

Hayv Kahraman

- Iraqi, b. 1981
- Lives and works in Los Angeles
- 2005 studied graphic design, Accademia di arte e design di Firenze, Florence, Italy; University of Umeå, Sweden



Body of Work

Raised in Baghdad, Hayv Kahraman fled the first gulf war with her family to Sweden at age eleven and started painting by age twelve. She recalls, “The main thing I can access from that time is these masses of bodies on the move, I remember seeing this constant flow of bodies from the car window, knowing that we were lucky just to have a car.” In recent works she rendered crowds of women and individual portraits in a recognizably stylized manner: curvy, pale-skinned, dark-haired women reminiscent of Botticelli’s Venus or Japanese ukiyo-e figures. Thirteenth-century manuscripts including the *Maqamat al Hariri*, created by the Baghdad school of miniature painting, inform some of her compositions, color schemes and structures, and she paints on raw linen from Belgium. Kahraman stated, “Most of my works lack background because I don’t like to define context.”

While Kahraman’s art is always intensely personal, drawing on her experience in an abusive relationship, her previous characters and their predicaments were at the same time universally and instantly recognizable, often based on researching current events on the news. She said, “These works are personal narratives, but they are also a way for me to transcribe and archive a history that I feel I am forgetting.” As a young adult she relearned how to read and write Arabic. Her recent paintings reveal the invisible and psychological confines of fear and belonging; the limits of memory and time; and how forced displacement, while harrowing, can also create a strong and vivid inner self. Her 2018 exhibition at Suzanne Vielmetter in LA was titled *Silence is Gold*. The show’s title, lifted from the popular saying “speech is silver, but silence is gold,” suggested that refugees gain currency or value for being seen and not heard. In a 2015 interview with *Guernica*, she said her art is “a way for me to justify my existence in the West. The work served as an avenue to address concerns and actively do something about it.”

Kahraman has had numerous solo exhibitions at museums and galleries around the world including Pamona College Museum of Art, Claremont, California; Jack Shainman Gallery, New York; Contemporary Art Museum, St. Louis; Joslyn Art Museum, Omaha; The School, Kinderhook, New York; London, and Dubai. Group exhibitions include venues in Moscow, Russia; Gunma, Japan; Istanbul, Turkey; Mattatuck Museum, Waterbury, Connecticut; Katonah Museum of Art, Katonah, New York; the National Museum of Women Artists, Washington DC; The Pizzuti Collection, Columbus, Ohio; Kemper Museum of Contemporary Art; Nelson-Atkins Museum; Victoria and Albert Museum, London; Museum of Fine Arts, Houston; Cantor Center, Stanford University, California; and Paul Robeson Center for the Arts, Princeton, New Jersey. Her work is included in several private and public collections.

Hayv Kahraman

The number of immigrants and refugees accepted in the United States and in Europe — and in the global North more generally — has been steadily decreasing to the point where one's case must be truly exceptional in order to be legally recognized. Border walls are being built at an unprecedented rate — there were 70 globally at the last count, versus 15 in 1990 — marking a new global right-wing populist politics of border closure. But the unwillingness to let people in, no matter how much they are suffering, is not new, of course. In *Pulse*, Iraqi-born artist Hayv Kahraman is inspired by the mass exodus of Kurds from Iraq in April 1991 that she herself was a part of as a child. This exodus of 3 million people was prompted by what was largely understood as chemical weapons attacks on the Kurdish towns by Saddam Hussein's government. Her work grapples with how the exodus was portrayed in the global North, and what elicited attention and resources for those who were fleeing. How can situations of suffering and violence be portrayed without erasing the dignity of those who suffer, without representing them as victims? Then, as now, proving one's worthiness for asylum or humanitarian aid requires evoking the pity or compassion of border officials — often by way of a mediatized appeal to a larger public — and demonstrating that the persecution one is fleeing is particularly horrendous.

Kahraman's paintings — particularly *Donation Mouth* (2018) — draw attention to how this process of claiming asylum is gendered and racialized; it works differently for different people. In particular, women fleeing from the global South often need to sexualize and sell themselves to cross borders, or to sell the very real violence they may have experienced.¹ The stories of violence serve as currency for their entry to a new place.

Kahraman's use of colors and textures also helps to show the complexities of these processes. The rough textures and multilayering show that nothing is pure, simple or one-dimensional, despite the purity and innocence we ask for from the refugees who are being saved. The pure white is overlaid with the impurities of gold-leaf paint, creating a palimpsest that not only connects these paintings to each other, but to the history of such images and to previous spectacles of suffering. Oxfam and the Red Cross campaigns deployed what we now think of as the paradigmatic images of women and starving children to raise awareness and money as early as the 1950s and early 1960s. But the *Live Aid* concerts of the 1980s brought images of suffering home in a new way, carried forward by celebrities. The first one, produced by Geldorf and Ure, took place in 1985 to raise relief funds for the Ethiopian famine of 1983-85. But most relevant for Kahraman — a set of images to which her paintings *The Celebrity* (2018) and *The Audience* (2018) speak back — is the epic, five-hour-long Live Aid concert in 1991 hosted on MTV and sponsored by British Tory MP Jeffrey Archer, called "The Simple Truth: A Concert for Kurdish Refugees" which featured singers such as Madonna and Whitney Houston against a backdrop of images of the suffering Kurds fleeing Saddam Hussein. Needless to say, almost none of the 57 million pounds raised by Archer reached the Kurdish villages in need.²

As anthropologist Liisa Malkki argued in 1996, refugees, especially African refugees, are figured as "a 'sea' or 'blur of humanity'" — as "a spectacle of a 'raw,' 'bare humanity'".³ They

¹ See <http://msi.net/Two-Species-of-Sexual-Violence>. See also Ticktin, Miriam. 2011. *Casualties of Care: Immigration and the Politics of Humanitarianism in France*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

² <https://www.theguardian.com/uk/2001/jul/26/iraq.archer>

³ Malkki, Liisa. "Speechless Emissaries: Refugees, Humanitarianism, and Dehistoricization." *Cultural Anthropology* 11.3 (1996): 377-404. p. 387.

are understood as passive and voiceless: reduced to an undistinguished mass of bodies rather than individuals, they represent a humanity stripped of dignity. We see this in *The Kurds* (2018). While cast as solidarity, spectacles of suffering masses primarily evoke pity. And pity, after all, works to distinguish the fortunate and the unfortunate, casting the unfortunate as victims. It is a hierarchical emotion, not an egalitarian one.

Kahraman's use of gold is also a play on the colors figured in humanitarian campaigns, like Bono's Product (RED); (RED) is an initiative to engage the private sector – and companies like Nike and Apple — to help in addressing HIV/AIDS in Africa, in what has become known as ethical consumerism. Companies label their products with the (RED) brand, which informs their consumers that by choosing this brand, they are helping to address the epidemic, directing part of their profits toward the Global Fund. This is considered a win-win for everyone; such branding avoids the visual realism related to suffering, and yet allows people to feel they have responded with immediacy.⁴ The market logic leverages the celebrity status of actors, while erasing the causes of HIV/AIDS and the complicity of those who give: we can forget the monopolies of big pharmaceutical companies who own the drug patents and insist on huge markups which make life-saving drugs unaffordable to most.

Kahraman's paintings play with these different figures: audience, celebrity and suffering masses. They are distinguished by their dress and their posture and by how many are figured together in one frame, but their faces are nearly interchangeable, showing how we all could or should be able to exchange places; in particular, of course, the artist herself paints from the perspective of both the refugee being saved and the celebrity of the artist bringing attention to a cause. The problem is that some of us only accept to be saviors, and some are only allowed to be victims. This is the dilemma of contemporary humanitarianism; it is institutionalized in ways that maintain inequality.

Is there a way to represent suffering respectfully, to call people into solidarity with those in need on the basis of equality? The United States government clearly does not think so, as officials refuse to allow their soldiers to be photographed dead or dying: there is no dignity in this. To me, Kahraman's haunting work confirms this; she suggests that humanitarian imagery requires commodification, sexualization, and hierarchy. She exposes humanitarianism as both compelling and corrupt. But in so doing, she creates an opening, giving us a chance to take a different type of responsibility.

- Miriam Ticktin, Associate Professor of Anthropology, The New School for Social Research, New York

⁴ Chouliaraki, Lilie. "Post-Humanitarianism: Humanitarian Communication Beyond a Politics of Pity." *International Journal of Cultural Studies* 13.2 (2010): 107-26. See also Richey, Lisa Ann and Ponte, Stefano. 2011. *Brand Aid: Shopping Well to Save the World*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.