Painting Without Paint: Four Sisters, Three Dresses

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Abstract: Nuveen Barwari uses the multiple layers of the jilli Kurdi (Kurdish dress) as a metaphor for the multiple layers of a Kurdish diasporic identity. Using Édouard Glissant’s concept of opacity, Barwari engages with the jilli Kurdi as artistic inspiration, describing it as private space for an individual, and for a diasporic community as an apparatus that works in opposition to transparency, protecting the unseen, and resisting a colonial gaze.

Keywords: Kurdish art, Kurdish diaspora, United States, Kurdish dress, jilli Kurdi, Iraqi Kurdistan, intersectionality, conflict

Gulistan
I am a person, I am a place
I exist
I am a flower that lives in the mountains
I am Gulistan
Land of the flowers
I am the sister who washes the dishes
I am the mother who weeps for the children I buried in the mountains
I am the wife who sold her gold for her husband’s bail
I am Gulê, the reason Shexo is in a dark cell
I am the aunt that sews all the dresses
I am invisible labor
Commodification
Objecthood
I can’t spell or you just don’t know how to read
I am the diaspora kid going to the bazaar to pathetically buy, buy, buy, stuff, stuff, stuff, to stuff, stuff, stuff my suitcase
I am the suitcase that says
“There is no suitcase big enough that will help you fill that void”
I am the father-in-law that asked for a handful of soil from the homeland
I am a stateless flag
I am a rag that was made from old clothes to wipe the kitchen counters with
I am the sumac that needs to be ground
I am Gulistan
My mother tongue is a shard of glass, and my mouth is bleeding
I exist

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Borders within borders
I sometimes think about the first person who must have drawn a line with a stick in the dirt and
spoke
“This side is mine”
Imaginary place and people
Our occupiers and their sympathizers say we are not real.
I am real
Just because you can’t find me on the map doesn’t mean I am not real
I exist
I am Gulistan
I am a painting that can go on a floor like a rug,
be draped,
that one can wear,
or live inside.
Painting without paint.

— Nuveen Barwari

In his essay “The Thinking of The Opacity of the World,” francophone writer and literary critic Édouard Glissant says, “Opacity welcomes and collects the mystery and the obvious of all poetics, that is to say all details of the places of the world, without over offending them and without trying to reduce them one at a time.” Looking up the word in the Oxford Dictionary, the reference text states that opacity is “the fact of being difficult to see through,” and another meaning “the fact of being difficult to understand.” Glissant is well known for his development of the notion of opacity beyond its literal meaning, utilizing the term to describe something that works in opposition to transparency and as a resistance to domination through the colonial gaze. When I think of the word opacity, I think of a thick coat of paint and the various layers beneath it that we do not often see. I think of found canvases, textiles, and the discrete paintings underneath. While the canvas is typically thought of as “prep work” for many, I consider it to be the most crucial part of the painting. Most of my work is stretched textile-based paintings that get covered with layers upon layers of paint, fabric, and even concrete. I think about the foundation of the painting. This multi-step process of stretching of canvas, brushing on layers of gesso, drying, sanding, and adding color has its own parallels to the multiple layers of the Kurdish women’s dress. Ḫillî-Kûrdî (Kurdish dress) for women includes pantaloons and a tunic, and over that layer a long dress, often with long sleeves that one might tie around their back.

1 Glissant 2006.
3 Britton 1999.
Finally, over these layers is a short vest or sometimes a long coat. Most often the various layers of sheer over opaque ensemble are quite colorful and decorated in bright patterns, with sequins and gemstones. It has multiple layers as we ourselves have multiple layers. A vest or long jacket is worn over a gown in the traditional Kurdish women’s attire. Under the dress are puffy trousers and an underdress. Some of the layers are visible while some remain opaque. No matter how opaque the fabric of the dress on top is, there will always be a layer underneath it. Though some layers of the *Jilli Kurdi* are sheer, the multiple layers, one on top of the other, oppose easy transparency. Kurdish dresses have taught me everything I know about collage, material culture, and protest. The dress-as-collage and as an expression of protest has taught me everything I know about my motherland, my mother tongue, and my mother. Kurdish women’s dress has taught me everything I know about collage, fashion, and resistance.

“I am a person, I am a place, I exist...”

I have come to realize that my entire existence has been influenced by material culture, language, and acts of protest. This layering, as exampled in the *Jilli Kurdi*, informs my artwork. I have been deconstructing Kurdish women’s dresses that I’ve collected from the Nashville Kurdish community. I was born in Nashville, Tennessee, and then moved to Kurdistan when I was about thirteen years old. These experiences have had a profound effect on both my artistic practice and my overall sense of identity. Employing collage, painting, textiles, and installation, I study the intricacies within conditions of assimilation, displacement, and contradictions within diasporic identities. My expansive studio practice involves gathering and repurposing artifacts from my community—such as worn Kurdish clothes, fabric, and used rugs—to investigate the multiplicity of materials, their inherited history, and their cultural meanings. The patterns and symbols that I abstract from textiles often shift from being decorative to interrogating cultural symbols, redrawing borders, remapping,
and reconnecting to ancestral land. Instead of focusing on what is often lost through translation, I vigorously sift through the different shapes and symbols that are found when one is living between clashing cultures, languages, and materials.

“I am a rag that was made from old clothes to wipe the kitchen counters with...”

The Kurdish dress contains layers of information, invisible labor, and a suppressed history. The dress alone becomes a symbol and motif in my work that represents resistance. Now that I am older, I understand why a lot of women would wear Kurdish clothes to rallies when protesting. The shiny material that I have been using is usually the layer underneath the Kurdish dress that is supposed to shine through. By bringing this layer on top, I can use “shininess” as a level or layer of confrontation which doesn’t allow the viewer to reflect or enter completely. By using shine as a layer, underneath most of my stretched textile-based paintings are maps and patterns that sometimes appear and sometimes do not. This depends on factors such as perspective, placement, and light. Those multiple layers of the Kurdish women’s dress have their own parallels to the multiple and varied roles Kurdish women have played in the Kurdish liberation movement.

What does Kurdish liberation mean? When I think of Kurdish liberation, I often consider how the western media has framed Kurdish women, particularly in the context of violent conflict. My intent is to show a different side, how Kurdish women resist oppression within Kurdish society and to show that Kurdish women have not only been fighters in wars but that they also fought within Kurdish society, trying to break up the dominance of patriarchal rule. For example, there are numerous stories of women selling their gold to bail their husbands out of prison. I am interested in these small-scale forms of resistance, particularly those that happen in the private spaces of women’s lives. Some examples of these would include seemingly small acts of resistance, such
as my mother eating breakfast with a group of men, refusing to get up from the table to wait her turn to dine with the other women as tradition would dictate. I am interested in the rugs, socks, quilts, and dresses that were made by women like my mother when they were growing up at home because they were not allowed to go to school.

“I am invisible labor, Commodification, Objecthood ...”

Mimi Thi Nguyen’s 2016 article about the hoodie movement after the killing of Trayvon Martin, “The Hoodie as Sign, Screen, Expectation, and Force,” provides context regarding materials and their inherited histories. Nguyen is interested in the “dense interactions between human and thing, especially where the hoodie is called upon to tell truths about the body it covers.” Nguyen also discusses how clothes are typically seen as clues to a person’s existence in the world because of their indexical link to the person who wears them. Conversely, since clothes typically act or are alleged to act as a disguise or costume to allow false impressions, they heighten worries about epistemic certainty. Do we understand what we’re seeing? I have worn leggings and tank tops underneath the traditional Kurdish women’s dress because it was too hot to wear this shiny sticky layer. My mother and sisters disapprove because the layer underneath the dress should shine through. For the reasons Nguyen discusses, from a racial colonial perspective, clothing might likewise serve as a proxy for flesh.

This point is extremely important to examine in the context of Kurdish dresses in occupied regions of Kurdistan and the use of fabric in my work. Kurdish clothes indeed act as a clue to a person’s existence in the world, especially since Kurds have a history of being denied their existence. It makes a lot of sense for the occupiers and oppressors to ban such things as clothing, dance, language, music, and literature. The occupied regions of historic Kurdistan in the countries of Iran, Syria, and Turkey have a history of repressing Kurdish clothing, much as they have repressed the use of Kurdish language. For instance, Iranian officials paraded a Kurdish man through the city wearing handcuffs and a Kurdish dress as a form of public punishment.

According to the Global Nonviolent Action Database, on April 15, 2013, police officers in Marivan, Iran, convicted a 25-year-old man named Tawfik Dabash of “disturbing public order,” and then paraded him around the city in handcuffs wearing traditional Kurdish women’s clothing as a form of public criminal punishment. Hundreds of Kurdish women in the city afterward staged a protest against the sentence. Many of the protesters were attacked, beaten, and injured because they were dressed in traditional Kurdish garb for the march. When two Kurdish men from Marivan launched a Facebook group called Kurd Men for Equality, the story quickly circulated on social media. As a show of support, these men began sharing images of themselves dressed in traditional Kurdish women’s garb, and the strategy quickly spread over the internet. Kurdish men all over the world began posting photos of themselves wearing the traditional Kurdish dress as a

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5 Ibid.
6 My father said that during Saddam Hussein’s regime, certain Kurdish clothes were allowed to be worn in public, but the outfits that Kurdish freedom fighters wore in the mountains were banned. If you look closely at Kurdish men’s clothing, they have a couple of specific styles that are only worn in the mountains during combat because they are more practical.
symbol of solidarity, quickly reaching multiple news outlets. According to the database, within one month after a Facebook page was established, the Islamic Republic police chief “issued an apology to all Kurdish women and announced that the officers responsible for carrying out the punishment were fired, affirming that the situation would not happen again. Two other people were scheduled to soon face similar punishment, though it was cancelled at this time.”

The shiny material that I have been using is usually the layer underneath the Kurdish dress. By bringing this layer on top, I can use “shininess” as a level or layer of confrontation to disrupt the colonial gaze. When dealing with shine in textiles, the viewer’s reflection becomes obscure and disjointed. I occasionally stretch and force the fabrics and Kurdish dresses out of their original, flowy state to make them “behave” like traditional paintings. Stapling the fabric to the stretcher bars feels like an aggressive and violent act. Perhaps the tension of the fabric being stretched from different directions is a form of assimilation and a result of diasporic living.

7 Global Nonviolent Action Database 2013.
8 In a discussion between Anne Anlin Cheng and Tom Holert for e-flux Journal titled “Do You See It? Well, It Doesn’t See You!” they talk about how entertainers and actresses Josephine Baker and Anna May Wong both chose a depersonalized condition of sparkling, gleaming, shiny thingness on stage, in front of the camera, rather than being someone prone to being othered and fetishized in the very attempt at assuming an authentic self, in trying to be a person who demands acknowledgment. Their performances, which move between commodification and resisting objecthood, prove to be a way for Black, Brown, Asian, and Indigenous women to avoid the traps of a sexist and racist gaze.
“...stuff, stuff, stuff to stuff, stuff, stuff my suitcase...”

Being part of a diasporic community entails this transcontinental exchange of materials from the homeland (home country) and host land (host country). Being a member of diaspora necessitates this almost constant exchange of materials from the homeland and the host land. This exchange consists of family from the homeland sending anything from photographs with written messages and dates on the back, to honey, spices, and beautiful fabrics, or the family in the host land sending photographs, clothes, medication, and in my case, bags of Cheetos to the homeland. I’ve always been fascinated by the little things, like how much space would be added to the suitcase when a needle is used to poke tiny holes in Cheetos bags when traveling back home. I grew up watching elders in diaspora transplanting fig trees and rose bushes from the homeland into this new soil, making Kurdish dresses out of the fabrics that were available to them in the host land, and most importantly I witnessed the longing, the act of making a home away from home and the grief that comes with it.

“I am the flower that lives in the mountains,
I am Gulistan,
Land of the flowers...”

In 2019, I was smelling a rose and asked my father why it smelled so beautiful while the other flowers had little to no aroma. He said to me that he did not know why the Kurdish flowers that had been transplanted smelled better than the American roses. When my father was visiting his sister in Canada one year, he took a branch off a rose shrub from a Kurdish man’s garden, he told me. When he was in Kurdistan, the man had cut a branch from a rose bush. Using a single branch that has been cut off and planted into a new rose bush, he explained to me how to replant rose bushes. At that very moment I took deeper breaths when I was smelling these roses, because I felt like I was closer to Kurdistan. I felt like I had a piece of Kurdistan in my hands.

“Made for the kitchen,” deconstructed jeans, latex paint, velvet, thread by Nuveen Barwari
This prompted additional inquiries regarding other plants and whether this was typical of diasporic communities. “Many people will bring a root from a Kurdistan fig tree and plant it in the United States. The roots will spread, and you can then continue to take cuttings from that one root and plant more, according to my father. The fig tree must be removed from the root, unlike the rosebush, to be planted again. I got to considering about the various ways I could use the fig tree as a metaphor to describe “transplanted” artists. I have heard people say “the figs here are not as good as the ones back home.” This raises the question of authenticity even within the materials that I use in my studio practice. I have compared myself to a rug that was made in the USA, and referred to that same rug as a “fake rug.” If you take a root of a fig tree from Kurdistan and plant it in the US, is it the same fig tree? Do the figs taste the same? The water is different, the soil is different, the air is different. How do one’s roots grow stronger in a land that is not theirs? I am interested not only in the roots but also in new acts of pollination and cross-pollination within diasporic communities.

“I can’t spell, or you just don’t know how to read…”

I am aware of the “naïve diaspora kid who romanticizes the homeland and has no idea about the realities on the ground” narrative, and have found myself over the years being hyper-alert of my privilege, agency, and consciousness of what it means to be a Kurd in the diaspora, and what my role can be regarding building bridges between the homeland and the host land through my art.

“Where do you come from? They ask me,
The same question becomes a raspberry
And makes my voice bleed.
For the thousandth time I name my flower.
Some of them nod after a second
As if a wind has once run this past their ears.
But most of them suffocate in silence,
Their neck becomes an exclamation mark.
In desperation I take out a map from my pocket,
A map crumbled like politics,
Torn and dirty like the ethics of nation states.
I put my finger on my divided sun.”

— Sherko Bekas

My mother says that depending on the width of the fabric, all you need is two meters to make a Kurdish dress. If you have that two meters, one can make a dress out of any fabric. I noticed that my family had an excessive number of old rugs, fabrics, and Kurdish dresses stored away in boxes and suitcases, and I thought others in the community might too. I put out a call on various social media platforms for traditional Kurdish dresses and rugs and have been collecting

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9 Bekas 2018: 73.
10 Nashville, Tennessee has the largest Kurdish immigrant population in the United States.
and repurposing them ever since. I received bags of fabric, old Kurdish dresses, and rugs from the community in Nashville. It was recognizable which fabric was from Kurdistan and which fabric was from Joann’s or Walmart. They are of equal importance. Making a home away from home results in a lot of settling for what is around you and what is available. Adapting, appropriating, (re)signifying, and improvising. This is an important part of my life and practice.

As I received these materials, I studied the way they were made. A lot of the dresses displayed mud stains on the bottom from being worn at gatherings such as picnics in Nashville. Some even had makeup stains on the portals where the heads would typically go through. I found a very special connection to the materials, not only from the people who were donating their old dresses, but with the people who made them whom I had never met. Artist Jean Shin described her relationship to collecting materials from a larger community in the book “The Artist as Culture Producer,” by Sharon Louden.11 “Inviting participation from a community through a request for materials did a few key things for my work,” Shin explained. “It activated a social interaction with people unknown to me (and often unfamiliar with art), while creating an audience invested in the exhibition. It also meant that the museum or other commissioning venue would facilitate material acquisition and become an active part of my art making. This collaboration allows individuals to share personal stories behind the objects that they donate generating a richer narrative around the work.”12 Collecting materials from the community not only gave my work a collaborative element, but it also enabled me to recycle and create fresh tales about diaspora and imagination within the Kurdish community.13 I am interested in activating the kind of imaginative capacity that Kurdish poets have historically fostered via their art.
I am interested in the tension and sometimes contradiction that is made when you place distinct objects, patterns, materials, and even colors together. I connect these amalgamations with displacement and diaspora. I have placed rugs in the middle of busy parking lots; I have seen the type of contrast created when you place two objects such as a rug and a skateboard together; I have collaged with rugs and Cheeto bags.

“My mother tongue is a shard of glass, and my mouth is bleeding…”

Gloria Anzaldúa, in a piece titled “How to Tame a Wild Tongue,” says, “So, if you want to really hurt me, talk badly about my language. Ethnic identity is twin skin to linguistic identity—I am my language. Until I can take pride in my language, I cannot take pride in myself.” I used to believe that my anxiety of language was simply a symptom of being a part of the “diaspora,” but the problem goes well beyond being a case of “she forgot her mother tongue because she was born in the U.S.” It should say something more along the lines of, “Iran, Iraq, Turkey, and Syria have historically prohibited the use of the Kurdish language.” Unfortunately English, Farsi, Turkish, and Arabic are often used by Kurds as a neutral language for communication. I’m reminded of a quote by Adrienne Rich that goes, “This is the oppressor’s language, yet I need it to talk to you.” I never felt like I truly committed to learning either language when I was growing up, neither Kurdish nor English, though some may reassure me that my Kurdish is good “for someone who was born in America.” So what happens when neither language allows you to properly express yourself? You create your own. I have found my language through the materials that I have been collecting, from the rugs’ geometric shapes to the knitted patterns my grandmother made to the flower motifs and metaphors employed by poets and musicians. On the podcast A Brush With..., I listened to the artist Glenn Ligon say, “Language is a material you can play around with—twist, distort, and repeat.” This is a quote that I frequently return to—language as material, a material that you can cut and sew back together to create something new.

I have always been mesmerized with the many ways Kurdish poets and musicians have employed language as a tool for resistance. The term Gulistan is a common motif in a lot of Kurdish songs and poetry. The flower of a rose is known as a “gul.” All flowers are referred to as “gul” in conversations, but the correct word in Kurdish is “kulik.” There are complexities in using floral themes and metaphors to both reveal and conceal one’s ethnic identity. For example, many poets, singers, and songwriters would often use the words “Gulistan” or “Gule” in their poems and songs instead of the word “Kurdistan.” In English slang, “-Stan” can refer to a person who is a diehard fan. In Kurdish, “stan” means land or the place of. Gulistan literally translates to “flower land” if translated verbatim to English, despite its original meaning of “land of the flowers.” Another beautiful way to translate it is “flowers of the land.” In Kurdish, “Gulistan” is also a typical name for females. These artists would use the term “Gulistan” instead of “Kurdistan” in their craft in fear of the oppressive governments occupying their regions. My curiosity with this word is connected to its multiplicities of use. The word Gulistan carries the potential of referencing a person, a place, or even a fragment of imagination which I can apply to my expansive practice.

14 Anzaldúa 2022: 34–44.
Most of my work, which combines painting, sewing, and storytelling, is situated in the nexus between reality and fiction. I am interested in the multiplicity of materials, their inherited history, cultural meanings, our perceptions, and associations we have of them to certain places or people. Like flowers, I’m interested not only in the roots but also in new acts of pollination and cross-pollination.

Most of my stretched textile-based paintings contain maps, symbols, and patterns that are occasionally revealed under thin layers of paint, concrete, and translucent layers of textiles. Maps as patterns, patterns as language, language as material. Perhaps this is where the imagination comes into the work. I am drawing maps that could help to guide us through all this grief and generational trauma, or maybe these are maps that will assist in locating the space between a love song and a protest song. Maybe these maps that I have been drawing will lead us to this place, where colors will temporarily serve as our neutral language. Texture transforms into a landscape. Paint begins to serve as a protective layer, both revealing and concealing.

“*I am Gulistan...*”

My interest is in small-scale forms of resistance enacted by women within everyday society. I am also interested in acts of protest that occur in contemporary art practices and spaces that disrupt the colonial gaze, resisting fetishization and objectification. As a former art student and now an instructor of art, I am well aware of the gaps in knowledge about Kurdish contemporary art that exist within the walls of Western institutions and art history textbooks. While my peers have years and years of Western art history and exhibitions that they are represented in to rely on, I have been studying the intricacies within conditions of assimilation, displacement, and contradictions within diasporic identities. Rather than inserting myself and my work into a history that has been dominated by white European men, I have found it more appropriate to source my materials right from home—collecting stories from the older generation of feminists in my family, treating bazaars like museums and found objects like artifacts.

“*Borders within borders,*

*I sometimes think of the first person who must have drawn a line with a stick in the dirt and spoke, ‘This side is mine’...*

The idea that higher education is the sole place to get scholarship and knowledge is ludicrous, classist, and a sad reality for many. Acts of protest happen in different shapes and forms across several regions and cultures. Some of these examples were exquisitely discussed in the first chapter of Bell Hooks’ “Feminist Theory: From Margin to Center.”16 Hooks states that white feminists often assume as if Black women were unaware of sexist oppression until they expressed their feminist ideas. They think they are delivering “the” insight and “the” blueprint for liberation. They don’t realize, or can’t imagine, that Black women, like other groups of women who live in oppressive situations daily, often develop an awareness of patriarchal politics because of their lived experience, just as they develop resistance strategies, even if they don’t resist on a sustained or

organized basis. Hooks writes: “The implication being that people who are truly oppressed know it even though they may not be engaged in organized resistance or are unable to articulate in written form the nature of their oppression.”

I have been deconstructing Kurdish dresses that I’ve collected from the Nashville Kurdish community and utilizing as the focal point in my latest series the portals that the heads typically travel through. I am having a difficult time coming up with a name for this series because they resemble both portraits of heads, frames, and even caves. I have been seeing these stunning images of Kurdistan landscapes taken from caves circulating on social media that remind me of these textile-based paintings that I have been making. Sceneries that are depicted in these photographs are framed by the contours of the caverns. While these works could be portraits of heads, I think about them in the context of caves, landscapes, and even Western paintings. I believe caves like mountains can offer protection, friendship, and shelter—a bulwark for support, protection, and defense. What are these landscapes of? Who lives there? Where is this imagined space and who are the people who occupy it? Is it Gulistan?

Caves can appear mysterious, beautiful, and perhaps terrifying when viewing them from a distance. Why do they look terrifying? Is it because someone may be returning our gaze? Looking at caves from the outside is usually not inviting. Is it because this perspective withholds what is inside and is not entirely knowable and visible in one glance? How does the wall become this imaginative space? Is it the wall inside of a home or a bazaar? Whose body is it and where did they go? While I am dealing with deconstructing the word Gulistan, I am also dealing with deconstructing the image of Gulistan—the image of the flower, flower as patterns, patterns as maps, and maps as an attempt at locating diaspora—the space between a love song and a protest song.

About The Artist

Nuveen Barwari was born in Nashville, Tennessee and spent her adolescent years living and attending school in Duhok, Kurdistan. Barwari received a Bachelor of Science in Studio Art from Tennessee State University in 2019 and a Master’s in Fine Arts from the University of Tennessee, Knoxville in 2022. Barwari’s expansive practice includes installations; writing; performances; and collecting and repurposing artifacts from her community such as photos, rugs, fabrics, and Kurdish dresses. Barwari has worked with and completed projects with the Frist Art Museum, Oasis Center’s Art and Activism Series, Coop Gallery, and McGruder Social Practice Artist Residency. Barwari’s work has been featured in national and international publications including Nashville Scene, Native Magazine, New American Painting, Yahoo Nachrichten Deutschland, Rudaw, Gazete Duvar, Botan Times, and Caravel Magazine. She has exhibited in numerous locations such as Kurdistan’s first Fashion Week (2018) in the Erbil, Kurdistan region of Iraq; the University of Michigan (2019); Sugar Gallery (2019) in Fayetteville, Arkansas; Zg Gallery (2020) in Chicago; 21c Museum Hotel (2021) in

17 Ibid.
Nashville, Tennessee; NGBK Gallery in Berlin (2021); and Duhok Gallery (2021) in Duhok, Kurdistan. Barwari is represented by The Red Arrow Gallery in Nashville, Tennessee and is currently based in Albany, New York.

References


