Shwan: Welcome, Bahjat.

Bahjat: Thank you

This is the first part of our podcast. We have started in Kurdish. The podcast is about my doctoral project at the National Academy of the Arts in Oslo. As part of my project investigations, I will invite several people at one time to talk about their work, unlike other podcasts, which usually invite and interview only one person. But today is a little different, you will be interviewing me.

Bahjat: Okay.

Shwan: The idea is that the person who is interviewed will look at my works. What does that person sees in my works? When I work, I have a purpose, an idea. I find it very interesting to know the point of view of others to see how my ideas reflect on them. Now, instead of I introducing you to the audience. I prefer for you to tell us all about yourself and background.

Bahjat: Thank you, dear Shwan. I'm glad to be here. I know you through your art, but also as a person; you are an old friend of mine whom I met while studying at the Institute of Arts. I feel that you and I met at the Institute of Fine Arts in Sulaimani between 1993 and 1997, and we will delve into that aspect in great length later. I am Behjat Omer Abdulla. I have been living in Sweden for several years now. I knew you from the time I was living in Kurdistan. I left home around 1997 and lived and worked in the UK for 12 years, where I applied for asylum and completed my degree. Later, when I moved to Sweden, I earned my master's in fine arts in Gothenburg. However, as a profession, I want to add that besides my work as an artist, I also teach fine arts at the College of Art at the University of Gothenburg. I think this is enough for now.

Shwan: Very well. At present, we are sitting in my studio at the Academy. The room is approximately twenty square meters. We are surrounded by some large pieces of work. The pieces were done on paper; they are 270 cm high and 113 cm wide. They are all called drawings. In addition, I use a lot of color in my work. First, I'd like you to ask me whatever is on your mind, so that anyone who hasn't seen this project or heard about it can understand what we're talking about.

Bahjat: Well, I'd like to start like this. Before coming here, I had seen this room in several photos, but I think being inside the room gives a different perspective. When you enter, the room appears as a large volume of colors. Let's get to what you just called drawings. I find that a bit of a question for me. On the other hand, you can ask: What is a drawing? What sort of art is called a drawing? And what type of art is referred to as watercolor art, as they do in Kurdistan? However, when you come into the studio, you feel a sense of compression. The room seems compressed into shapes and images, and you sense a great density behind the pictures, making you wonder whether every piece needs a key to be understood. I might be a little worried about not doing a thorough enough scan of all the works you have here, but let's focus on a couple of pieces and see what we can say about them. As I said, most of the works are large, but generally, when one enters the room, one thing that comes to mind is that portraits and landscapes are somewhat mixed. It is true that some of the works are

upright while others are inverted; standing in front of these pieces creates a sense of hesitation. For me, as a spectator, it evokes a very interesting feeling. Moreover, for you as the artist, how you present these works for viewing is also intriguing. How do you exhibit the works? Do you traditionally hang them on a wall so that one stands in front of them, or do you hang them in such a way that they can also be seen from above, from a bird's eye view?

Shwan: The bird's eye…

Bahjat: If you look at the works from a bird's-eye view, they appear clearer to me. It would be more convenient than viewing them vertically, which is not the natural way for the human eye. It's a bit layered; there are a lot of figures in them, and at the same time, the figures are not very conventional. The figures represent something else. For example, there are dogs with their heads turned into hands sprouting flowers, angels with weapons, horses all lying on top of each other, with blue blood coming out from their backs. There are forms and a flow that opens a stream of meanings.

What caught my attention was one of those works that, as you said, is about 270 by 113 centimeters on a heavy sheet of paper. The paper is heavy even without anything on it, and especially when you draw an image on it, it certainly makes it feel a little heavier, generating questions in the imaginations of the spectators. Before I go on, I wish to dwell on one thing. If you're Kurdish or from the Middle East, you feel a peculiar resonance with the colors, shapes, writings, blacks, and all the elements you've chosen. I feel like the figures have something more attached to them, as if they have some sort of filter on them. When you look at them, it takes you back home. The figures, for a moment, bring your inner self out and transport you to another place. The works trigger your imagination; if there's some reference in your mind related to a figure, for example, I might talk about tea. Tea holds a reference for me that has nothing to do with what appears in the work, but more with where I come from and my experiences with tea from childhood.

How exposed have I been to the sun since I was a child? Or to the snow? I feel that my exposure to these works takes me back to the time of Anfal. We, especially the generation of the 1980s and 1990s, when we were young, were exposed to expressions, shapes, and things that we couldn't escape or avoid easily. One of the topics that was frequently discussed was imprisonment, and I was one of those who visited my uncle a couple of times in Abu Ghraib prison in Baghdad. You go from a state of freedom into a circle where you are completely controlled; you are obliged to do things, say things, be scanned, and watched at all times. The way you have hung your figures, which spectators view from a bird's-eye perspective, transforms you into a bird looking down at the prison building, which is simultaneously surrounded by black dogs. The black dog here is another symbol; when we were children, we heard stories about black dogs. For a religious person, it carries certain connotations and meanings. When you see a black dog, a black cat, or a white pigeon, it takes us back to those experiences. That is why I say that if you come from the Middle East and look at these works and the symbols within them, there are cultural exposures you have experienced. Moreover, we have heard about what happened inside the prison.

If I were to bring all these feelings I have about the figures into the discussion: Shwan, from above the building, tells us that this is a territory, a boundary, where a Kurdish carpet is laid

in the middle. I know this because we are close friends, and I asked you about it yesterday. It is a carpet given to you by your mother.

You've drawn a childhood carpet in the Nugra Salman[1] (Prison Camp), and you're observing it from above. (I would like you to start from there…)

Shwan: As they say in our country, especially among the people of Sulaimani, "let the words become sugar in your mouth." I will talk about the project from the beginning - how the ideas for this project came into being and how I used some of the symbols in the figures. This way, it will be easier for the audience to understand the symbols. The first issue that every Kurd faces is the plight of the Kurdish language. How subjugated the Kurdish language is and how it has been forgotten or lost in some places, especially in Turkey and Syria. Those who have been to Turkey know that many Kurds speak Turkish, not Kurdish. Most of them do not even know Kurdish at all. Of course, they identify themselves as Kurds, but they have forgotten their language. According to studies, it takes one generation to obliterate a language, but three generations to revive it and activate it again.[2]

Bahjat: Three generations?

Shwan: Yes, to revive a forgotten language, it takes three generations. Although we Kurds in Iraq have our human right to speak our own language, we were given the opportunity to study and speak Kurdish from the primary stage. However, this opportunity is still not available in Iran and Turkey. In Rojava, studying Kurdish may have begun now; however, I'm not aware of that. The Kurdish language has always been a topic of interest for me, especially when I started coming to Europe as a refugee in the 1990s. On my way to Europe, I saw many Kurds who had lost their mother tongue. You don't know how difficult it is to be a Kurd until you come out. I stayed in Istanbul and Turkey for ten months, and by just being a Kurd I discovered that I could provoke and upset some people.

These thoughts were on my mind, but after I came to Oslo and started studying art again, I didn't begin with those subjects. Instead, something else attracted my attention: leaving my hometown and my family. However, in the context of this doctorate (PhD), the issue of language subordination became a very significant topic for me. As you mentioned before, life and experiences in childhood leave an imprint on us. One of the things that has stayed with me since childhood was the arrest of my brother Kamal in 1982 in Erbil. He was a university student at Salahaddin University. He participated in a demonstration and sang the anthem of "Ay Raqib" (Kurdish national anthem). He was arrested with his friends. When he was arrested, he was imprisoned and tortured for three months. I was very young, five or six years old, but I remember is my mother crying. She cried and sang lullabies for her imprisoned son. When she cried, you could tell she missed him and wondered whether he would even return. Even if he returned, would he be the same man he used to be or would he have changed?

---

[1] Kurdistan Memory Programme." *Nugra Salman Prison*. n.d. Web. [01.02.2025]. https://kurdistanmemoryprogramme.com/place/nugra-salman-prison/.

[2] Vidal, Inger. "Hvorfor forsvinner så mange av verdens språk?" *Forskning.no*, 8. mai 2020. Web. [01.02.2025]. https://www.forskning.no/ntnu-partner-sprak/hvorfor-forsvinner-sa-mange-av-verdens-sprak/427950?utm_source=chatgpt.com.

Bahjat: May I ask how long he was in prison?

Shwan: After three months of torture, he was released on the grounds that there was no evidence against him. They told him to confess simply because he had a beard. Having a beard was a sign that you were either a Peshmerga or that you supported the Peshmerga. They tortured him to reveal the names of the people he worked with, but he was not in any way connected to the Peshmerga; he was only a Kurdish university student. That experience was one of the things that made me focus on this issue.

Additionally, I read about a Kurdish writer in Turkey named Bozarslan, Mehmet Emin[3]. Bozarslan published a book of the Kurdish alphabet (Alfabê 1968) for Kurdish children in Turkey in the mid-1960s. However, after the Turkish regime discovered that it was a book promoting Kurdish identity among Kurdish children, they banned and burned his book and imprisoned him. After spending a couple of years in prison, he was released and now lives in Uppsala, Sweden.

This became another significant event that directed my focus toward language. The question I ask in this project is: what effect does the subordination of language and mother tongue have on the kind of image you create as an artist? Whether you create it yourself or imagine it, that's where the idea truly began. My initial idea was to explore how Kurds, for example, today are losing their language - not only their language, but also the authoritative nations surrounding the Kurds have imposed the requirement that we must write in the Arabic alphabet, for example, in Iran, Iraqi Kurdistan, and Rojava. In Turkey, after the establishment of the Turkish state, Ataturk[4] changed the alphabet in use; he removed the Arabic alphabet and introduced Latin. Since Kurds today write in two types of alphabets, I started by mixing the two alphabets (Latin and Arabic) to see what would happen.

After working on it for a while, I concluded that this would be somewhat difficult for me because I am not a linguist. I am an artist, so I needed to express the subordination of language through paintings, not by becoming a linguist. It took me several months to create 34 large works. As I mentioned earlier, the dimensions are from 270 to 113 cm. Each of these 34 large paintings represents a letter in the Kurdish alphabet[5]. Through these 34 works, I was able to explore these issues through research, writing and sketching. In every work, there is evidence of the process, traces of sketches whose initial purpose was for the implementation of a bigger idea, have become part of the work itself. I have tried to make the footprint of this process visible in the works, from beginning to end.

Bahjat: Certainly, you are not indifferent to these experiences.

Shwan: These experiences led to the re-creation of stories; they became symbols for me. I used them in my works, and I have also incorporated these themes into three short films. We can talk more about that later if we have the opportunity. This is the general idea about the conception and starting points of my work.

---

[3] Bozarslan, Mehmet Emin. "Mehmet Emin Bozarslan." *Store norske leksikon*, n.d. Web. [09.02.2025]. https://snl.no/Mehmet_Emin_Bozarslan.

[4] Kornbluth, A. "Why did Turkey adopt the Latin alphabet instead of the Arabic alphabet?" *YouTube*, 09.02.2025, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=F-gyW7uaDwE&t=7s.

[5] Omniglot. "Kurdish." *Omniglot*, n.d. Web. [09.02.2025]. https://www.omniglot.com/writing/kurdish.htm.

Bahjat: I want to go back to the beginning of the question.

Bahjat: Why a carpet? It may be much clearer now, but I want to know more. Why has that carpet become the foundation of the building? I feel like the carpet is very relevant here. Now that you mentioned it, I feel a bit clearer. I sense that it has a lot to do with the memories you had with your mother during those three months...

Shwan: Yes!

Bahjat: The three months that Mr. Kamal was missing. But this ... or I feel this is a very direct act or movement. The building is like sand - a desert-like quality; it is like sand, with no hint of red and blue. This is... you are very Kurdish, but one of the things that is covered with is gold ink, the building gives the impression of many rooms. Now it transforms the middle of the building into 2, 4, 6, 8 more rooms. Each room has another frame with four more circuits inside that frame. It feels very close to the prison building. This is only tolerable when the experience is narrated, not lived. The shape of the prison above is rectangular, not very long - maybe two and a half squares - with four semicircles on each side. When you fill the middle of it with the carpet, you feel like you're giving it some other meaning related to the map of the prison. This was strange to me. Then you gave the building a golden colour. I sometimes use gold to represent something that doesn't disappear, something that remains in nature. Does this have anything to do with our memories? I mean, most of them... Research has been conducted showing that, through my experience... If I were to go through a period of trauma - through war, prison, or whatever - even if my child didn't see or experience it, the trauma will slowly be passed on to them; it will be transmitted to them.

Shwan: Generation to generation.

Bahjat: It goes from generation to generation and doesn't disappear. Whats not to say just because it happened to me, my child won't experience it anymore? But how was it for you? How were both the color and the carpet?

Shwan: Of course, as I said, I have made two trips in the last two years as a field researcher to collect stories for this project. I carried out research through reading a book I bought in front of the Great Mosque, Sara Square, or any bookstores in Sulaimani. And secondly, through conversations with different people such as my older relatives who once experienced such traumas, or whose family members were killed, massacred, and buried alive. The prison you mentioned earlier is Nugra Salman prison near Samarra. It was used to massacre Kurds after the Anfal Processes. Additionally, my father was a policeman in Halabja and at the same time a member of the Kurdistan Democratic Party.[6] If it was discovered that you were a government man on one hand and a member of a party which is against the ruling party...

Bahjat: You are a Kurd.

[6] FAS. "Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP)." *Federation of American Scientists*, n.d. Web. [01.02.2025]. https://irp.fas.org/world/para/kdp.htm.

Shwan: Yes, you are a member of a Kurdish party. My father used to tell us about Nugra Salman since we were children, but he wouldn't go into detail about the prison. I don't know why he didn't tell us what happened to him, how he was arrested, and what his conditions were in that prison. It may have been to protect us because if something terrible had happened to him and he told it to his children, we would feel sad...

Bahjat: This means that you have two terrible experiences - one through your father and one through your brother Kamal, who was imprisoned.

Shwan: Yes, they were both imprisoned. After that, our relatives from Sewsenan were chemically bombed. We are originally from Qaradagh, in the village of Sewsenan. My cousins, the ones I grew up with and spent time with during the summers...

Bahjat: This means a third trauma.

Shwan: After the summer, when I was in third grade, I bought a book called "Nugra Salman." The book described the Kurdish genocide and focused on those who did not suffer the massacre and survived before they were killed. The survivors… What surprised me the most was that those who survived all told the same story - the story of the ferocious dogs outside the prison walls. They said that whole families were imprisoned, from babies to women, girls, and old men. If someone died from torture or was killed by any other means, their bodies would not be buried in the ground out of respect; instead, they would be thrown over the prison walls into the wild to be eaten by the ferocious dogs. As the prison was built specifically to massacre the Kurds; it was later named Kurdish Castle.

The castle (Nugra Salman prison) was a place where Kurds were massacred, there are associations which arise when you talk about a castle, you think of welfare, you think of gold, you think of money. The prison was built by the British when they occupied the area after the collapse of the Ottoman Empire. However, after that, the Iraqi government used it in a much more brutal way to oppress and torture people. The reason for choosing gold is for that reason… Of course, I can't discuss all the symbolic aspects.

Bahjat: Yes! It's difficult.

Shwan: Of course, we all know why gold is used, but the first reason is due to the name of the prison. Secondly, gold was very important to Saddam Hussein's regime[7]. One of the things I remember after the American invasion of Iraq was seeing American soldiers attacking Saddam Hussein's palaces and taking away the faucets, which were all made of gold. Also, gold was taken out of Iraq by several trucks and trailers. Because of my father's job, as I mentioned, we were from Sewsenan village in Qaradagh province, and he was transferred to Halabja (Old Halabja) because of his job as a policeman. We were a ten-member family, but four of us were born in Sulaimani, which means we have been in Sulaimani since the age of my older brother, who is three years older than me. Our family has been living in Sulaimani since 1974. As for the carpet, the middle of the prison is covered

[7] A US soldier standing in a truckload of captured gold." *Reddit*, 2023, https://www.reddit.com/r/interestingasfuck/comments/18ixk48/a_us_soldier_standing_in_a_truckload_of_captured/?utm_source=chatgpt.com&rdt=54581.

with a carpet that my mother bought in Halabja in the 1960s. When I came back to Norway, my mother gave me both carpets. My father was retiring as a policeman and moved to Sulaimani, but what if my father had continued his job and stayed in Halabja? We might have ended up in the same prison after the massacre; that's just one of the options I've considered. Your ancestry isn't just preserved through reproduction; sometimes objects are passed on with you.

All the memories I have with my mother are imaginary, but the only physical reminders are these two carpets she gave me that I have now in my house in Oslo. The reason I created these perspectives from the sky through a bird's-eye view is that it refers to the sight in Eastern, or as some call it, Islamic miniature art. In Orhan Pamuk's book "My Name is Red," he states that when the Islamists created miniatures in the old Ottoman Empire, both in Iran and in our country, all their motifs and everything they drew were created from God's perspective, as if God were looking down. They didn't create from the perspective of a dog. How could a dog, which is poorly regarded in Islamic culture, be placed on the ground looking at a mosque? They created from God's point of view.

Bahjat: They sanctify it.

Shwan: Yes, it is a kind of sanctification—a form of sacredness. If you look at it from a European perspective, if a person is in front of a camera and a mosque is behind them, the person appears larger than the camera because the eye perceives it that way. However, this is not the case in Islamic miniature art. The House of God, that is, a mosque, is always a symbol of the House of God. My reference goes back to that, which may raise another question about why I incorporate war references in miniature art.

Bahjat: Yes, as you just stated, that's a question, but at the same time, sanctity has always been a significant issue for religious parties. For example, in Britain, in a city like London, you go to the center and see that all other buildings must be in parallel since any new building will impact the surrounding buildings. For instance, a church is built in such a way that no other building should have more prominence than the church.

It must have no more glory than the church, so that the church never loses its sanctity, and all other buildings must always adhere to the basic law of the church, like our mosques. Most of the time, we see examples of this: a big tsunami comes, and all the buildings are destroyed, but the mosque remains. We might say, "Look how God protected the mosque," but surely it has nothing to do with God. Rather, it was constructed in a way that made it last longer.

At the same time, I feel the same is true of castle building. For example, castles are never built without bloodshed. These grand buildings always carry a bloody story behind them. If you "scratch the surface a little bit," as the English say, you'll uncover the dark history behind these huge structures, whether they are British or European castles in general.

Another thought that comes to mind is twofold. One-part concerns someone like Kentridge - for example, William Kentridge, the South African artist who is a masterful storyteller. If

you're familiar with his works, you'll know that he turns his father, fathers' office, mother, neighborhood, and his childhood experiences into art.

What I find most fascinating when visiting an art studio is their perspective on creativity. He says, *"The studio is a room in the brain."* Inside the studio, he suggests, is your mind. On your left, there might be a window through which you see a horse; from another, a peacock. I feel like we are in that symbolic room in your brain. On one hand, it's very hard to describe everything in it, but on the other hand, this is a sort of capture - a snapshot - of thoughts: a black text, a horse, or a bird all hanging on the wall. Yet the wall is like a window through which we look out and see the world.

That was one part of my thinking. The other is not so much a question, more an observation. When I was looking around, I felt a sense of completeness in the scenery. We could have this kind of debate for each of the paintings, one by one. We could create 34 podcasts, each dedicated to a single painting, and perhaps someday we'll have time to discuss each piece individually. I'd be very happy if we could do that in the future.
But one thing that stood out in the painting we're discussing is this: sometimes, when I look at a piece of art, I want it to move me, to strike me in such a way that it transposes me. What do you want me to feel when I stand in front of your painting? What should we do when we encounter your work? What effect should it have on us?

Shwan: From my point of view, this is a difficult question to answer because I cannot maintain a persistent understanding even for myself, let alone think about what I want to create for others. Sometimes, I feel like I am documenting something, whether it's telling the stories of people's suffering or searching for information, through stories or symbolism. I have encountered a significant problem when seeking information in Europe. You mentioned William Kentridge; if I sit in my studio and search for William Kentridge, I will find all kinds of videos and information about him. However, on issues related to the subjugation of the Kurds, I faced difficulties obtaining information, similar to what other individuals, intellectuals, artists, and writers have also encountered. This created a major problem for me.

Perhaps a lot of things have been done in Southern Kurdistan in the last 30 to 35 years. When you live abroad in the diaspora, it becomes more challenging to acquire the information you need, leading to the necessity of returning to Kurdistan to collect the required information. It is especially difficult in Turkey and Iran, where Kurds are continuously subjected to severe censorship. The slightest thing said may result in terrible consequences.

I've looked into the history of the Kurdish people and I've found that the existence of our art history within the eastern region is quite limited. For instance, we do not have a national museum where I can observe how Kurdish artists worked 100 years ago. If you visit the Sulaimani Museum, you will see ceramic pieces that date back thousands of years to the time of the Babylonians. Unfortunately, when it comes to paintings, we have nothing comparable; we lack an archive. Which makes it difficult for me to differentiate between what is ours and what has been taken from us Kurds. This prompts one to wonder, who am I between East and West? Who am I today?

We have always been divided among various powers. Since colonial times, after the collapse of the Ottoman Empire, Britain, France, and other powers divided the region and left their influence. Even earlier, when the Mongols and later the Turks invaded, I noticed something unsettling. When I buy a book and read about miniature arts, I see a book that states the history of the Persians spans 5,000 years, focusing on the Persians and their art. I visited Istanbul and purchased a book on Islamic miniature art, which details how the Turks practiced miniature; the Kurds are scarcely mentioned.

Although there are no written accounts about the Kurds, much of our history may be preserved through oral narration and stories. Unfortunately, these narratives often go undocumented. Storytellers do not live for a thousand years; they may live 80 to 90 years at most, and after they pass, only some stories survive through their descendants. Most of the time, I feel that if I take the initiative to document those narratives through what I've learned from you, I can transform that story into a work of art. Instead of translating it into written language, I have translated it into a visual language. Perhaps I am unsure of this now, but I felt it was a beginning - a form of history writing, but in a different manner, a manner which documents events innovatively. So instead of simply claiming that our culture has been stolen from us, I would say, well, let's acknowledge our heritage and assert, this is ours, but it has been taken from us.

It belongs to us. I own it. For instance, many people discuss boycotting visits to Turkey, yet many Kurds have traveled to Istanbul. Why shouldn't I go to Istanbul? There are 5 million Kurds living in Istanbul, right? We own that space; it does not belong solely to the Turks. These understandings allow each work to tell a specific story, rather than following a chronological order, like the alphabet.

Bahjat: It's a starting point.

Shwan: It's all a story, but the story is told through 34 large works of art. For me, it doesn't have to be limited to 34 works; it could be more, and I can select the ones I believe are the most satisfying for my project. Since I'm studying here, I'm experimenting with things; I'm genuinely testing ideas, and sometimes this leads me in directions that aren't relevant to my project. Sometimes, things happen by chance. For example, one of the ways of working that I employed when I completed my master's degree in 2009 has evolved over the last 10 years. My practice has consisted of writing and theoretically investigating the ideas behind my work before translating it into artistic form.

Sometimes, the academic environment here causes you to fall into a pattern of applying for grants and finding sponsors to obtain financial support.

Bahjat: There needs to be some sort of explanation.

Shwan: There has to be an explanation of some kind, so you know what you're doing. However, when I enter the studio, I often have no idea what the day will bring, which I find significantly freeing. I've gotten used to the practice I've developed, whether it's through the technical skill of sketching, which I've been doing for many years, or through the physical

experiences I've had in the past. It might also be through reading literature, through conversations, or interactions with other artists. I've initiated a process, and this process has become a job for me.

Most of the time, my paintings resemble a tree - how a tree branches out, with another branch sprouting from it. My senses have evolved in a similar way. As I mentioned earlier, the works have become the source for three short films. One of the works features a woman fighter, a female Peshmerga or guerrilla. In this piece, we see a girl standing with a bullet in her hand, surrounded by hyenas, with hands growing from their heads, creating a wolf-like symbol. Bachtyar Ali's novel "Occupation of Darkness"[8] (داگیرکردنی تاریکی) inspired this idea. The novel describes how a racist nationalist Turk wakes up one morning to find he has forgotten his native language and speaks a language those around him do not understand.

Later, when they examine him, they discover that the language is Kurdish. It becomes clear that the Turkish nationalist is, in fact, an assimilated Kurd. Over generations, the language was lost, and even he had forgot his ethnicity. He believes he is Turkish, but he has Kurdish roots. This is written by Bachtyar Ali, but I have given the concepts a different shape. The rise of Turkish nationalism is evident, and we can see its manifestations on the Internet. The Turkish Grey Wolves[9] are based in Turkey, particularly in Ankara and Istanbul, and they even have a center in a small town outside Oslo, Norway. To me, this is very dangerous.

These situations often lead me to set boundaries for myself. Such boundaries may represent a form of subjugation. When you have been previously subjugated, you often cannot articulate who you are, creating a sense of inferiority within you. That's why the title of my project is now "Halo of Shame." There is always a cloud of shame and fault surrounding you, and you consistently feel inferior to others. You must be very aware not to subjugate yourself or those around you.

Bahjat: Well, I have one more question. Because of the title, should I avoid the exhibition to prevent feeling ashamed of things I'm not proud of as a Kurd? But consider if you gave me a different title; I could enter the space proudly, asserting that these are the things I take pride in, not the things I feel ashamed of. If you propose that there's a passive/active or positive/negative aspect to everything, what kind of message are you conveying? Is this project filled with positivity or negativity? How should we approach all these images?

Shwan: Yes, that's a reasonable question, but it's challenging to answer. When I started working, I didn't intend to tell a positive story that would make the audience feel better for Kurds. However, that documentation could be perceived as positive, depending on an individual's perspective on life. Sometimes, you can have the biggest problems, but you maintain a positive outlook; at other times, the opposite occurs. However, the project has that title as an overarching theme, but I've already assigned specific titles to most of the works based on their content. For instance, the work featuring the female guerrilla standing among several hyenas with a bullet in her hand illustrates this point.

[8] Ali, Bachtyar. *داگیرکردنی تاریکی (Occupation of Darkness)*. Første utgave, Nawandi Rahand forlaget, 2020, Suleimani.
[9] "France Has Banned the Grey Wolves: But Who Are They?" *Al Jazeera*, 24. nov. 2020, https://www.aljazeera.com/features/2020/11/24/france-has-banned-the-grey-wolves-but-who-are-they.

Bahjat: Fate depends on luck.

Shwan: Yes, in the game it is all down to your luck, but if the trigger is pressed the bullet fires and will kill you, but what I have written here is that this is not that game. This is not a game.

Bahjat: It's real life.

Shwan: It's real life. The real situation is unfolding now. People are truly dying - not in a game, but for higher human values.

Bahjat: One of the things I notice in this work is that the bottom appears very ugly. It's a rather strange collage. She seems to express that she doesn't wish to be there.

Shwan: Yes. The story I wrote through this work, after creating it, is about a girl surrounded by a group of soldiers. We don't know who these soldiers are, but through the uniform the girl is wearing, we understand that she is a PKK guerrilla[10].. I work using metaphors here; I've depicted the soldiers as hyenas because I've often heard Kurds refer to Turks as hyenas. When they attack, they don't come alone; they come in groups, which aligns with the nature of hyenas. The hand on their heads is also a metaphor, as I mentioned before.

However, going back to the positivity you mentioned, a Kurdish person standing in front of these paintings will notice that the bottom is ugly because there is always a much larger force that wants to subjugate, kill, annihilate you, and erase your identity. You can see that the scarf fastened around the head of the Kurdish girl has blossoming flowers, symbolizing women's freedom in Rojava - a movement unprecedented in the entire Middle East. Rojava was a very optimistic event, and it remains the case that if there is any hope for women's rights in the region, it is in Rojava.

Nevertheless, the powers are making a comeback. After Donald Trump took office, he withdrew US troops[11],, leaving the field open for Turkish forces to enter and commit massacres at will. Currently, Turkey dominates the region and has become a broker between Ukraine and Russia, seeking to establish peace. When Sweden and Finland applied for NATO membership, Turkey protested, leveraging its significant position. Turkey demanded the deportation of the "terrorists" back to Turkey from these two countries before agreeing to support their membership. For Turkey, the "terrorists" include the women Peshmergas who were regarded as heroes by all of Europe 6 to 7 years ago, who inspired stories and films. Regrettably, they are now categorized as terrorists again. My work incorporates these themes, but my objective is not to provide a psychological cure through my art. Instead, I aim to express my feelings - conscious or unconscious - through art and reflect on them to improve myself.

Bahjat: To mentally feel better.

---

[10] Turkey's 'Deep State' and the Military's Role in Politics." *BBC News*, 21. jan. 2013, https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-20971100.

[11] Fisher, J. "Trump orders US troops to withdraw from Northern Syria
." *YouTube*, 15. okt. 2021, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Dab408Gmh6c.

Shwan: Yes, to achieve a better mental state. Most of the time, the subjects I choose elicit very difficult, dark, and melancholic feelings. However, confronting them turns out to be intriguing. It's important to note that interesting does not imply positive. Sometimes, something else emerges from fear. I accomplish this through films, using a combination of mediums, including sound, music, voice, and imagery. In the short films I've created, I utilize the same images, as I mentioned earlier; I will use the images as visual alphabets. You don't feel that this is a filtering process you undergo with your body? Sometimes you are exposed through writing, but when you filter it through images, say a piece of art or whatever you call it, while telling stories using personal pronouns, such as "I," it creates a different dynamic. When I present it through art as a picture of a woman and the accompanying sound is also a woman's voice, it feels like a weight is lifted from my life. I've done this during live performances; for example, when I showcased a video, I had the translation appear on screen in English, while I simultaneously translated it into Kurdish in a hushed whisper. What about you? We hear you recounting the stories and presenting these images. It's a peculiar situation. How involved are you in the work, or how distanced are you? Is the "I" lost in the process? Or does it transform into me, into another version of myself, into someone else who comes and goes with it.

It can become a non-European who approaches you and has to create a context through the "I" that stands apart from the work, who doesn't comprehend it, yet is still moved by it, even slightly. For instance, if I ever see a person from the East walking around the market, I might say I don't understand them because it's a complex subject; it's not easy for me to grasp.

Bahjat: We have known each other for more than 30 years. There are still some things you cannot understand because it's a very complicated and challenging system to explain and express yourself through images, writings, or any other mediums of communication. When you display these works, do you feel a distance between yourself and the works, saying, "OK! This is my take, and this is how I did it," and what is your take? What is your perspective?

Shwan: You know, there is a limit to how much you can truly own these things, especially when the subjects are so dark that the soul can't carry or tolerate them. In his book "No Friend But the Mountains," Behrouz Boochani describes the moment when, as a refugee on his way to Australia, the boat they were in was about to sink. That very day turns out to be his birthday, and he considers his entire life in that moment, in a flash, worrying about how, "If I die now, how will my mother accept the news of my death? How will she cry and grieve first?" Despite this, he creates a brave and heroic narrative for himself to overcome all the sadness and hatred in his heart.

Bahjat: This is truly an act of overcoming.

Shwan: Of course, it's about finding a balance so that I don't break down while working with these dark subjects. In the middle of the project, I divide responsibilities among different forms of art. For example, one of the three films I mentioned tells the story of a dead pigeon that was flying in the sky and suddenly falls into chemical weapons, leading to its demise.

Bahjat: I think this is a good point to pause, especially if we're short on time, because you are reclaiming pride through your work. By doing something, you achieve a balance. But this balance is not negative; it is a positive one. It's a balance that allows you to say, "I did what I did; this is the Kurdish pain - this was a task on my shoulders." You recognize what you should have done. You didn't become complacent; you did what you wanted and needed to do. Perhaps, as I mentioned, you can be more precise and meticulous in your work. However, the works feel like a thunderstorm; a strong wind carries a world of images with it. Due to the constraints of your program, you need to relate whatever you have at that moment - not as quickly as possible, but at its best, according to your time management. As we all know, time flies, and you've accomplished all this in only two years, am I right?

Shwan: No, in three years.

Bahjat: Three years! What can I do in these three years, so I don't feel like I'm missing out? I sense when you enter the studio that there is nothing wrong at all. Only the door is left out; otherwise, the entire wall has two or three layers of images. I wanted to talk about this Turkish hotel room painting, but it seems we…

Shwan: There isn't enough time.

Bahjat: Okay we have to move on. I thank and congratulate you.

Shwan: Thank you.

Bahjat: It's very nice work. I feel like you're telling us that behind all these images, there are still many more images that need to be painted and documented. Good luck.

Shwan: Thank you very much. Until we meet again in another program with more discussions, I wish you the best.