

Jala Wahid

by Sarah Jilani



Exposing imperialism's coverups



An eternal flame burns in a field near the city of Kirkuk, an area disputed by Federal Iraq and the Kurdistan Region. Known as Baba Gurgur, or the ‘Fiery Father’, in Kurdish, the field yielded its black gold to the Anglo-Persian Oil Company at 3am on 15 October 1927, when its drilling unleashed a 42m fountain of oil into the air. Bringing this historic moment to life acoustically in Jala Wahid’s new exhibition *Conflagration*, at the Baltic in Gateshead, is a series of spoken and sung exchanges. “I do not care under what system we keep it, whether it is by perpetual lease or whatever it may be, but I am quite clear that it is all-important for us that this oil should be available,” proclaims Wahid’s disembodied voice, quoting a self-assured letter written by a British colonial officer of the time. “Mercurial land/Trembling beyond reach/Doesn’t care what you mean/When you use words like sovereignty,” answers another voice in an elongated, funereal melody: it seems, almost, like the Fiery Father’s chastisement of the British.

A collaboration between British-Kurdish artist Wahid, singer/composer Amal Saeed Kurda and sound producer Owen Pratt, this multilayered soundscape, *Naphtha Maqam* (2022), is a haunting work that weaves together the history of European and American oil imperialism in the Middle East, the destructive effects of extractive practices on the natural world and Kurdish myth to create an affectively charged series of *maqams*, or melodies. The ‘naphtha’ of its title can mean any of various volatile, highly flammable liquid hydrocarbon mixtures, but is the name the oil tapped at Kirkuk was given in British colonial records. The officialese of Wahid’s voiceover, which underscores the arrogant ignorance of an imperialism that thinks it can master nature without consequences, clashes pointedly with the poetic lyrics that she has written for Kurda’s expressive voice.

Wahid tells me that *Naphtha Maqam* began with a question that looks at the world from an entirely different perspective and invites us to stretch beyond the limits of our human-centric imagination: “What might sound sound like if you were the oil below the ground?” In a singing answer to Wahid’s recitations of colonial correspondence, Kurda ventriloquises two natural phenomena – the oil itself, and the *Salvia spinosa*, one of the few flowers that grow on shale rocks between oil wells in Kirkuk. The soundscape is, as Wahid puts it, “an opera” through which the artist says she seeks to draw attention to “the political, social and elemental implications of oil in a future we don’t yet know”. While oil is presented here as a sentient being, liquid states run throughout Wahid’s sculpture, video, sound and text creations as a slippery metaphor, at once political, geological and spatiotemporal. *Rock Fortress* (2020), for example, is an installation that combines wall-mounted sculptures of iconographic lions with song (another collaboration with Pratt) and light, and transports Wahid’s

audiences to the ancient city of Heskîf (in Turkish: Hasankeyf), now fully submerged by the Tigris river – an outcome of Turkey’s extensive dam and irrigation projects. Elsewhere, as in the videowork *Fiery Father* (2019), Wahid overlays images of oil and flames with verses of her poetry, gesturing both to the symbolic importance of fire for *Newroz* (the Kurdish New Year), and to the most coveted resource in Kurdish lands. Time and again, her pieces bring natural elements – earth, flora, sky, sun, water – to the fore, reminding Wahid’s audience that “the repercussions outlive all of us” when it comes to oil.

The world’s militaries do not have to declare their environmental impact to the UN (when the US negotiated this exemption in 1997, John Kerry hailed the achievement as “a terrific job”). Yet research shows that military pollution and its consequence, conflict pollution, is a more substantial climate menace than the emissions of entire countries in the Global South. Kirkuk’s oilfields have been a frequent target of militant attacks, with the latest in April 2021 attributed to

ISIS. A second work in the Baltic show, *Sick Pink Sun* (2022), speaks directly to these catastrophes. Wahid memorialises a haunting image from the aftermath of one such attack – in which the resulting toxic cloud (visible from space) renders the sun a dull crimson – with an uncanny, rust-pink spotlight. The third work, *Baba Gurgur* (2022), is an approximately two-metre-high sculpture of the *Salvia spinosa* flower, painted in deep purples, greens and coppers that give it an oil-slick iridescence. Through these, Wahid says that she is “trying to suggest an altered landscape, but also thinking cosmically about what all this means. The pervasive consequences of these events need to be discussed both through the elemental and affective, and through the politics.”

Wahid attends to these politics through a sustained, critical engagement with the past in her practice: “I see history as a way of understanding the now,” she says, “but also the future, which becomes a way of thinking about identity and politics in a fictive realm”. Especially valuable is how the artist’s visual and sonic reinterpretation of events found in history books and archival material dethrones the written word. In doing so, she draws our attention to how those same events may have been experienced by the human and nonhuman beings that did not make the colonial record, but lived with the consequences. As at home poring through archives as she is working with paint, sound, light and performance, Wahid based her previous show *Aftermath* at Niru Ratnam earlier this year on her findings from the Kurdish Cultural Centre and the National Archives in London. Those works included sculptures of otherworldly female figures like *Inflammatory, Revolutionary Fever* (2021), which draws on Kurdish women’s protest paraphernalia preserved at the Cultural Centre, and text-based works like



preceding pages *Fiery Father* (still), 2019, video, 7 min. Courtesy the artist and Sophie Tappeiner, Vienna

above *Rock Fortress* (detail), 2020, mixed-media installation, dimensions variable. Courtesy the artist, Contemporary Art Space, Batumi, and E. A. Shared Space, Tbilisi



Doesn't Feel Like Conquering, Feels Like Reunion, 2021,
resin, fibreglass, 90 × 54 × 6 cm.
Courtesy the artist and Sophie Tappeiner, Vienna



Jala Wahid, 2021 (installation view, Sophie Tappeiner presentation at Frieze London, 2021). Photo: Tim Bowditch. Courtesy the artist and Sophie Tappeiner, Vienna

The Profitless Gift (2021), where Wahid recontextualises the British political narrative around the Middle East during the 1920s as it exists in the National Archives. Comprising memos, telegrams and letters exchanged between British government officials, oil engineers and diplomats about Kurdish, American, French and Ottoman actors in the then-British colony (or ‘mandate’) of Iraq, *The Profitless Gift* maps the covert political manoeuvres that eventually secured nearly half of Iraq’s oil reserves for Britain under the 1928 Red Line Agreement. But it also shows how archives construct myths about those deemed ‘other’; in the letters, the British scoff at the ‘comic opera’ of Kurds participating in an electoral process. Colonial power can have a ‘casual, intimate’ kind of violence, Wahid reflects, in that it can “utter something about an entire people and it becomes fact, echoing in its effects through time”. Describing the self-image of the colonial settler in *Wretched of the Earth* (1961), Frantz Fanon once recounted perfectly the epistemic violence that Wahid points to here: ‘He [the settler] is the absolute beginning: “This land was created by us”; he is the unceasing cause: “If we leave, all is lost”; ‘All the while the native, bent double, more dead than alive, exists interminably in an unchanging dream.’

Given not only the formative presence of the British Empire in the Middle East but also the migration of persecuted Kurds to the UK during the 1980s and 90s (among them Wahid’s parents), when Wahid asserts that “British history is my history”, the statement is loaded. “Kurdish issues are spoken about within the geopolitical boundaries of the lands they are in – but I’m wary of that,” she says. “When you localise issues, it makes it easier for people not to feel implicated by them.” Her art’s focus on the intersections of the elemental and geopolitical makes difficult the all-too-easy refuge that critics can sometimes take in using ‘identity’ as a catchall term whenever they discuss the output of a non-Western artist. Kurdish cultural

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life, political sovereignty and diasporic experiences are certainly all important to Wahid, but not just for their usefulness in examining what may constitute Kurdish identity today. Rather, the artist brings the viewer back to the material reality that informs, among other things, the making and unmaking of cultural identity; there are lands in which people are rooted, and the struggle over ownership of precious materials in these lands too often determines which people will, or will not be, positioned as citizen, refugee or collateral damage.

In the case of the Kurds, oil remains “a futile symbol of nationalism”, laments Wahid: equal parts a promise of liberation, wrapped up in the long-awaited Kurdish dream of political and economic autonomy, and a vulnerability that others have exploited for a century. To attempt to make sense of it, Wahid considers not only the resource theft committed by Western states, “but also the oppressions of the occupying powers in the region [Turkey, Syria, Iraq, Iran], and intra-Kurdish issues”. And so while petrocolonialism is one material facet to Kurdish identity, Wahid’s work speaks to how the imbalance of industrial power and wealth it has generated has shaped all of our lives – even when located far from geographies of extraction. Whether we are more its beneficiary or its victim depends on where we find ourselves – economically, racially – on the map of climate imperialism. For the artist, “it’s not even knowing what is buried, not knowing what I don’t know” – or the “terrific job”, in Kerry’s words, of imperialism’s coverup – that continues to drive her creative excavations. **ara**

Conflagration is on view at Baltic, Gateshead, through 30 April

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The Profitless Gift, 2021 (installation view, *Testament*, Goldsmiths Centre for Contemporary Art, London). Photo: Rob Harris. Courtesy Goldsmiths CCA, London