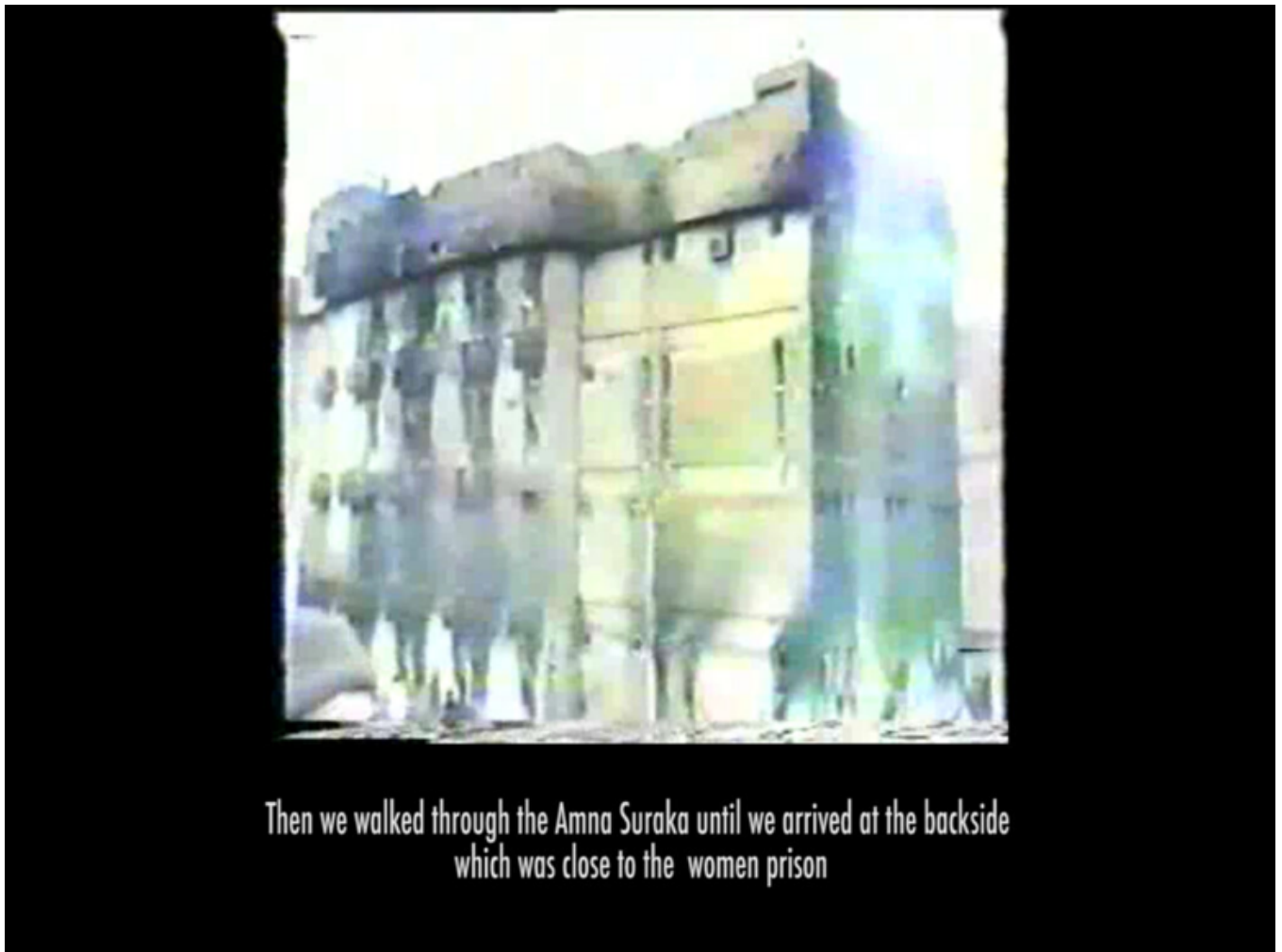


Amna Surka was a building used as headquarters of the Mukhabarat, Saddam Hussein's intelligence agency.

Much of the violence embedded in these works is real and visceral, painfully so. Iraqi-Kurdish artist Sherko Abbas's film, *Phantom of a Museum*, for instance, delves deep into an archive of violence. His work incorporates footage he found – which had been kept by his father for years – as he researched the infamous Amna Surka building, which formerly functioned as headquarters of the Mukhabarat, Saddam Hussein's intelligence agency – which has now been turned into a war museum of Saddam Hussein's war crimes. "When the building was named as a museum, it only focused on some stories, supportive of some political parties that are now in power, and they overlooked the rest," Abbas explained. The footage he found showed the 'Caravan,' an interrogation room that was full of women's clothes, underwear, and birth control pills – evidence of the torture of Kurdish

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Sherko Abbas used archival footage and documentation from his father to uncover cases of women's torture in Amna Sakra. Above is a still from his video, 'Phantom of a Museum'.

But some of that violence is also latent, lying just beneath the surface. In the various ways that these artists strive to connect to their culture, to their

language and history, one can sense the systematic erasure of culture that they have had to endure – and that they continue to struggle against. “We were not allowed to speak our language in a public space. We were not allowed to learn it and write it,” Baker says, drawing on her experience on the borders in Syria. “It has always been problematic for me because I never had the time, immigrating and running and living everyday life, it’s like if you don’t do it [learn to write the language] at a certain time, you’re kind of taken by the life and you lose something... I think I’m just trying to stay connected in a way, and the textile, it’s a part of the culture.”

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The same disconnect is felt by most Kurds everywhere – and it’s not a coincidence. It’s a result of decades of forced exile and displacement. The work of Bahram Hajou, a renowned Syrian-Kurdish artist (who has been producing art for 40 years) similarly evokes this notion of erasure through portraits and paintings of figures, stripped almost bare to the bone, seeming lost and lonesome. Postures are broken, expressions and faces are twisted – a statement on the state of the world and the corruption pervading it to the point that connection between people seems arduous, if not impossible.



A painting by Bahram Hajou.

Textile, however, and certain elements of Kurdish culture, as used by Baker, provide literal threads of connection – both to Kurdish communities now, and to their traditions, many of which are threatened by erasure. “Textile is part of the culture, especially for me as a woman; women carry culture most of the time. You recognise a tribe or community or nationality because they have a certain way of dressing themselves and certain colors, and through the way they shape their bodies,” explains Baker, who also recycles the textiles she uses for her work, drawing upon her mother’s daily practices of recycling, making cloth into blankets, then cleaning pieces, then into trash.

Her work is very much premised on different forms of recycling, another way for her to connect to her culture, and her memory of life in the Kurdish region of Syria years ago. Not only does she recycle materials, but art itself; her project has been ongoing for almost 15 years and is premised on making art

that connects communities and generations.

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Abbas's film, which also incorporates, next to the actual footage of the torture rooms, testimonies from women who were subject to torture in the Caravan, is similarly a form of art that weaves politics, documentation, and philosophical exploration together, blurring the lines between art and politics for Kurds. That depth of meaning, however, is a forced form of creative expression, more so a practice of necessity than a choice, as one of the artists told us. "I do not wish to work on these matters, by choice. It is an acute sense of necessity that drives the motivation. I wish one day I will work freely," said Boyraz.

But what also arises from these works is a strong sense of connection, a resilient desire to keep the culture alive, and to do so by keeping the conversation going, not in one area of Kurdistan, not for just one population, but for all of them – hence the title, *Speaking Across Mountains*.

The exhibit is running until February 2020 at the Middle East Institute Gallery in Washington DC.

Main image courtesy of Khadija Baker.