

Shwan: Dear listener, may this time be joyous and blessed. Today's conversation is with the artist Avan Omar, and we will discuss the extent to which film is necessary for expression. In addition to the drawings in my art project, we will also talk about why I have repeated the same drawings as a means of communication in my films. One question that arises is whether we, as artists in exile, have the opportunity to create an artistic archive that can form the basis of an artistic infrastructure. Perhaps we can refer to it as Kurdish art history? Avan, welcome.

Shwan: Like the other participants in the podcast, Avan, I believe it would be best if you start with an introduction of yourself before we gradually move on to your questions and thoughts.

Avan: Of course. My name is Avan Omar, and I am originally from Iraqi Kurdistan, currently residing in the Netherlands. Regarding my education, I graduated from the University of Sulaymani's School of Fine Arts, majoring in drawing, in 2004. However, since then, I haven't worked extensively with drawing but have engaged with various media such as performance, video art, and installations. I moved to the Netherlands in 2009, and after learning the language and establishing myself, I began studying at the Dutch Art Institute (DAI) and completed a Master of Fine Arts at ArtEZ in Arnhem from 2014 to 2017, graduating in 2017.

Shwan: Thank you very much, Avan. I have already sent you images and video essays from my project. As Norwegians like to say: "Go for it!" "fyr løs".

Avan: Such meetings often come across as a form of offense and defense, which feels uncomfortable. I hope this is not the case with us and we can have an open discussion and exchange of information. First of all, I would like to say that I come from a critical art background, both here and in Kurdistan, especially during my master's program, where criticism was essential to the whole study and process. So, although my insights into your work may not be perfect, my goal is to critically share my insight into your work as an artist rather than criticize you personally.

Kurdish artists often talk about each other's work. Or they talk about each other when they should know each other. I was listening to the other podcast episode you did with Behjat Omer, where it was clear that you're both familiar with each other's artistic practices. Our conversation is completely different because we have no personal or artistic connection and I have not had the opportunity to see your works in person. I just watched them on a screen. This may create a unique space for questions and answers, but it can also lead to flaws and inadequacies.

I'd like to talk about my experience with your work in two parts: first, about the form, and then we'll talk about the theme, I think the theme is more powerful in your work. I have seen 31 drawings made on large sheets of paper. This is a visual exploration that includes both drawings and watercolors, as well as video. My initial impression was that your works remind me of Chinese art, with paper of that size and use of gold ink, which makes me feel more that you are interested in their philosophy of work. Was this a deliberate reference to Chinese art? Maybe you want to answer this question now.

Shwan: From an aesthetic perspective, I sought to draw upon my experiences in Kurdistan for this project, where I completed my education. The art education I received at institutions in Sulaymani has been heavily influenced by European and Russian art history, which has greatly shaped us. We have also been impacted by Eastern miniature painting, often referred to as Islamic miniature painting, where gold leaf is used to highlight artistic forms and patterns. I believe there is a connection here, even though you mentioned that we should

initially focus on form. I will return to this later, as I feel that my works embody a continuous relationship - a dialogue between material and subject.

I aim to address both aspects simultaneously, making it difficult for me to separate them. The combination of the abstract nature of gold ink and the realistic forms enriches both aesthetics mutually; this blend creates a flat, abstract surface in contrast to my depictions of realistic figures, such as a dog. I have attempted to reconcile these two painting traditions as a means of self-reflection and to cultivate a sense of ownership within myself.

I constantly question what it means to be a Kurdish artist today. The answer does not lie in the art we are trained to consider sublime, which I attribute to the lack of an artistic infrastructure - a contemporary museum in our region that could serve as a national memory. A place where one can go, see, and understand what we accomplished 500 or 1000 years ago from a visual arts standpoint. Our cultural heritage remains largely invisible due to ongoing oppression, and rather than asserting that the art I create belongs to others or that we have borrowed from them, I strive to foster a sense of ownership.

I am unsure how successful this endeavor has been, but it has resulted in my works appearing as a technical amalgamation - a composition of two artistic poles. Regardless, I view my artwork as part of my quest to find myself.

Avan: I see lots of symbols in your works. You know that in our history, during different Iraqi regimes, Kurdish artists have worked with many symbols. When they have pointed out a problem or something beyond them. This is commonly called the “art of defense”, where we focus on those who oppress us, we cannot express our voice openly, therefore we express it in symbols. For some artists, this methodology has changed after the uprising, as we looked inwards and criticized ourselves.

In your work, I see that you have worked symbolically against the “other”. You use many symbols, whether it’s a dog or a flower in a girl’s hair. Everything works as symbols and allegories that can be easily interpreted.

The colors and calligraphy, although beautiful and strong as forms, are dominated by the subject. The stories you tell reflect a deep sensitivity to narrative and memory, connecting various crimes and different periods. You talk about the events of 1983 and 1988, alongside the atrocities committed by ISIS. I see you mixing these three periods – maybe you choose some of these stories based on their differences.

When I look at your drawings and watercolors, and then your videos, I notice that you use the same drawings in the videos but deliver a certain narrative alongside them. You take a story, turn it into a drawing, and then recreate the narrative. Here I want to ask: Were your stories just not enough as drawings for you, why did you feel that these videos were also necessary? That is, you have turned the stories into drawings, then you have turned the drawings into films, and then into stories again!

What you are talking about is primarily related to the crimes, genocide, and suffering of the Kurdish people. There is also Kurdish artist Osman Qadir, who tells the story of Anfal only through paintings.

Shwan: Yes, I have met Osman Qadir in Sulaymani and gained insight into his work in the studio. He is a skilled artist, and his pieces reflect his personal experiences as a former Peshmerga. With close relatives from the Baath regime era, I feel a deep connection to his art.

Avan: I believe it's important to specify time and place so that things can be viewed from the right perspective. While you can on the issue of Kurds and Kurdish identity in general, it is essential to know where are you focusing your efforts. You mentioned that you concentrate on the issue of language. Are you referring to Kurds and the Kurdish language in Kurdistan and among the 40 to 50 million people?

There is a question: Can I say that your work is an artistic exploration of all of Kurdistan, or is it focused solely on the South? In your stories, I primarily see events from Southern Kurdistan from the 1980s up to 2014, including ISIS and the revolutionary women recognized in the West, which has become an international topic as well.

Shwan: My focus from the beginning has been precisely this. I initially had an optimistic approach, aiming to include all four parts of Kurdistan in my project and to visit each region. However, in practice, this has proven to be very difficult. I traveled to Turkey, to Istanbul, where I met some Kurdish journalists who could not express themselves freely. I began to ponder: How can I carry out this project, which concerns the oppression of a people, in a region where that oppression is ongoing? I went to Southern Kurdistan with hopes of traveling to Iran, but my family was very concerned for my safety - they feared that I could be arrested and perhaps never return. These worries held me back.

Over time, I began to consider that art often serves as a memory for a nation. For instance, if the Kurds had been eradicated over the past 200 years, there would be no traces left to tell us what happened. When you create art, it becomes a form of collective memory for that people. Perhaps my project will document certain events, but it does so across all parts of Kurdistan. When you ask a Sami person from Sweden, Norway, Finland, or Russia about their homeland, they identify with all four regions as their own, just as we refer to Southern, Northern, Western, and Eastern Kurdistan.

Ultimately, my decision was also to avoid limiting myself to a specific part of Kurdistan. Unlike academic research in another field where you can focus on a defined topic or region, my situation is different. My studio has become a space to explore all parts of Kurdistan. The language itself reflects the stories that have been told in Syria - stories of oppression found in both the North and the East. You are also familiar with the situation in Iraq, where, despite our fundamental right to speak our mother tongue, we have had the opportunity to use it freely, both orally and in writing, especially in our early school years.

Avan: Yes, I know you want to work on language, which is related to significant political and historical issues. It is a complex topic and wide, and it is important to know how to deal with this wide range of issues. You mentioned that you needed to travel to gather material, but I suggest you might benefit from the stories of people from Northern Kurdistan who live near you in Europe. This can provide valuable insight without traveling far. A Kurdish friend of mine is learning his mother tongue, Kurdish, at the age of 48. This is a strong theme in itself - language as part of identity in a new cultural context. Let me give you a beautiful example of working on language, Harold Pinter's *Mountain Language*. It tells the story of a mother who visits her imprisoned son. The mother does not speak Turkish and cannot use her language, which is Kurdish. So they only communicate by looks. Such stories illuminate how language can be a form of resistance to invasion and oppression. Language beyond its native environment highlights how unity and division can affect individuals and cultures.

Another example of language is my teacher, who was Basque. He told me that when he was a child, his father paid him to encourage him to speak Spanish instead of Basque. You see the

form, the farther away from your language the more money will be spent on you, coin of course.

You have worked with several historical themes through the use of symbols. You have touched on war, exile, genocide, and international interests against the Kurds. Some examples from your works illustrate how deeply political decisions extend into people's lives. But honestly, language is not one of them.

I think you mix many topics, for example, examining the events of the 1980s in South or West Kurdistan, or issues related to women, and if you zoomed in instead, it could provide clarity and depth to your work. It feels to me, that by weaving stories and symbols together, you want to convey complex historical and political themes.

Shwan: Yes, I don't know where to start answering the question ...

Avan: My point was that if you limited your scope a bit more, or focused on a specific part of these stories, events, or themes, your work could become clearer and deeper, making it easier to work with. This is my opinion, Shwan. As I said, don't take it as an attack or defense. I absolutely do not intend to tell you what to do or not do. You are in the midst of your work and have arrived there through a process. Generally, as you say, we do not have strong archives. But we need to gather information from the archives for our work. When we look at historical themes, especially when relying on narratives and real events, we must be very cautious. We need to take small steps to get to the bottom of things. There is much that is large and complex, more than what humans can handle.

Shwan: My problem was that when I started working on this project, I was convinced that those going through the doctoral program face a similar problem: What is the difference between artistic research and research in other fields? My starting point was to focus on all four parts of Kurdistan. Eventually, I realized that it was challenging to limit the topic. I concluded that I could not provide a definitive answer to the question of the oppression of people, as it is not an issue that can be solved as simply as mathematics where 2 plus 2 always equals 4. Through this project, however, I am trying to offer my own interpretation of these complex themes.

Through my works, I find that multiple narratives are created. In the particular piece with the woman holding a rifle while flowers bloom from her head, I began without a specific story in mind. Over time, like a tree sprouting new branches, new narratives developed. This work became the starting point for a narrative that later shaped the video work "Rengê Xiyanet" (The Color of Betrayal). These narratives are a collection of actual events I have read about and experiences women have experienced under totalitarian regimes, combined with my own imagination inspired by literature from various cultures.

Regarding your first question about reusing my works in the film, this relates to my original idea of creating a visual alphabet for the Kurdish language. In this experiment, I allowed myself to work without being limited by the need to differentiate the artworks from previous works. I planned to produce four films using the same material, just as the letter "A" can be repeated several times in a text. The goal was to place the images in new contexts to give them new meanings and thus observe how this effects the stories. I do not consider my narratives as my possessions or myself as an authoritarian force over them. The films function as branches on a tree. The works, in my view, adequately convey the experiences of the events, the research I have conducted, and the conversations I have had. I believe it is more

appropriate to let the audience interpret them themselves, rather than for me to explain each symbol or link them to specific stories from the films.

Avan: When I first saw your pieces, I got into the narratives pretty quickly. The symbols you used generally express the stories. If I relate this to the theory of semiotics, as described by Ferdinand de Saussure, (I am sure you are familiar with him), it is closely related to the subject we are discussing now. His theory is groundbreaking when it comes to signs and semiotics. "Sign" in Kurdish is "نیشان - Nishan", which is divided into two parts: signified and signifier. A signifier is the physical form of things we can touch, smell, taste, or hear. A flower you smell, see the color and feel the thorns, while signified refers to the concept of the thing, the flower in our mind has several meanings. A flower can represent romance, love, the coming of life... These meanings are tied to the flower. In your works, I believe if you look at it this way, and since you have worked so much with symbols, I fall into these themes easily. But, in all your work, I generally understood more about working on identity, not language. Questions and issues related to language and identity are the first things we, as refugees, encounter when we leave our homeland. It is a natural process for all of us. Those coming from outside their own country, often do not have the time or desire to talk about identity, but we face identity issues. As Hannah Arendt discusses, she connects the refugee issue to the identity conflict they experience. She said you must negotiate your own identity with the new identity you must have in the new country. This creates ongoing conflict. So, when we come out and look at the world outside, our first experience is often tied to the identity conflict. I understand how and why this is the case for you.

Shwan: That is absolutely correct. Although my original focus was language, language is also an essential part of our identity. When our political identity is threatened, as in the case of the Kurds, situations arise where a lack of proficiency in one's own language makes it difficult to process experienced trauma. After Kurdistan was divided in 1923, the Kurds were deprived of the ability to express their sorrows and pains in their own language, both in film and in writing. We have faced many obstacles and attempts to suppress our collective grief have been widespread - even the names of our places have been changed.

This project is an attempt to regain ownership over our history and our identity. Even our history risks being taken from us, with changed place names as a symbol of this. For example, Kobanî in Syria in the 1980s underwent a name change to "Ayn al-Arab," which means "The Arab Eye." Why did this happen? The same goes for Qaradak in my own region, where the place's original name, Zardiawa, was also changed...

Avan: Karahanjir, all the words that contain "Kara."

Shwan: Regarding our oral culture, I believe its strength stems from the suppression of our written culture throughout history. I want to write down our conversation, partly because the evaluation committee for my project requires documentation, but also to use it as a symbol of the living Kurdish language, which has primarily survived through oral tradition, even though some of these aspects are now being documented in writing. Documenting our conversations has a deeper significance: it counters the suppression of our written culture. This has often been deprioritized in the region. Another significant obstacle I have faced is the lack of information about Kurdish oppression, especially from my own studio in Oslo. While there are abundant sources related to themes connected to Europe in several languages like Arabic and English, resources on Kurdish themes are far less accessible. Often, one must physically travel to the region to genuinely understand the oppression.

Avan: That is very true. There are many stories, but they have not been compiled and made available to us. This is a project that requires effort from institutions; it cannot be a one-person job. Even though we as individuals continuously try, we cannot do it alone. The existence of archives, as well as theoretical and research-based knowledge, is crucial for us. Without accessible archives, we cannot build upon our own ideas. Therefore, we must always return to the beginning and start anew with raw materials to make progress; in this way, the work often remains simple. That is why I am saying, it is very, very important to take on a small part of the events or a single theme in order to dive deeply into it. We cannot work with the big picture. It is a problem in our education that from the start we were not encouraged to research, observe, and understand, to write reports or texts based on our own knowledge. The teacher always told us what to do. This makes it difficult for us to be detail-oriented and to focus on one theme at a time.

Shwan: Here in Europe, I have learned a lot about this. During my studies, I was repeatedly told that I talked about too many themes at once, that my work was too broadly distributed over large topics. Now I struggle with this issue. But then I realize that it is just me - I am wrong if I say we are all like this; many of us experience this, and the lifestyle and experiences around us are often overwhelming. I have not experienced an easy journey; what has been challenging and what I have learned about, both from the perspective of a man and woman, as a person without nationality, oppressed as a Kurd, a refugee, and as an "other." I have lived through many of these difficult stages. From the moment I was born until now, I have lived in war. When the war in Ukraine broke out, I could relate to them, while people here in Norway grow up in a luxury, these different realities that can shock them. We have become resilient, like crocodiles; we endure a lot. This is why we tackle many themes and want to encompass as much as possible in our works.

Shwan: The Palestinian author Susan Abulhawa observes that we are exposed to intense emotions from birth, which gives us a strong ability to express ourselves. Experiencing traumatic events, such as seeing one's mother shot or a brother abused by soldiers, marks one's childhood with deep emotions that shape identity and creative expression. This may be the reason my project is not focused on one theme but rather explores several aspects ranging from emotions and culture to the physical space. These elements are so intertwined that they often result in fragmented expressions in my work.

Avan: That is very true. This can be difficult where many questions and themes are gathered in one project. I guess that is our culture too, we often speak about different topics at one time. This also reflects our education to some extent, which also affects our work. This can confuse us because the themes are often complex. You mentioned subaltern or oppression; are you familiar with Gayatri Spivak?

Shwan: Yes.

Avan: Great, she is an important and well-known post-colonialist. Now I think of her text: "Can the subaltern speak? It is very, very beautiful.

The text has been translated into Kurdish. She argues that we do not create our own situation; we never make decisions, and our voice is rarely considered. The West has to intervene. This also applies to the Kurds; we have been oppressed twice, under two occupations. It is a kind of categorization we have experienced, and we have paid a high price, but have we devoted our thinking to this? Have you read anything about what the British did when they came in the 1920s? How many investigations have been conducted about their influence? What do they do, and what do they not do? No, many of these thoughts are sacrificed; therefore, I like what

Spivak in that book suggests, that our intellectuals need to study the discourses of other societies, not necessarily commenting on them word for word, but benefiting from them for their advantage, just as Edward Said, Gayatri Spivak, and Frantz Fanon have done. They belong to the few who have worked on colonialism; we need to read them. For us artists who work with these issues, reading them can help us delve deeper, choose, and work more concretely. I have personally found great benefits in studying them.

Shwan: It may seem as if the colonizers deliberately keep people in ignorance, as when Swahili in Kenya is altered. This is an example of how African writers are often pressured to write in foreign languages, which causes a distancing from their own culture. By creating a population that is disconnected from its own history and ignorant of it, it becomes easier to exert control over them. This also gives colonial powers an excuse to claim that these groups are too small or dependent to govern themselves, thus justifying their control.

Avan: What you say reminds me of Althusser, who says that if we as (acting) subjects submit to the dominant system, it does what it wants without questioning our own existence and place, then we just live - we continue to exist, and that is all. He points out that we must create problems for power in order to fight against existence, and not just live as a herd. We have created the path and walk on it, but it is where we deviate that we meet something and find ourselves. I apologize; I don't like referring to so many theorists in such discussions, but as we talk now, the thoughts I have worked with come back to me, and therefore they emerge in the conversation without me planning it.

Shwan: There is an extensive theory of postcolonialism, which I have insight into through studies of Frantz Fanon and Edward Said. Nevertheless, situations arise that challenge me to think further, such as when a student asked why I had not interviewed a psychologist to understand the psychological aspects of oppression. I wondered about this need because psychologists, who are often grounded in theory, might lack the relevant experience from our specific situation. The stories from those who have experienced oppression in Kurdistan have a raw, overwhelming strength and depth. It is a challenge I am concerned with; artistic work can sometimes feel inadequate against the intense and complex stories of the Kurds. The silence in these stories becomes a powerful symbol in my films, which not only represents fear but also communicates a message when emotions become too overwhelming to express directly - only when the tears push up the throat does the silence become articulate. I have consciously made artistic choices based on experiences with the aim of illuminating the theme of fear. Is fear an expression of the absence of language, a consequence of oppression, physical torture, or a persistent suppression? Our own oppression is unbroken, and we have yet to reach the point where we can reflect fully and retrospectively. Even today, while situations like the collapse of the Assad regime are discussed, our ongoing struggle for freedom continues.

Avan: I am impressed by the resistance in Rojava (Western Kurdistan). But now, due to the advances of radical terrorist groups, I feel great fear. As a nation and an oppressed people, this is a significant, important, and complex political and historical issue. Of course, as Kurds, we may share the same pain and difficult life as around 200 other nations without our own state. A few years ago, a project was carried out in Utrecht, Netherlands, called Stateless Democracy. A Dutch artist, Jonas Staal, in collaboration with several major art organizations, held a large conference on this subject, and most of these stateless nations, including ours, were invited. Artists, intellectuals, revolutionaries, and speakers were included. I participated a lot, and the topic was important to me. I was glad that the example of Rojava was celebrated as a model; they believed that not only these stateless nations but also Europe should look to Rojava as an example, because it is both ecological and balanced in terms of gender.

Shwan: Our whole dream and hopes have been Rojava - how the women there are proud, and how the system is attentive to all minorities living with pride. But right now, as I speak with you, I have lost hope.

Avan: Yes, me too. Exactly like what Spivak argues is that this Eastern condition we live in is actually a constructed reality, and we never make decisions about what we do; it is always someone else who decides for us. It is a challenge to work with the real stories of these experiences; it is not impossible, but it is very difficult. Art must show more of reality, and our reality is so overwhelming that we rarely reach the bottom. For example, Halabja in 1988 is a tragedy that still affects us. Every year we encounter stories from this city that are so vast that they are difficult to process.

Opening up these narratives could be a way to expose people to an a deeper understanding. But what kind of artwork can we do to present such stories without losing their strength? I guess they must be documented in a way that reflects their seriousness. Some stories are so difficult to express by words and language can become stunted. We may not have words for it. I believe the ability to enter these spaces and work there - this is where creative, artistic work truly arises.

Shwan: It is possible that it is truly the greatness and complexity of the project that has affected me so deeply. I wouldn't label it as an experiment; this work is my research. I have devoted myself to it, let go of certain aspects, and then moved on. The project represents a collection of various elements such as narrative, sound, lines, and the various forms you referred to from the beginning of our talk. Previously, I worked with smaller formats, like A4, but in this large work, my entire body is involved. The works are larger than me, with a height of 2 meters and 70 centimeters. This creates a completely different dynamic in my work and allows for a deeper and more physical participation in the process. It creates a sense of boundlessness - a boundlessness that perhaps mirrors the one we experience in Kurdistan. Isn't that so? Decisions are often made on our behalf, and we see this reflected in symbols, like the dove in my works. There are many such symbols that carry deeper meanings in the context of our experience.

Avan: You use many symbols in your works.

Shwan: There are many symbols that can be analyzed and discussed individually. But as a whole, art is different; where other fields seek clear boundaries and concrete answers, art allows for improvisation. As you say, an artist has the freedom to explore various areas, and I think this boundlessness is essential for an artist's expression. It is about integrating elements from the vast amount of information we encounter, and in art, we have the freedom to move across many different fields.

Avan: Yes, we are doing well ... I really like the way you work, especially when you say you work continuously. It is so important; that you test out a variety of different media, perhaps installations or performances. What I mean is that the freedom you give yourself is very, very significant, but at the same time, it may require an interpretation, both in terms of the theme and the medium and perhaps in the end, you choose one of them. You must work until things come to the surface. These discussions can also be one of the forms. Because I stand outside your work, I participate in discussing with you as an unknown and unidentified person to understand where you are in the process. Ultimately, this is just my perspective, which may be wrong in many ways. But you listen. You need someone outside yourself to see it differently - it is very healthy to do that. I hope it is useful. You have worked a lot; you have

tested many forms of expression, as I said, and perhaps it will later require an interpretation, so you know what your works lead to.

Shwan: With many elements, you take just one symbol from the works and develop a larger project out of it.

Avan: Each of the themes you have mentioned in each work is a long-term project. We talked about the absence and issues with archives. When you work, you know how deep and painful this void is. As you said, I want to gather things in this project as an archive; this has been your sense of the void. Perhaps you want to create something that can be of use to others after you. Unfortunately, we give little attention to our archives and our matters, which may be due to the situation we live in; every day brings a new story, and we have never reflected on putting things in order. But we, who live outside Kurdistan know that the archives are very important and take it as our responsibility. Often, we invest time and effort into this, but as I mentioned, it cannot be done by one individual; it is very difficult.

Shwan: Here, I have been influenced by many factors and have not been able to define a conclusive framework for the project over these three years. How can I claim that the project is complete? However, now I have gathered so much material that I can delve deeper into each part after my education and further develop them. I want to give the project a continuity that extends beyond three years. Perhaps, if I have another 20 years, I can continue the work. From the perspective of silence, both in relation to sound, form, colors, and the volume of the works, there are many aspects I can further develop.

Avan: Absolutely, that leads you there, because the continuous work creates a path for you that is more focused and cohesive. What you are doing now is wanting to gather everything in one place so you can work with it. But at the same time, there is confusion, a process where you may feel lost, both as an observer of your own works and for me in the working process, but that is not a problem - it has to be that way.

Shwan: We will conclude here, Avan. Thank you very much.

Avan: Good luck, Shwan.