

KW

Hiwa K

2 June – 13 August 17

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Don't Shrink Me to the Size of a Bullet

Schering Stiftung Art Award

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Opening: 1 June 17, 7 pm

KW Institute for Contemporary Art and the Schering Stiftung are pleased to present the exhibition *Don't Shrink Me to the Size of a Bullet* by artist Hiwa K (born 1975 in Sulaymaniyah, IQ), winner of the Schering Stiftung Art Award 2016. For the exhibition at KW, the artist presents a selection of works from the past ten years as well as an ambitious new production.

In a recent interview, Hiwa K commented on the shift from “we” to “I” in his country of origin, Kurdistan. He said: “Before the 2003 invasion, Kurdish society was a collective one. People shared rooms, and pots. Now it is a country copying the Western model of independence. Every day new plans arise for a new shopping mall, bringing about a certain kind of amnesia in which recognition fades and new realities arise. No one has time for each other and society has become increasingly driven by consumerism. Collectivity is a thing of the past.” During the second Gulf War, Hiwa K managed to flee his country, travelling on foot across the mountains to the Iranian border, through Turkey, and finally settling in Germany.

The paradox of belonging and estrangement has been a crucial aspect of the life and work of Hiwa K. By concealing his last name, he underlines his detachment and ongoing engagement with issues around identity. The letter “K” comes to the fore and operates as a figure without agency—a figure that does not identify with either an “I” or a “we”. Coming from a place at war, the artist’s gaze constantly shifts from horizontality (the landscape) to verticality (the sky), therefore making himself hyper-aware of his surroundings. The disconnection to what was formally known as “home” is what drives Hiwa K to produce work in which vernacular forms, oral histories, and political constructs are intertwined. The various references in his practice consist of stories told by family members and friends, found situations, and everyday encounters that revolve around make-shift solutions and pragmatic approaches to often complex ideas and concepts. The artist attempts to retain the traditions surrounding his upbringing while also obtaining knowledge that will help him to further integrate into newer environments. When he arrived in Europe in 2001, he took the opportunity to study music and became a pupil of the Flamenco master Paco Peña. Ever since, his relationship to music has been frequently used as a tool for creating a different dimension of critique within the complexity of today’s society. It has also often functioned as a bridge to creating a strong collective and as a participatory dimension within the work. A longing for connection, ferocious curiosity, and a desire to learn are what

drive Hiwa K to produce art in which concerns about *the personal* and *the collective* are ultimately inevitable.

For his exhibition at KW, Hiwa K has developed a new cinematic project titled *The Existentialist Scene in Kurdistan (Raw Materiality 01)*, which is commissioned and coproduced by Schering Stiftung with support of the Medienboard Berlin-Brandenburg. Within the breath of some of Hiwa K’s previous work, this film traces oral histories through the vantage point of an intellectual subculture that formed in Iraqi Kurdistan during the 1970s and 1980s. In retrospect, the 1970s can be seen as a high point in Iraq’s modern history. A new, young technocratic elite was governing the country, and the gap between the rich and poor got wider. However, with the rise of Saddam Hussein’s power, the following decades would become a disaster for the fledgling country. As someone who has had to seek political asylum, Hiwa K tries to connect several protagonists who played a role within the existentialist scene back in the heyday of Iraq, in order to understand and portray the fight for individual freedom through the lens of collective agency. Through the eyes of the artist, the notion of individual freedom was deeply influenced by rising neoliberal ideology and especially by Milton Friedman’s definition of personal freedom as only guaranteed by the freedom of the market. This new project takes the form of a documentary that depicts these individuals, currently living throughout the globe and is an attempt to preserve their histories in a collective manner. Simultaneously, *The Existentialist Scene in Kurdistan (Raw Materiality 01)* reflects the beginning of a cultural and economic reorientation in the Persian Gulf region, which was followed by countless wars and is still ongoing to date. The sixteen hours of footage remains raw and unedited up until the work is acquired. One of the conditions for purchasing the work is that the owner makes editorial decisions about shortening the work, a way of underlining a distant, external point of view. The editing process refers to geo-political developments that occurred in the whole region of the Middle East since World War I, which caused drastic division of land, labor, and population, conducted by colonial powers, and western alliances.

Earlier works from the past decade are presented in addition to the new work. On the first floor, the artist’s most ambitious project, *The Bell Project*, links two places that are very distant from one another—the wasteland in northern Iraq and a 700 years old bell foundry in Italy—by manufacturing a bell made from the discarded metal waste of war. A double-screen projection portrays the production process and context surrounding the development of the bell. In a similar vein to *The Bell Project* is the work *What the Barbarians did not do, did the Barberini*. This work also connects the wasteland of northern Iraq with Italy, but this time with the Pantheon in Rome. The title relates to an anecdote criticizing Maffeo Barberini—



Hiwa K, *The Existentialist Scene in Kurdistan (Raw Materiality 01)*, 2017, Video Stills, Courtesy Hiwa K and KOW, Berlin

the bellicose, seventeenth-century pope Urban VIII—for the use of bronze from the Pantheon’s portico to make the papal baldachin and to supply his cannon foundry. Bronze is a metal used for both art and war, linking the fields of visual representation and the military execution of power. In a foundry on the outskirts of Sulaimanyah, a local craftsman melts and casts metal obtained from the battlefields of the Iraq-Iran War, the Gulf Wars, and, most recently, the Arab Spring in Syria. The casting method uses sand molds, and the forms pressed into the sand suggest formal references to the concrete ceiling of the Pantheon.

The works *For a Few Socks of Marbles* and *My Father’s Color Period* are reflections on the artist’s childhood and his memories of this time. *For a Few*

Socks of Marbles presents a complex children’s game in which found marble stones form the starting point. As a child, Hiwa grew up in different neighborhoods, one Kurdish and the other Arab, which gave rise to certain social complications for the artist. In order to be accepted, Hiwa managed to win the game by using both (horizontal) Arab and (vertical) Kurdish hand positions. *My Father’s Color Period* presents various models of vintage televisions that reinterpret his father’s intervention on the family’s home television set, which he covered with cellophane filters in order to create a kind of colored television.

In addition to the new work *The Existentialist Scene in Kurdistan (Raw Materiality 01)*, presented on the second floor, are video works produced over the last several years. Juxtaposed with each other are the works *Pre-Image (Porto)* and *Moon Calendar, Iraq*, which underline Hiwa K’s interest in and investigation of the notion of horizontality and verticality. *Moon Calendar, Iraq* portrays the artist tap-dancing on the premises of Amna Suraka (The Red Security Building in northern Iraq, which was used as a prison) to the rhythm of his own heartbeat by listening through a stethoscope; the artist is measuring the space auditorily while reminiscing about the space. *Pre-Image (Porto)* is a documented performance in public space, which utilizes an object-sculpture made out of prefabricated elements: a stick and motorbike mirrors. In order to navigate through the city the artist balances the object on his nose, using the various mirrors as guidance.

Projected on the floor is the video documentation of the performance *Star-Cross*, which is drawn from a story told to the artist by his oldest brother when he was eleven. Hiwa K’s brother had just returned from prison, where he had spent three months. He had tried to escape from the regime in Iraq by attempting to enter Europe but ended up in a Pakistani jail. This is where he learned the following fairy tale: “A man goes to the West and falls in love with the princess there. He asks the king for her hand. The father puts him into prison and gives him a riddle: ‘If you make a cross out of this star without touching, it then you will be my son-in-law, but if you don’t manage this by tomorrow morning, you will be hanged in public.’ The poor young man looks at the puzzle all night and cries tears of helplessness. A few drops of this water fall where the broken matches are conjoined, and the matches start to stretch back to form the shape of a cross.”

Projected onto one of the gallery’s larger walls is the video *This Lemon Tastes of Apple*, which documents an intervention undertaken by the artist on April 17, 2011 in Sulaymaniyah, during one of the last days of civil protest that had entailed of two months of struggle. We see the artist joining the protest by playing the infamous cords from the movie *Once Upon a Time in the West*. The fabled and universally recognized tones

are transformed into a signal of protest, in which the artist plays the harmonica and his friend the guitar—amplified through megaphones. The title refers to the use of gas against Kurdish people in a genocidal act. In 1988, Saddam's forces immersed Halabja and other Kurdish settlements in suffocating gas, which had the smell of apple. This smell has retained strong associations in the political memory of the country.

During the opening, a taxi owned by philosopher and writer Bakir Ali is parked in front of the premises of KW. The taxi hosts a library relating to the Iraqi existentialist movement including issues of 'Bun', a Kurdish magazine, which was co-initiated by Ali himself.

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Opening Hours

Wednesday–Monday 11 am–7 pm
Thursday 11 am–9 pm
Closed on Tuesday

Admission

8 €, reduced 6 €
Annual Ticket – KW Lover* 50 €, reduced 35 €
Combined Day Ticket KW / me Collectors Room Berlin
10 €, reduced 8 €
Admission free on Thursday evening from 6–9 pm

Guided Tours

KW offers free guided tours through the exhibitions during regular opening hours. For further information on tours for large groups (over 10 people), please contact Katja Zeidler at kaz@kw-berlin.de or +49 30 243459-41.

Colophon

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