

# Living in the Edge

HIWA K, *Pre-Image (Blind as the Mother Tongue)*, 2017, stills from single-channel HD video, color, sound with English and Kurdish languages. 17 min 40 sec. Courtesy the artist.



Portrait of HIWA K. Photo by Daniella Baptista. Courtesy Jameel Arts Centre, Dubai

## HIWA K

BY FRANCES ARNOLD

After almost two decades of living in Germany, the Iraqi-Kurdish artist Hiwa K moved back to his birthplace in Kurdistan in early 2020. When we connected over Skype, he had just returned to the mountainous territory from Dubai, where his exhibition “Do You Remember What You are Burning?” had opened at the Jameel Arts Centre on December 16, 2020. “I don’t complain that it came too late, but it could have been earlier,” he said of his first solo show in West Asia. “It’s nice that people now start to understand what I want to share with them. There has been a lot of art from the region that points directly to issues with the index finger. The works that I do mostly point with the pinkie; they leave space for the audience to produce their own readings.”

Focused on the conditions of marginality, Hiwa K’s films, installations, and performances probe themes of migration, identity, and collectivity, and gesture to the geopolitical ties between his native Kurdistan and other places that he has called home. He explained of Kurdistan, which encompasses northern Iraq, southeastern Turkey, northern Syria, and northwestern Iran: “It is the only region with borders running through its center. It’s a place of margins, with a certain kind of instability and dubiousness. That’s why I always say I’m ‘based on my feet.’ Being Kurdish, you never have the luxury of sitting—unlike if you’re Turkish, Syrian, Iraqi, or Iranian. They all have a capital in the center and a periphery. But for the Kurdish, we are only periphery. I see it in every Kurdish person; we don’t have that center.”

Itinerancy extends throughout Hiwa K’s biography. His childhood and adolescence coincided with the Iran-Iraq War (1980–88) and the Gulf War (1990–91). This was not just formative but fateful: in 1996, at age 21, he fled Kurdistan on foot, embarking on a journey to Europe that lasted five months and 20 days. “I had tried to escape many times before,” he said. “The last time was very urgent—I had to go.”

By 2005, he was living in Germany and applied to the Academy of Fine Arts, Mainz, using a friend’s portfolio—as a commentary on the “homogeneity” of Western art institutions. On admission, his critique continued: In the performance *Arbeitsplatz* (*Workplace*, 2005), he repeatedly painted white a section of wall designated for displaying student art, in objection to the school’s “very market-oriented, object-oriented” slant. Expelled and reinstated a

total of three times, he ultimately received his diploma in 2009.

Recalling his art-school days, Hiwa K again returned to the topic of peripheries: “I got kicked out of so many classes. My practice was mainly in the corridor,” he said. “I saw the corridor as a place of conspiracy, in a good way . . . It was a manifestation of my position of statelessness.” Much of his work from this period was realized outside the classroom. For example, in the filmed performance *Cooking with Mama* (2005– ), the artist’s mother guides him and his friends through the preparation of a traditional Kurdish meal over Skype. “I have always questioned this traditional Western way of teaching, of master and disciple. I was more interested in learning from each other, as we do here [in Kurdistan] in teahouses and gatherings,” he explained.

Collectivity and non-hierarchical social structures are central to the video work *This Lemon Tastes of Apple* (2011). The piece is named after the distinctive-smelling gas used in a 1988 chemical attack on Kurdish people in Halabja, as well as the lemons passed among crowds of anti-government protestors in 2011 in Sulaymaniyah, Iraqi Kurdistan, to soothe the sting of tear gas. The footage features the artist walking within a jostling crush of demonstrators during the latter event, while playing the theme tune from the 1968 film *Once Upon a Time in the West* on a harmonica. “For various reasons, I always avoid looking at that work. But when I do, I see my role as not much more than anyone else taking part in that demonstration, as bringing it back to the collective and the ‘we.’”

*The Bell Project* (2015), created for the 56th Venice Biennale’s central exhibition, “All the World’s Futures,” curated by the late Okwui Enwezor, similarly touches on collectivity by uncovering what Hiwa K calls “the fingerprints that we have left on each others’ cultures.” Comprising sculpture and film, the piece features Iraqi metal merchant Nazhad, whose knowledge of the provenance, makeup, and worth of the region’s war-scattered missiles, mines, and vehicles is nothing short of encyclopedic. The work follows Nazhad sending 300 kilograms of newly cast metal bricks to an Italian foundry where artisan bell-makers invert the historical European practice of making weapons from bells.

A compulsive storyteller, Hiwa K splices personal experience with fiction, allegory, and anecdote. In the video *Pre-Image (Blind as the Mother Tongue)* (2017), for instance,

he re-enacts chapters of his Iraq-to-Europe migration while balancing on his nose a rudimentary navigation device of rearview mirrors affixed to a pole, which affords him only a fractured, disorienting view of his surroundings. The artist revisited the perspective of migrants and refugees at Documenta 14 in Kassel, where, in the video *View from Above* (2017), he juxtaposed images of a diorama showing the German city in the aftermath of World War II with a narrative about an asylum application. Because the person, M, had fled the army but hails from a designated “safe zone” he claims refugee status by proving residency of a different city, K, by learning its geography.

When we spoke, Hiwa K was awaiting the opening of his solo exhibition at Museum Abteiberg in Mönchengladbach, Germany, which had been delayed due to Covid-19. The show includes the first of five chapters of the video *The Existentialist Scene in Kurdistan (Raw Materiality 01)* (2017– ), which comprises 16 hours of contemporary Kurdish philosophers discussing existentialism. A condition of the work’s acquisition is that the buyers edit the piece according to a particular ideology (in agreement with the artist). For Museum Abteiberg’s edition, the perspective was “more leftist, more activist,” the artist said. His stipulation reflects how, “[Kurdistan] is not in a position to edit itself; decisions have always been made externally, from the West. I wanted this work to be edited in the same way that the country has.”

The work pitches existentialism’s discussion of individual freedom against Iraq’s war-won structural reforms—specifically, a free-market economy. “I was interested in how our collective society underwent the West’s promotion of certain ideas such as individuality and freedom of the individual. But we lost our collectivity, our social bond with each other. What we gained was not democracy but another form of totalitarianism: a freedom without responsibility, with the cost being the environment.”

Since relocating back to Kurdistan, Hiwa K’s practice has taken an ecological approach that continues to position his homeland front and center. “I have land on the mountains, near the villages here. I’m trying to work with trees, animals, and farming culture to bring something back. There are so many young activists who need support right now, and that’s the focus of my work.”

See our website for the Chinese version of this article.

欲閱讀此文章的中文版本請登陸我們的網站