

Hiwa K

Like a Good, Good, Good Boy

*In his exhibition at KOW for the 2023 Gallery Weekend, the Kurdish-Iraqi artist presents a new video installation in which he returns to his native city Sulaymaniyah. The three-part work *Like a Good, Good, Good Boy* (2023) interconnects three places that loomed large in Hiwa K's childhood and youth: his family's modest home, now a ruin; the old school; and the notorious Amna Suraka prison, where, between 1979 and 1991, Saddam Hussein's henchmen tortured, raped, and murdered countless men, women, and children.*

In the central video projection, a camera drone pans along a thick rope that, stretched across rooftops and streets, literally ties the three buildings and institutions together. With a total length of 1500 meters, the rope also intertwines the stories and histories of the sites. A second video shadows Hiwa K as he walks through his school. He recalls the hellish routines of studying under the teachers, some of whom also worked as torturers at the prison, as well as the dangers posed by friends and even one's own family and early gestures of futile resistance.

In a third video, Hiwa K and former classmates gather on the rooftop of the school, which they had never been allowed to go up to, and share their experiences under the regime, revisiting, now "from above" and from a distance, the pain and anguish they suffered. They follow the rope, first into the classrooms, then into the prison's interior. The ensuing conversation makes clear that Saddam Hussein's system deformed generations of citizens, bending people and breaking them—initially with support from the U.S. After Hussein, the ideology of free markets prevailed, bringing the unforgiving demands of a global Anglocentric labor market for which young people were to be prepared, always at the expense of their Kurdish culture, whose systematic repression is evident everywhere.

Not enough has been written about the significance of the vertical and the horizontal in Hiwa K's oeuvre. As the artist sees it, European culture and those with a strong Western influence typically function in vertical fashion: top-down relations, rational scales of evaluation, institutionalized hierarchies, a general observation that even extends to music with its emphasis on chord rather than melody. Kurdish culture, Hiwa K argues, is an example of the complementary phenomenon: predominantly horizontal cultures, where relationships are more level, narratives are more fluid, oral, and melodic, and national institutions are often absent. Individual experiences are integrated into a communal praxis rather than subjected to rational classification.

What his art portrays is the encroachment of vertical principles on traditionally horizontal cultural and social spaces and subjects. The vertical–horizontal contrast serves him to structure many of his works, and he lets us grasp this contrast, or conflict, in its spatial, temporal, linguistic dimensions, staking out a horizontal creative perspective for himself and injecting it into our way of seeing things. A more general distinction might presumably be made between vertical and horizontal aesthetic programs—and the associated histories, narratives, and politics—and this exhibition is an excellent starting point for such a discussion.

For the theme continues in the other works on view in the show, in which Hiwa K renders the violent transformations of the Middle East in the glaring light of Western dominance.

View from Above (2018) was created for documenta 14. The video shows a model of war-ravaged Kassel (as seen from above); the artist's voice is heard describing his Iraqi hometown "J" from a bird's-eye perspective. After fleeing Iraq in 1990/91, Hiwa K explains, he had to train his ability to speak this way for his asylum proceedings: the officials were not interested in whether he was actually familiar with the city, from below, in a horizontal perspective. The court looked down from above on maps that recorded distant places as being now safe, now unsafe (and hence entitling refugees to asylum), and gave credence only to descriptions of them that matched this vertical gaze. That is how Hiwa K's voyage to freedom was made possible not by truth, by his actual knowledge of a place, but by a fiction, by the adoption of a foreign gaze and its institutionalized vertical expectations.

A 20-by-20-foot carpet lies on the floor in front of the video work that was made for the Jameel Arts Centre, Dubai. Titled Destruction in Common (2020), it shows an aerial view of Baghdad, a city that people all over the world know primarily from TV footage in

which bombs drop from the sky as anti-aircraft missiles shoot up from the ground in an asymmetrical war decided by disparate vertical resources. “I remind the Western powers of their past and their worldwide exportation of war,” Hiwa K says. Destruction in Common underscores the continuity of a globalized form of warfare in which cities, regions, and populations become pawns in the hands of outside interests that destroy them from afar. A destruction that ties them together like the threads and knots of the handwoven carpet.

In the gallery’s ground-floor showroom, two more works intertwine personal episodes with historic political events. The video *Walk Over* (2014/2023) opens with the tale of a soccer ball crashing through a man’s chest like a cannon shot, then pivots to a soccer stadium in Kalmar, Sweden, where elderly gentlemen exercise, who fled from Chile and from dictator Pinochet after the military coup in 1973. The men talk about their experiences of torture and trauma and how the Soviet team refused to show up for their World Cup qualifying match because of the coup: the Chilean side played alone, surrounded by soldiers, and won against itself. The West—it was no secret that the U.S. supported Pinochet—was the only remaining player on the field, the only true global power, without a coequal antagonist: a political parable pinpointing an epochal turning point. The senior team reenacts the game for Hiwa K’s camera. What it is like when the madness of geopolitical as well as physical horror is your—absurd—everyday reality: that is what *Walk Over* illustrates with oppressive immediacy.

Also on the ground floor, five backlit collages look back on Hiwa K’s early school days (*Ball ballat Babel*, 2023). As a Kurd in an Arab school, he understood not a word of the Arabic spoken around him and in fact did not grasp that what he was not understanding was a foreign language he could learn (*ball ballat* means *blah blah*). Until one day, when he was six, he suddenly got it, and from then on he spoke Arabic. A bit of background: the Kurdish language has been repressed or marginalized for decades in a variety of ways in the areas in which it is spoken, and some Kurdish children never learn their native tongue. To complicate matters, there is no unified Kurdish language, only widely different dialects, making it difficult to articulate the idea of a united Kurdish nation. The formal design of the collages revisits Hiwa K’s *My Father’s Color Periods* (2014–), again with an autobiographical reference: when the first color film was broadcast on Iraqi television in 1979, few residents of the Kurdish areas had color TV sets. Hiwa K’s father, a calligrapher, devised a creative solution to the problem. He cut pieces of colored transparent foil and taped them over the black-and-white TV image, transforming the unfulfilled promise of technological progress into an art in its own right.

On view in KOW’s upstairs showroom, the sculpture *Gods Wearing Pots* (2018), created for the New Museum, New York, consists of an

oversized metal helmet hanging upside down by chains like a kettle above a burning fire. Historic sources relate that when the Incas first encountered the Spanish, they thought the conquistadors were peculiar gods who were fused to their horses and wore upturned pots on their heads. Hiwa K's sculpture and the associated drawings pick up on this misunderstanding between two utterly alien cultures that describe each other in the most absurd metaphors. This work, too, inverts a vertical principle—the literal vertical exaggeration of a conqueror's head by means of a helmet—into a horizontal one: the utilitarian value of a pot. On the soundtrack accompanying the installation, the Spanish singer Ismail Fernadez sings an elegy lamenting his country's colonial history, rhythmically beating time on the upturned helmet as a sonorous bell.

Hiwa K's exhibition at KOW highlights the extent to which the wrenching transformations that have devastated the Middle East in recent years have been driven by the continuity of Western and primarily American colonial policies that subject entire large regions to sometimes physical, sometimes economic, sometimes political and social destruction and dilapidation from a distance—and from above. With a practice that operates horizontally, Hiwa K devises a creative language that both exposes and defies the logics of vertical thinking.

Alexander Koch

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