

# The Iraqi Artist Creating Beauty out of Destruction

Although she fled the country in 2006, Hanaa Malallah is regarded as one of Iraq's most prominent artists. She's best known for pioneering the "Ruins Technique," in which she burns and obliterates material to represent the reality of war.

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**19/01/2016**



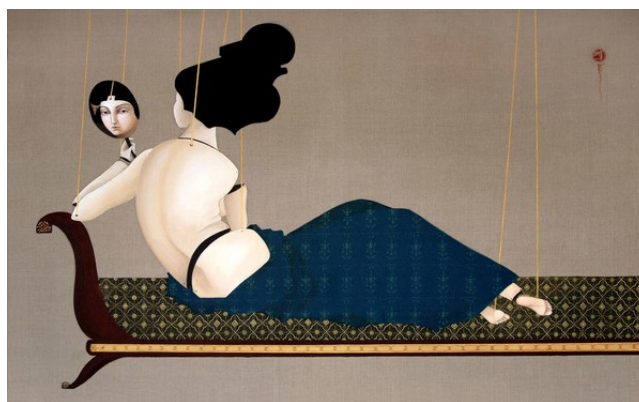
Iraqi artist Hayv Kahraman was ten years old when her family fled Baghdad for Sweden during the Gulf War, eventually settling in Arizona in 2006, when the US and Iraq were at war. Memories from her home country—and the artist's increasing distance and dislocation from them—form an autobiographical core in Kahraman's work, which combines aesthetics from the Middle East and the West to consider the effects of gender and geopolitics on both psyche and body.

The darkness of many of Kahraman's themes—trauma, war, genital

mutilation, and "honor" killings—is counteracted by the delicacy of her style, which borrows from the traditions of Persian miniatures, Japanese illustration, and Renaissance painting. The identical pale, dark-haired figures populating Kahraman's canvases are based on her own image: In 2012, the artist commissioned a 3D scan of her body to generate an accurate model that she could "rotate, slice, and manipulate" at will. Kahraman captures the sense of a body separated from itself: the fragmentation experienced by refugees, exiles, and émigrés. In *How Iraqi Are You* (2015) women violently detach each other's limbs; *Iraqi Kit* (2016) presents the same body parts neatly assembled in a modular set to "build your own Iraqi."

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The LA-based artist's current show at the Jack Shainman Gallery School in Kinderhook, New York, revisits the sounds of war, from air-raid sirens to the long-range, high-decibel speakers employed by the military to disorient enemy forces: sound as warning and weapon. In *Strip Search* (2016), refined paintings of women's bodies are pierced by acoustic foam, transforming the canvas into a sonically absorbent shield while referencing punctured flesh. Although much of her work is driven by her own need to recover or recreate, Kahraman reaches beyond the personal, offering a multifaceted contemplation of gender politics in the modern world.



"Toilette," 2008. All images courtesy of the artist and Jack Shainman Gallery

**BROADLY: How does memory function in your practice?**

**Hayv Kahraman:** Memory plays a pivotal role in my work. I was an Iraqi who fled the first Gulf War to Sweden in 1992. At that point I became a refugee, seeking asylum. Now I'm an immigrant, part of a larger diaspora consciousness that dwells within borders.

When you are displaced because of war, you somehow get stuck in the past. I think this is specifically true when it comes to Iraqi refugees, because we are haunted by this sense of the glorious past—the cradle of civilization becomes something to focus on when your current situation is desolate. But as you flee to the West, you are obliged to assimilate. If you want to survive, you will need to adapt and conform to that reality, to that way of life. I don't think I managed very well. I tried to become a Swede. I bleached my hair; I mastered their tongue and allowed myself to be colonized. In this process I lost who I thought I was or could be. Introducing memory allows me to archive those lost histories.

**When did gender politics become central to your work? Did a specific set of issues—personal or social—bring you to it, or was it always linked to your desire to make art?**

It snuck in without me knowing it. My entry point to "becoming an artist" didn't start with art school. That process began as a way to deal with guilt and other personal issues that I did not confess to myself at the time. I was riddled with the guilt of moving to the United States in the midst of a sectarian war in Iraq. Here I was, buying a Snicker's bar at Target while my fellow countrywomen and men were dying. I needed an outlet, and that was paint. What surfaced was a host of violent paintings dealing with issues such as female genital mutilation, honor killings, and beheadings.

My mother called me once from Sweden to ask why I was making all these violent paintings; I told her that I just felt an affinity with these women, hiding the fact that I was in an abusive relationship [at the time]. But then again, I hid that from myself as well. It was not until years later that I could look back at these works and see how my personal life had interjected.



"Iraqi Kit," 2016

### **Tell me about your sacrifice paintings from 2008.**

This was the first body of work I made on linen. I remember coming across an image of a lamb being flayed and really responding to that violent act of removing the skin. The specifics of that ritual (*Eid al-Adha*) were somewhat irrelevant. I wanted to concentrate on the aggressive act of removing a body part, what that meant and what that could yield. The skin, the body, and the flesh have always claimed my attention. The fact that this was a lamb obviously connects to western conceptions of "purity" and "innocence"—at the time I wanted to debunk that.

Those were my conscious thoughts on the works, but I think my personal life always sneaks in, and looking back now, I think I needed to undergo a renewal or a rebirth. Perhaps it was a secret message to my future self, saying, "Hey, wake up! You need to get out of this abuse!"

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**Tell me about your piece *Strip Search* in your new show.**

*Strip Search* and this new body of work come from a sonic memory. The idea of the sound of war surfaced for me in a purely visceral way, as one of my most haunting memories of growing up in Iraq—the sound of the air raid sirens. It's a violent sound that haunts me and jolts me to the ground: It signaled an event that might or might not end your life. I wanted to translate that sonic memory into a physical object: a painting.

Early in my research on sounds, I came to sound absorbers and acoustic foam, which bounces and then scatters the sound waves in several directions, causing them to dissipate. I liked the idea of making an object that also "detains" sound, so I started incorporating acoustic foam into the work.



Shield, 2016

## **The sound piece also includes a woman's voice speaking. Whose is it?**

At intervals the sound of my own voice repeats certain war-related phrases taken from the DLIFLC (Defense Language Institute Foreign Language Center) online courses on tactical Iraqi Arabic. These interactive courses are meant to teach the military Iraqi Arabic, focusing on certain tasks such as public safety, medical situations, basic commands, cordon and search, weapon names, and gathering intelligence. I left Iraq at a very young age, so my command of my mother tongue is rather limited. As I sat down to take these courses, I found myself learning my language. So this tool designed for the American military to teach tactical Iraqi, ironically, was also teaching me! There is something frightening about that. It makes me think of the idea of a translator being a "traitor"—referring to the Italian phrase *traduttore/traditore*, someone who discloses the mother tongue to the public. But it also makes it more evident that I am part of a diasporic, colonized people, and I'm hoping ultimately I can create avenues of decolonization through the work.

## **How did you arrive at the poses for the figures in these paintings?**

As I was doing research on covert US military operations in Iraq, I came across laminated, postcard-sized pamphlets titled "IRAQ Visual Language Translator" that are distributed to the service women and men when they get deployed. They have small pictograms that are meant to serve as visual translators between the Americans and the Iraqis, sectioned into war-related scenarios such as hostage/reward, search, smuggling, weapon identification, etc. So I chose to focus on the "search" section, which has multiple scenarios of a man being searched, one of which is a pictogram of a fully dressed man and beside him a nude man. The process of making these works entailed putting my body into these exact positions and photographing them to then make sketches and paintings.



"Collective Cut," 2008

**You draw freely from both Western iconography and Middle Eastern aesthetics. What does this overlap offer you? How does it function?**

I fled Baghdad and landed in northern Sweden. I was the only kid with black hair in my class. The "Western" influence comes from someone who discovered she was colonized. It comes from someone who was taught to believe that European art history was the ultimate expression of "beauty." I also spent four years in Florence, Italy, going to every single museum and gallery and doing copies of the old masters. This is where "she" started emerging. Her white, diaphanous flesh, her contrapposto. She was an expression of who I had become as an assimilated woman. And as I obsessively repainted her again and again, she became part of a collective.

**Your work often gets slotted into various politicized categories. Do you ever feel this as a limitation on interpretation?**

We love to put categories on everything, so yes—I become this Iraqi female artist who makes paintings of figures. What a perfect place to be at this point in time, right?

Honestly, I have learned to live with this reality, because once the work leaves my studio, it's out there, and I can't control it.





"Strip Search," 2016

### **You recently had a 3D scan of your body made. What was that like?**

One of my neighbors worked with a team to digitally scan, document, and archive antique sculptures around the world, so I asked him to scan my body into a 3D model. The process was somewhat performative, as he created this stand that held my body completely still. I needed to be completely nude and covered in cornstarch because a matte surface helps the scanner pick up every single detail. I stood there completely nude in front of this man with a scanning device, holding my breath as the red light from the scanner moved on my body from top to bottom. After two sessions of eight hours each, I had an accurate 3D model of my own body that I could rotate, slice, and manipulate on the computer.

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## place to be at this point in time, right?

### How does your own body function as a tool within your practice?

Since my work is semi-autobiographical, using my body was a clear decision. A lot of times, I'm posing questions to myself and I do this with my own body. But the body is also our common denominator; it's a language that we all possess.

There's another aspect here—the work also speaks to the notion of commodities, as the female figure becomes this object that's being sold and traded within the art market. So here I am, putting myself, my nude body, within that space.



"Folding Sheet," 2008

### You refer to certain styles of historical painting that are sometimes categorized as "decorative"—Japanese painting, Persian miniatures, illuminated Arab manuscripts. What draws you to these formats?

The decision to share certain formal resemblances with the Renaissance allowed the figures to act like decoys in the work. I wanted to use that familiarity we have with European conceptions of beauty passed down in art. In terms of the illuminated manuscripts, this was a direct reference in the *How Iraqi are you?* works. They were a series of 50 short stories from 13th-century Baghdad called *Maqamat al-Hariri* and told the story of everyday Iraqis at the time. The actual illustrations are very interesting, as they focus on the figure and the expression on the face, and,

more often than not, leave the background unpainted. I responded to these aesthetically and still draw inspiration from them.

**Your paintings have struck a real chord with collectors everywhere, but especially in the Middle East. Do you think there is a growing appetite for overtly political work?**

Perhaps. Although I'm not sure my work is perceived as political in that region.



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