Highlighting the Invisible: An Interview with Avan Sdiq

Avan Sdiq
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Abstract: Sulaimani-based artist Avan Sdiq talks about her involvement with Nawi Min Nawi Daikama, an activist project working to change the laws regarding the carti nishtinmani Iraqi (Iraqi identification card) for cases of children who are born after rape, abuse, or abandonment. Sdiq discusses what she thinks are the biggest challenges facing the art world in Kurdistan and her view of the role of the artist in Kurdish society.

Keywords: Kurdish art, Avan Sdiq, Nawi Min Nawi Daikama, Iraqi Kurdistan, intersectionality, conflict

Meriwan Abdullah (MA): Welcome, Avan. Thank you for taking time to talk with us and for contributing to “Making Spaces: Art, Culture & Difference in Iraqi Kurdistan.” First, I would like to make sure that our readers know that your artwork, a piece titled, “The Passivists,” is featured prominently on the front cover of this special issue. We are very pleased and excited to have both your artwork and you featured here with us.

My first question for you has to do with your involvement with the project Nawi Min Nawi Daikama. Could you tell us a bit more about this bold project?

Avan Sdiq (AS): Yes, thank you! This project has been organized by the People’s Organization for Development (PDO), which specializes in cases of women’s rights. This project includes a group of activists and lawyers, scholars of law, as well as some members of parliament who were previously part of the Kurdish Regional Government. They are working to change the laws regarding the carti nishtinmani Iraqi (Iraqi identification card). Specifically, they are trying to change two laws regarding the carti nishtinmani Iraqi for cases of children who are born where the father is unknown. The concern is for cases like the children born after rape or abuse, or where the father didn’t accept the responsibility of fatherhood. These include those children who were born during the war, who were fathered by ISIS soldiers, as products of rape and for many other cases, where the mother and father never married but produced a child.

By cultural tradition and in the legal tradition in Iraqi Kurdistan, these children are na shari (illegitimate). The problem is that from the time they are born, they are facing many problems and will for the rest of their lives. The first trouble is that they will be separated from all the other...
children when they are first born. On their chest or some other part of their body, and more importantly, on the birth file, they will be labeled *lakeet*, which means “bastard.” They mark them with this curse. The other big problem is that these children are not given a proper government ID. By law, they cannot get an ID until they are put under the name of a man. A man is required to take the responsibility of acknowledging the child, for that child to be recognized legally, even if the mother is alive to do the same. However, the child will not be legally put under her name. A child without any family name, without any ID, will be excluded from all basic rights and those [rights] for their future, like being able to study, healthcare, being able to get work, and more. As hard as all of these things are, probably the hardest is the way society looks at these children and judges their family and even those that are close to them.

By Iraqi law, Muslim women cannot marry non-Muslim men. Also, without asking about the religion of the mother or family, any new birth is labeled “Muslim” on the baby’s ID. These two laws are the ones that the Nawi Min Nawi Daikama project is seeking to change: (1) children labeled *lakeet* (bastard) in the birth file would instead be labeled “new birth child,” and (2) every mother would have the right to put the child under her name, especially in those cases where the father is not known.

The PDO, together with three other organizations and many higher-up people, have been supporting this project for about two years, with the help of specialists in law and in Shari’a. They created a law project to get the Iraqi parliament to amend the *carti nistimani Iraqi*, but this law project also needed to create public discussion so that people understand the need for these changes. For this matter, the chairman of the PDO created another campaign by inviting many artists to talk about this project and to talk about it in the media and with society.
**MA:** What do you think are some of the most important themes in this project? What is the “big idea”?

**AS:** When the PDO organization announced their support for the Nawi Min Nawi Daikama project, they contacted the majority of prominent artists, singers, actors, and musicians to aid them with their goals.

They wanted social support for the project through a campaign by those artists who had social media accounts that could help support the project. Each artist would change their father’s name to their mother’s name on their social media and also agree to participate in interviews with television and other media to promote the campaign. Also, they were interested in getting opinions and ideas from artists about how to get the public to participate socially, to gather and to talk about the project.

Also, the Nawi Min Nawi Daikama project has been working to make a documentary film that focuses on the cases of these children. I helped the directors by suggesting ideas, and even playing a role in creating a short spot about the project that will be broadcast on television and through social media channels. The film will be shown to two groups, the first one politicians and legislators who can change the laws, and the second group are those families and society. Through the film they can face these otherwise invisible children, the dark aspects of their lives, and feel their pain and understand the need for change.

**MA:** What have been some of the biggest challenges you have faced with this project?

**AS:** This subject is a really sensitive subject in Middle Eastern Islamic society, especially in a country like Iraq, which has been created by many nations and many religions but where the law has been written through Shari’a law. There have been many conflicts over this because the law for the country has been written through Shari’a yet the law is not stable.

For those artists supporting the project, politically and socially, we have been facing many criticisms. People criticize you when you come out in support of the Nawi Min Nawi Daikama project and ask you if you are trying to support people “making more bastards.”

This thing for us is about asking for the right to use the mother’s name; the job is not simply to stir the pot. It is to shake and vibrate all of the old, traditional thoughts and to find a solution for these problems and for us to not repeat these problems after the war.

**MA:** Where is this work being shown?

**AS:** As far as I know this work has been done all over Iraq. The campaign announced the [names of] many artists and personalities in Sulaimani City and bashori Kurdistan (Southern Kurdistan), and some have been supporting outside of Kurdistan in the diaspora. There have been many who have been supporting on social media as well.

**MA:** Why did you decide to be part of this project?

**AS:** In terms of the political life and society, financially and culturally, the situation in Kurdistan and Iraq—all the political parties including the opposition all continue to focus on the budget and shortage of money coming in. For me this matter is completely different, and I think our big problem is related to how we think. Our morals and how we see the world, the humanity, the cultural, the political—that is the bigger problem.

I think that all the old and traditional thinkers need to reconsider their views for a better world for all nations and everyone. If our focus is not on rights of minorities, how can we see the bigger dreams, like democracy, human rights, living together—indepedence? This is my question. This is how I think. If we don’t take care of these small things, how can we get from this point, where we are, in the direction where we can dream about big changes in society? We must start from basic human rights, like giving identity to these so-called “unwanted” children. Personally, I feel that I am responsible by honor and a feeling of what is morally right to support this type of work in the face of all the political and religious power.
MA: I’d like to move away now from discussing the Nawi Min Nawi Daikama project and on to a focus more about you and our own perspectives. What do you enjoy most about being an artist?

AS: As a human being, I enjoy art a lot for its greatness, and all the difficulties that come with it. As an artist, when I deliver an artwork, I can’t exactly describe it as enjoying it. I feel more like I am a being and I try hard to enjoy the seconds of life.

MA: And on to topics that more generally are affecting artists in Kurdistan. Can you tell us what spaces are available to artists in Kurdistan? Schools, galleries, museums? Where is artwork being shown?

AS: This question is very simple. My answer to a Westerner will be unclear if I do not explain first. All of the places that you mentioned are open places, and at the same time none of them are suitable. Meaning, there is no place available.

In the art schools where there is a program of study, they have activity halls and festivals for their students where they can present their work. However, outside of those places there are no suitable gallery spaces for artistic work. What exists are some places that call themselves galleries but first, there are very few of them, and they are just places and do not have the capabilities of a true gallery. For example, these places do not have experts, like a professional curator. The Red Security (The National Museum at Amna Suraka) galleries include all the art subjects of painting, handicrafts, and others, but it is just a place without having created any personality for itself.

There is also the Hall at the Museum of Sulaymaniyah. There they have held shows,

Unknown Title by Avan Sdiq (center), Together/Alone art show (2022).
exhibitions, and performances of different artistic works like handicrafts, drawings, photos, and other works. However, there is no place that we can truly call a museum for art in all of Bashori Kurdistan (Southern Kurdistan). Yes, in recent years they built the Museum of Modern Art, but it has a lot of problems. Even until now, there are problems with the architecture, electricity, and lack of staff. It has not been able to fulfill its mission to work as a museum and collect the work of Kurdistan’s artists—not yet. Today, it is just a neglected and unplanned place.

Through my answers to you I realize that I must face the fact that art is not a strong position in this society as a strong and important thing. Otherwise, why is the situation like this?

The truth I have just mentioned is a major obstacle for artists who want to perform seriously, especially for those artists who do contemporary artwork. They must also consider sound and location when installing their art objects. The places I mentioned earlier are only suitable for hanging pictures. They do not have gallery conditions at all, nor suitable people like specialists, experts, and organizers as part of the art institution. This responsibility is then placed on the artists themselves through their different artistic groups. They are doing the work of collecting, creating, fundraising, cataloguing, writing, and searching for suitable places to show work outside of these places called artistic places.

For example, our group, the Concept Art Group, has presented art shows in several marginalized and neglected locations around the city, according to the need and context of the show. The exhibition of “Eight Rooms,” meaning eight spaces, was presented in an abandoned house in the city center. In that location, we worked to create a place for ourselves by building walls suitable for showing video performances and spaces for installation artworks. Also, the “Art Objekt” exhibition was held in a destroyed house, and the exhibition of “Visible Body/Invisible Body” was in the neglected basement of the Red Security (The National Museum at Amna Suraka). In this way, our group has set up venues for our performances by helping each other.

I would also like to note that there are dozens of special studios for artists, which call themselves galleries. What this means is that they have been approved by certain art institutions and the Ministry of Culture. It also means that certain artists have been funded at these spaces, and in general, they only present their artwork at those locations.

This is how we can say that there are places for art shows, but they are without programming, without funds, and without experts. They are just places.

So, I don’t know how clear my answer is to you?

**MA:** What’s your background? Can you tell us about your experience becoming an artist?

**AS:** I am a graduate of the Department of Painting at the Institute of Fine Arts of Sulaymaniyah and studied there between 1989 and 1994. This was an important moment in history at the beginning of the Kurdish uprising against the Ba’athist regime. Not long after, power came into the hands of the Kurds. At that time, we faced many big disasters and big wars. There was the uprising of 1991, the ESCAPE, the civil war between the Kurdistan Democratic Party (PDK) and Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK), and the hardship caused [by civil war]. At that time my artwork became more figurative and expressive. It was dirty and dark and used a lot of gray color. It was the beginning of my youth and my encounter in a traditional study of art and art history. After I graduated from the institute, I went to Germany as a refugee in 1997 and I started studying
there in 1998.

In my opinion, the history of Western religious culture is more of a picture culture than Eastern culture, which relies more on text in religion, ignoring shape in favor of forms that can be written and read. But that doesn’t mean that Islamic art does not have images. I do think that contemporary Islamic art has ignored the form to read its own culture from this point of view. I also think that we cannot talk about the art of painting without going back to Western sources. That was the basis of our learning at the Institute of Fine Arts. There our studies focused on knowing the stages and artistic histories of the West because in the art of painting, Western cultural dominance is powerful all over the world. I am not saying that there is no art in the East, but it is an undeniable fact that there is a marginalization of these cultural forms.

Of course, studying art in Germany was a great opportunity for me to learn, experience, and develop a deeper and wider perspective for art. At the same time, I had the opportunity to have a solo exhibition at the Darmstadt [Germany] Cultural Centre and joint exhibitions in Germany, Britain, and Austria up until 1999. Still, I felt that the traditional painting and canvas did not fulfill my desires. As a first step, I started with a new medium for me—that was video art!

**MA:** Who are some of your biggest influences?

**AS:** My father taught me to draw as a child and I was very impressed with it. My father was making simple drawing pictures at that time. Certainly, he was my first influence. But in the art world, the influence of American conceptual artists has been important. Their subjects and the forms the art takes are very interesting. I saw these for the first time at the Modern Art Museum in Frankfurt. Here I also heard a new phrase for the first time—“making moving pictures.”

The movements were moving paintings, the pictures represented a specific era, but the questions were eternal. A few years later I was amazed by Christian Boltanski’s artistic works, the subjects of war. I was very surprised by such artists, how they dealt with their subjects and how they dealt with different mediums for their work but in which the image was still strong.

**MA:** How has your art changed over time?

**AS:** My video work was my first experience of getting outside of painting. In 2007 in Kurdistan, at the Sardam Gallery, I opened a solo exhibition titled “Time Space.” It was the beginning of me settling into this new artistic stage.

The main subject of my work is human beings. That is, not that the human is the center of the perspective, but that human beings are the only creatures who have a distorted awareness of existence. Having the ability to mix with different times and places, to create spaces in space, I try to create form and meaning and tend to focus more on materializing such ideas. My pieces are independent and at the same time complex units that work in relationship with one another. Not all of the forms can easily be seen—some only pieces. Without the others they should not be anything. I don’t have a stable message throughout my work, but it doesn’t mean that my works are empty of content. But the pieces will be mixed and will be seen by different viewers all at once. One work becomes a changing thing and the viewer’s understanding will be changed as their point of view changes as they encounter different angles in the work. In this way, I create space, yet meaning
remains unstable in that space. The audience too becomes part of my artworks as they interact with them and will be a part of the structure of artistic work. It means that the audience will be another addition in my work simply by moving in and out of the work. Movement of the audience within the space creates an active picture. At this point, the image maker, the artist, no longer owns the meaning. Instead, the work stands on its own, meaning [it is] made by the audience selecting a viewing angle and living with it.

In addition, some of my works there are voice works. In these, I work with different materials and mediums such as a camera, performance, and installations. In general, I don’t like to transmit the subject and the obvious events from a realistic perspective. I want to open another channel to reality for my audience by giving them a range of perception. Human beings are constantly portrayed in the real world, and if this is translated directly into art, it loses the influence of the hidden aspects of the event and the image is made empty.

**MA:** What are some of the biggest challenges facing the art world in Kurdistan?

**AS:** Making art in all its forms is a great challenge in Kurdistan because the environment has not historically seen peace and stability. Instead, it has been busy with basic rights to live and to survive. Its art has gained no inheritance from instability. In Kurdistan, at the end of the twentieth century, art was used as a symbol and as an emotional tool, and tool for expression of opposition to the fascist regime and the injustices and tragedies inflicted. Art has not developed very far past this context, because it has not been provided the ground for it to develop and grow in its own context. To add to this, the relationship between the audience, our society, and the art is still weak. Lessons that art can offer are seen as unimportant. Art has been given only the role of decorating and beautifying. This is the disgusting side of governance under the authority of the Kurdish parties. Institutions here are outdated and incompatible with today’s world of contemporary art. However, those decorative artists that seem happy to do only the work of beautification have been given the rank of directors of their colleges, while talented, avant-garde artists must work independently abroad. As I [said] earlier, these artists must take full responsibility for all of the tasks that would be done by a team of gallery staff and also assume the costs associated with opening a show. In society, the position of a painter is at a very low social level and trying to make a living as a professional artist is a major obstacle. This can be demoralizing for an individual. Art is not seen as a field of knowledge. So, I come back to the same point that I made earlier, that art in Kurdistan is not well understood and it exists in an environment where it is not appreciated for its full value. Art is a big challenge.

**MA:** Which current trends in the world of art are you following?

**AS:** You know, I have never asked myself that question! There has been this movement of anti-art. I don’t care for it very much and I don’t want to go into that field. Then in modern European art in the late 1960s, those paths have become so branchy and so numerous that, in time, those paths seemed to have circled back on themselves in such a way that they are no longer relevant.

1 Anti-art is a term used to describe art that challenges the existing accepted definitions of art. See The Tate Museum. Anti-art. https://www.tate.org.uk/art/art-terms/a/anti-art.
I think every artist has his own unique world, even in today’s world, with the amount of information and the high speed of communication where every work can be considered and matched. For me, I believe in work that has the ability to present a difference of perspective. It is critical work that puts the artist in the special category.

**MA:** What role does the artist have in society?

**AS:** The question is complicated. I’m trying to think of the answer to this question from my own point of view. I think that there is another way to ask this question, maybe. Like, why are you doing art? Do you think your art will have an impact on changing society?

I think that the purpose of art changes from one artist to another, according to the type of art being done. I do think that the study of the art of painting is something that is unfamiliar to the majority of the population, and the art of painting is not understood. Every kind of art has its own characteristics and way of engaging with and affecting its audience. Modern artists focus heavily on creating discussions about the artwork and creating encounters with their audiences. In my own world I must first relate it to myself. The events of life do not pass me by, but I will pick up and gather little pieces of life to think. I will be full of thoughts about these pieces of life. I will allow them to form unconsciously and then try to give them form through the materials. I experience creating these forms like you might experience a laboratory. Of course, not a scientific laboratory, but as a place to test and experiment, encountering the object that is produced, and experimenting with it as it engages with the audience. As I mentioned earlier, the goal of my work is to shift the audience’s perception. I don’t do work to move the feelings. If I can get someone to see the idea differently, I have hit my goal.

I think the effects of art on society will be seen in the long term, but I can give you a simpler example. When someone has pain, they take medication, and the problem will be solved quickly. Art doesn’t work in this way because art is working with different tools. When society has complex problems, the task is harder. No, art is not able to get even one piece of bread for a poor person, but it can show the essence of the problem. Art has the ability to show the audience the invisible, and the ability to make that audience change the angle of their viewing to reevaluate the subjects.

**MA:** Thank you!

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**About the Artist**

Avan Sdiq is a well-known artist and curator in Iraqi Kurdistan. We invite you to get to know her more through these resources: Kurdistan Art [http://kurdistanart.blogspot.com/2017/09/artwork-by-avan-sdiqulaymaniyah-south.html](http://kurdistanart.blogspot.com/2017/09/artwork-by-avan-sdiqulaymaniyah-south.html) and through the artist’s Facebook page [https://www.facebook.com/avan.sdiq.9](https://www.facebook.com/avan.sdiq.9) and Instagram page [https://www.instagram.com/sdiqavan/](https://www.instagram.com/sdiqavan/).