What if Life Were Black and White: An Interview with Behjat Omer Abdulla

Behjat Omer

Artist, Gothenburg, Sweden

Interviewed by Meriwan Abdullah

Artist, Georgia, United States

Abstract: Artist Behjat Omar Abdulla discusses his most recent projects, What if Life is Black and White and From a Distance. These works focus on reflecting on identity, belonging, migration, and citizenship, along with the founding of Abdulla’s River of Light project.

Keywords: Kurdish art, Kurdish diaspora, What if Life is Black and White, From a Distance, River of Light, Iraqi Kurdistan, intersectionality, conflict

Meriwan Abdullah (MA): Thank you for taking the time to talk with me and for contributing to this journal issue. Can you tell me a little bit about what you are working on now?

Behjat Omer Abdullah (BOA): Thank you very much for the opportunity of doing this interview. I am very happy that we are finally getting into the practical part of this interview.

MA: We absolutely had to have you in this journal issue! Your essay “Performing in a Space Between Art and Life” that appeared in “Making Faces: Art and Intersectionality” was powerful. Since its publication, there have been many people who read your story of fleeing Iraq and the challenges you faced crossing the border, on foot, into Turkey, who were really very moved and very afraid for you.

BOA: Thank you. In regard to your question, for the past few years, this is going back to before the pandemic, but officially in April 2019 I was invited by Eva Eriksdotter, the director of the Borås Museum of Modern Art, to have a solo show at the museum. After a few meetings and discussing ideas for the show, we set a date for the show. However, because of the pandemic, the museum had to postpone the show until 2022.

Right now, I’m preparing for an exhibition called, What if Life is Black and White. I’m at the planning stages of the show, deciding which work I should include. I think I am going to be selecting a few of my previous projects, mainly drawings, to be included, but I will also include one video installation. In addition to these pieces, I have made a few new pieces of work for the show. I think it’s all coming together nicely.

MA: So, will your show *What if Life is Black and White* go forward in 2022? From the museum’s flyer, it looks like the show might have already happened?

BOA: Yes, we have a plan for the exhibition to be installed at the beginning of June, and the opening of the show will be on the 11th of June until September 11th.

MA: Again, from the museum’s flyer, it looks like this show is presenting black and white drawings. Can you tell me a little bit more about what you plan to present and some of the big ideas you are presenting there?

BOA: The title of the show is *What if Life is Black and White*. And I’m planning to show a selection of my works that I’ve made between 2009 and 2022. Now, for the same show, I’m trying to finish a few new drawings that I could include in the show in June. Completing the new works might influence and change the layout of the planning of the show. For now, I’m not sure but I think I will only know and discover this once I have completed them.

For this exhibition I’m going to be installing up to 120 drawings. Also, as I have mentioned, there is going to be a video installation of *A New Place of Origin* (2009), but I will talk about the drawing and the video later on.

---

MA: Why black and white?

BOA: Black and white? Are you referring to the title of the exhibition? Or are you talking about the nature of drawing which is black and white? I think your question here is more related to the nature of the drawing which is black and white.
I see this more as a medium like any other artistic tools and mediums, rather than referring to the color of the pencil or the drawing in general. For me, drawing is the earliest form of mark-making known by humankind. It’s been with us before we were able to use language for communication. It’s a medium that is very simple to use, but it will get more complicated when you work with it. I’m very fascinated by the fact that a drawing could be made of one single line, or it could be a work that you could spend months of building it.

I’m also interested in the fact that throughout the history of art, drawing has been referred to as a secondary medium, a drawing, or an outline of an idea rather than finished “actual” work. For me, the finished work happens right from the start when you are making the first mark with a pencil or any other medium. But I’m more interested in the way that contemporary artists are using drawing as the main part of their practice. It’s very hard to define what the word drawing is. It is an open process and [and it has] endless possibilities of use. But if we look around us closely, the use of the drawing medium is everywhere. It somehow describes us, and it’s also used to make all the tools that we are using every day. As the Italian painter Giorgio Vasari said, “Drawing is the parent of our three arts, Architecture, Sculpture and Paintings.”2 Drawing is a world, with many worlds nested within it, but it’s mostly all black and white. But I have to say, the two words “Black” and “White” next to each other has a tension and political connotation to it. However, if we divide the two words and use them separately, the stiffness is less visible. This is somehow embedded into my work also.

MA: In the show What if Life is Black and White, you reconstruct stories that have inspired or influenced you. What are some of those stories?

BOA: Most of the works in the show are autobiographical. In some ways, they are always starting from my own experience. The starting point could be a reaction to a story or a text that I’ve heard or read in the news, followed by a conversation that I could have with someone. This could be an interaction today, something that has happened recently or a few years back.

Most of the time, this reaction is about the subject or topics that I am feeling uncomfortable with, or about feeling powerless in front of a story that I cannot change or do anything about. This becomes a cloud of images and ideas for new works. I see the development of the work as a puzzle. I make one drawing, and this finished image demands more questions and another drawing. At the start of the work, I’m not sure what the next image might be. But if I am not pushing the process, as soon as I finish the work or get closer to be finished, the next image will force itself into the current work.

I’m also letting the process be a bit loose, allowing for the work to change directions and form itself in different, wider contents. This allows the works to be developed and influenced by other people’s stories and experiences. In a way, my body becomes a tool between the process.

---

2 The full quote from Giorgio Vasari’s book Vite reads, “Proceeding from the intellect, drawing, the father of our three arts – architecture, sculpture, and painting – turns multiple elements into a global concept. The latter is like the form or concept of all things in nature, all original in its measurements. Whether the human body or animals, plants or buildings, sculpture, or painting, you can understand the relationship between the whole and its different parts; the parts with each other and in relationship to the whole.” See Memento. Diptyque. Il Disegno, Drawing and Design. 7 August 2017. http://www.diptyque-paris-memento.com/en/disegno-drawing-and-design/.
of thinking and the development of the works. Through my own body, with drawing, I’ll allow the work to exist. In some ways, I am making the works for telling my own stories through other people’s lives and experiences.

**MA:** I would like to come back around in moment and ask you about your teaching. First, I saw that since 2016 you have also been working on developing a project called *From a Distance.*

**BOA:** Yes, more recently, I have been developing the *From a Distance* project more, and looking at possibilities for developing it further. I’m very excited to work with large lenticular prints. It’s a new medium for me, first time that I am trying out this print in such a large format. Previously I have used this print but in a much smaller A5 size as a postcard. But this new print that I have for the exhibition, it is a large print format of 150 x 100 cm. It’s going to be hanged in the middle of the space and the viewer will be seeing two images in the same frame. In a way, the image changes when you move in the space, it’s a combination of two images; in different angles, you will see different images.

“*From a Distance*” 2016-2022 and “What if Life is Black and White” by Behjat Omer Abdulla. Installation view at the Borås Museum of Modern Art. Photo by Behjat Omer Abdulla.

**MA:** Showing your work *From a Distance* at the Tate? The Tate has an incredible reputation. It’s impressive to have your work shown there!

**BOA:** Yes! I was showing *From a Distance* as part of the first *Who are We?* cross-platform event initiated by the Counterpoints Arts organization. *Who are We?* was a cross-platform event designed for Tate Exchange (Tate Modern) reflecting on identity, belonging, migration, and citizenship. The program was shaped by co-creation, co-production, and exchange among artists, arts and culture

---


4 Counterpoints. Our Work. Who Are We? https://counterpointsarts.org.uk/project/who-are-we/.
organizations, audiences, activists, and academics. I did really enjoy taking part in the show; it was very important for me to take the work to such a place.

I wanted the story behind the works to be heard by as many people as possible. So, I decided to have a wall space next to the works, where people were invited to comment and respond to the story of the work and where they could voluntarily be photographed, and their portrait would become part of the work. These images were printed and installed daily on the opposite wall. But I would like to mention that being involved in the Who Are We? project was part of a build-up from many previous collaborations with the Counterpoints Arts organization since 2011.

MA: As I understand it, it seems that the show was based on the experience of a family being smuggled across the Mediterranean with twin infants. Could you tell me more about this story and the thoughts that it created that led you to create this show?

BOA: At the time of making the work, I was really interested in the questions of what it would mean to experience our own privileged lives being inextricably tied up with the exposed lives of less fortunate others elsewhere in the world. I was very interested in water, the sea, landscape and how a landscape is able to change itself, erasing its own features sometimes and thereby changing its own history. The story began under the fear of war, as thousands of families fled their homelands. A mother of twin infants started her journey to seek a safer place. During the journey, a tragedy occurred. In the shock and humiliation of not being able to change this particular situation myself, I decided to base five drawings around this story.

Due to the geographical location where the tragedy occurred, the mother was most likely coming from the Middle East or possibly Asia, crossing the deadliest route to Europe over the Mediterranean Sea by boat. Barriers to immigration come not only in legal and political forms, but also from natural and societal obstacles, which can be just as dangerous. During the harsh journey, one of the mother’s twin infants died. Despite this loss, she kept the dead child with her. As tensions rose on the boat, the smugglers tried to force the mother to throw the body of her child into the sea. She refused and kept the body with her. One night, while the mother was asleep, the smugglers acted. The mother woke up to realize that her living child was missing and that she had been left with her dead child. The smugglers had mistakenly thrown the sleeping twin [the living child] into the sea.

This narrative has become very important to my work. Although here the story is told through text, it is overflowing with images. For me, the value and the spirit of an idea in creating an artwork is layered in various tones of intensities. This could be generated from hearing a story, revisiting a memory, seeing photographs of war, struggling in a situation, or making work about an event that remains with me longer than I would have expected. Most of the time, the act of combining my own experiences, memories, and ideas with those of other people becomes overtly political.

For example, for my final Bachelor of Fine Arts exhibition in the UK, I produced 11 drawings under the title In Limbo (2010) and New Place of Origin (2009) as a video installation. The idea for this project came from ten years of personal experience of seeking asylum in the UK, a period during which I struggled to gain an official identity card from the Home Office. My sense

of freedom in the UK gradually became more complicated and became the biggest obstacle of my life. As Michel Foucault said, “From the idea that the self is not given to us; I think that there is only one practical consequence: we have to create ourselves as a work of art.”

Through this project, I reflected on how the self (identity) is created, and what role art might play in this. I started the project with the simple act of taking an ID-style photograph of myself, filming the process, printing the photos, and turning it into a large drawing. The process of making the drawing was a way to become visible, exposing myself and the situation I was living in, so I could be dealt with legally by the Home Office and the UK government.

If I can, I would like to return to the story recounted above, of the woman fleeing the war with her twin infants. I heard this story when it was being retold around Swedish refugee camps in Gothenburg, and I began to see it as a kind of myth. For my final MFA [Master of Fine Arts] show at the Göteborgs Konsthall, From a Distance (2016), I explored this story by making a series of drawings in order to cope with, understand, expose, and transmit this story to a wider audience. Through writing and drawing visual symbols of the story, I wanted to touch the viewer in a way unlike the newspaper, television, and other media, dragging the story to a different environment, making it accessible to more people, particularly audiences in an art context.

In From a Distance, I aimed to show images with only slight hints of violence, to the point where the violence was nearly invisible. When the viewer enters the space, it was particularly important for me to give the audience little information about the works. They are only presented with the story (printed on the back of the cards) and the titles of the drawings as clues for understanding them. The story on the back of the card was intended as a trigger for the viewer to uncover the main methods and narratives behind the pieces. However, what is not revealed to anyone is the personal side of the work. This project by far still is one of the most difficult ones I have ever managed to complete.

Firstly, the story of the death of the twin was extremely overwhelming to deal with, in terms of my sympathy for the characters in the story, including the mother, the children, other people on the boat, and the smuggler who made the mistake. Secondly, during the making of these pieces, on January 28, 2016, 25 dead refugees were found off the Greek island of Samos, ten of them were children. This was an incident in which my partner lost 11 close family members. They were all trying to cross the Mediterranean Sea when their boat sank, and they drowned. Some of them are still missing, and perhaps will be, forever. The trigger story on the back of the card repeated itself and became unpredictably real for my own family.

**MA:** That’s incredibly difficult to even imagine. I think I need to sit with this a bit.

**BOA:** Yes, it is.

---

MA: Perhaps we can shift our conversation a little to talk about your teaching? What are you teaching? I think you have been teaching at this university for a few years now. Is that right?

BOA: Yes! For the past three years, I have been teaching at the HDK-Valand Academy of Art and Design at Gothenburg University. I am there in the faculty of Fine, Applied and Performing Arts. After moving from the UK to Sweden in 2012, I completed my Master of Fine Arts at the same school where I ended up teaching. Right now, I am teaching the Fine Arts practical course, and I have an elective drawing course which is taken by students from photography, film, fine arts, and literature compositions.

I like teaching a lot. It’s full of challenges and encouragement. Although I am on a part-time teaching contract, I still find it very hard to find enough time for my own practical work. It feels like the process of teaching takes a lot of energy from you, and this allows no time for your own works to be developed. But when you see the development of the students’ work, the teaching becomes an interesting and encouraging process. I think on some occasions, I witnessed that my teaching in higher education becomes a point of realization for some students. I mean non-white students seeing a non-white artist from the Middle East teaching art in a higher education gives them a bit of hope. Yes, in short, there is a reason why I teach. It’s work and sacrificing my own artmaking for it.
BOA: Also, I am proud to be a founder of the ongoing River of Light project that I have been working with for the past six years as its artistic director.\footnote{Vimeo. River of Light 2019 - Göteborg öppen för världen. https://vimeo.com/354722567; For the longer version, see YouTube. River of Light 2019 - Göteborg öppen för världen. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZchrEdBjWGQ}

MA: Yes!! I looked at the YouTube video about the project and was impressed by the scope of the project. Please can you tell me more about creating River of Light?

BOA: As I have mentioned before, most of my works grow from a reaction. In 2015, I was invited to help with organizing an exhibition in one of the refugee camps around the city of Gothenburg, Sweden. This was a year in Europe where there was a big shift in numbers of migrants coming from Middle East, seeking an asylum for safer life. The camp I visited was full of people mainly from Syria, Afghanistan, Iraq, and Iran. Of course, this has been the effect of the war that has been happening in those regions. The numbers were very high, and as we have experienced recently, compared to the migration from Ukraine to the EU, they were totally treated differently. After a very long, traumatic journey of fleeing from their countries, these families, children, and young people were kept in large, crowded groups in different buildings. They had nothing to do except wait in limbo. Some of them were sleeping on the floor of the camps hoping to hear a positive response from the Swedish Migration Agency.

On the way back, I had the idea to invite these people to the city, to organize and introduce these new visitors to different institutions, like the library, university, museums, and galleries. I wanted to show them [what are] inside these institutions and let them know that they are allowed to enter these public spaces. So, I planned to develop this idea as part of my MFA project. To get
some support, I discussed the possibilities of this project with my dear friend Hilary Hughes in the UK and my teacher, friend, and colleague, Denise Langridge Mellion, who also greatly helped me and showed support through friends, teachers, and students from Gothenburg University and the Red Cross. A few months after our visit to the camp, we organized a workshop of lantern making for the procession in the middle of the city. We picked the darkest month of the year. Since February 20, 2015, which is also the United Nations Day of Social Justice, we have continued to hold the River of Light event. But of course, because of the pandemic, we could not make it for a few years.

MA: What I saw on the YouTube video was fantastic and inspiring! You must be very proud of this work!

BOA: Yes, I am very proud of this project, and I think it suits the city very well especially since the city of Gothenburg is one of the most segregated cities in Europe. The River of Light project is a very inclusive project and we do include everyone who is willing to take part. By everyone, I mean from small children to elderly people – with no hierarchy. Everyone can do their part and be proud. But also, this is a project that comes from the times when I was in the refugee camp in the UK around 1999 to 2001, where I took part in a similar project run by B arts, a participatory art company in the city of Stoke-On-Trent. This was also a way for me to engage with different communities in the city that was very new to me. I ended up working for B arts until I came to Sweden in 2012.

After we made the River of Light project in the city a few times, the project grew bigger and bigger. Now we are a registered company! We have four members, and hopefully from next year, we will start making the processions again.

MA: There seem to be several parts to this festival – dancing, drums, and music – one part being the lanterns. Can you tell me more about the whole festival? And why lanterns?

BOA: That’s right. For our last event, River of Light 2019, the theme was “Gothenburg – Open to the World,” with a wink to the city’s 400-year history of openness to new influences through its trade and shipping tradition. River of Light focused on the inclusive city where all young people should feel valuable, have a voice and the right to be involved and shape the city’s future. Central to the project were the lantern workshops held at Blå Stället, at Frölunda Kulturhuset, [and] at Restad Gård asylum accommodations. Throughout the holiday week, lanterns were made for the procession during workshops at the World Culture Museum. In these places, new arrivals and Swedish children, young people, and families met and used art as a tool for breaking language and cultural barriers – gathering people together from all kinds of backgrounds who would not normally meet. On February 20, 2019, the procession with 282 lanterns went through the city, returning to the World Culture Museum and ending with music and festivities, including the Gothenburg Opera’s children’s choir and international choir, Dream Orchestra and Group of Knobs, and the dance group Under Samma Sol from Restad Gård, with over 200 artists on stage at the Museum of World Culture and 600 in attendance in the audience.

MA: Thank you! What an incredible career, filled with very critical work. It is interesting and powerful how your work has created spaces to engage with diverse experiences, like your own, but also how you bring that conversation into the space of the museum, in some ways, helping to normalize these difficult conversations. Powerful!

BOA: Thank you!

About the Artist

Behjat Omer Abdulla is a Kurdish artist, educated at Staffordshire University, UK and at the Valand Academy, Gothenburg University. He works with mixed media, mainly drawing, photography, and video installation. Through his art, he conveys feelings and stories about war, often through individual destinies and with a focus on experiences that can hardly be explained or shared. Behjat has participated in several exhibitions internationally, including in Tate Modern and Southbank Centre in London, and the Drone Vision exhibition at the Hasselblad Center in Gothenburg. His artworks are an invitation to look, encouraging a shift in the viewer’s understanding of the subject; and he tries to find ways to force them to connect to the artwork in unexpected ways. He currently lives in Sweden, and he is an adjunct lecturer at Gothenburg University, Faculty of Fine, Applied and Performing Arts.