

Exhibition Exposes Washington to Kurdish Art

Eleni Zaras



Gallery visitors take in Kani Kamil's "My Blue Blanket," which offers commentary on the gender bias she witnessed as a child. (PHOTO E. ZARAS)

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Music and Arts

On Dec. 6, the Middle East Institute Gallery opened "Speaking Across

Mountains," an exhibition dedicated to Kurdish artists who are now mostly scattered across the globe. For one of the first times, "Washingtonians are being exposed to Kurdish artists," applauded Bayan Sami Abdul Rahman, Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) Representative to the United States, in her speech on the opening night of the exhibit.

With Rahman, as well as the curator, Heba Elkayal, present for a discussion with MEI Arts and Culture Director Lyne Sneige, the opening event was overflowing, with far more visitors than chairs. "There are so many people [in Washington] who have been to Iraq, but how well do you know us?" Rahman asked, dubbing the exhibition "the first time to tell our own stories."

Many of these stories address identity, displacement, gender, cultural erasure and ruthless governments. Uniting the artists is a shared identity that stretches across borders, or "speaks across mountains." The exhibition's title came to curator Elkayal during her conversations with the artists and as she realized that "everyone had hyphenated identities—ethnic and national." The two often conflict and "some [of the artists] battle their national identity, but have to grapple with it," feeding their "constant need to communicate and engage."

Approximately 35 million Kurds live in a stateless region, concentrated in the border zones of Turkey, Syria, Iraq and Iran. Since World War I and the European powers' unfulfilled promises of granting the Kurds a state, the Kurdish people have remained united through a shared identity. Together, they have strived to achieve autonomy, enduring persecution for the perceived threat this vision poses to the "nationalist agendas of regional governments," explained Lyne Sneige and MEI's Vice President for Arts and Culture Kate Seelye. The artwork, contributed by ten artists living mostly in the diaspora, "seeks to remember and memorialize difficult histories, confront corrupt and unjust political systems, and to tackle outdated gender norms."

Beyond Kurdish identity, the artists' ingenuity and experimentation in artistic

methods also unites them, said curator Elkayal. Meandering through the gallery, the diversity of media and techniques confirms this assessment. The show starts with Kurdish-Iraqi artist Walid Siti's "A Poem to the Mountain at the Edge of the World," where painting meets sculpture; the large painted cut-out of a mountain peak is set a couple inches off the wall, casting layered shadows and evoking the hidden nooks and passages in the mountains. Kani Kamil's "My Blue Blanket" places an advertisement featuring a blond boy, which the artist's grandfather hung in his office, next to photos of the women in her family that he chose not to display. The female faces are obfuscated by tangles of human hair glued over their faces, evoking gender bias and erased histories.

From drawn, painted and stitched details, to photography and video montages, to an installation we are forced to step around—especially given the opening night's crowd—each artwork challenges us emotionally and viscerally with clever criticisms, grim historical realities, and introspective reflections.

Yet the curator acknowledges that the exhibition is not "complete," given the logistical challenges of organizing the exhibition in eleven weeks and their inability to represent Iranian-Kurdish artists. The show will therefore be complemented by film screenings to fill that void, but what is on view still successfully introduces Washingtonians to the landscapes of the Kurdish homeland, the intimate stresses at home, and their struggles against repressive regimes.

The exhibition features artists Sherko Abbas, 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, and is on view until Feb. 25, 2020.

—*Eleni Zaras*

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