

Profile

Jala Wahid

The London-based artist of Kurdish descent addresses the impact of the discovery of oil in the Kurdish region, as both blessing and curse, the power of myth and song in preserving memory, and the need to tackle the legacies of the past.

Jala Wahid's monumental exhibition 'Conflagration' at Baltic in Gateshead is her first institutional show in the UK. In her work, Wahid addresses the fraught history between the UK and Kurdistan, centring on how the sale and export of oil has shaped Kurdish national identity and global politics. In a dimly lit room painted dark red, a gigantic sculpture, *Baba Gurgur*, 2022, looms over viewers at the centre of the space. It resembles a *Salvia Spinosa* flower, a specimen endemic from North Africa to north-west Afghanistan. Behind the flower glows a hot-pink oversized light, akin to a sun viewed through a polluted sky and, as you track around the installation, the silky voice of Kurdish singer Amal Saeed Kurda ululates across the space.

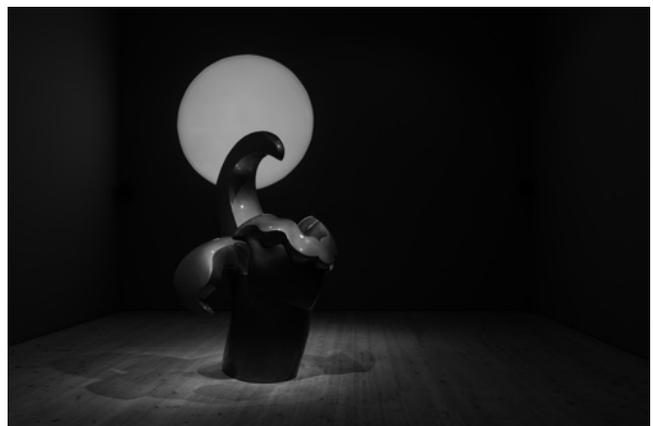
For Wahid, archives are a malleable material that might not only uncover some poetic potential hitherto unknown, but also challenge the dominant narratives that obscure it. For 'Conflagration', the BP Archive in Warwick became a crucial site of inquiry, and here she encountered a telegram dated '14 October 1927 at 3am' from British army officers who were occupying Mesopotamia at the time. The missive announced that they had successfully struck *Baba Gurgur*, a recently discovered oil field in Kirkuk. It is also the city in which Wahid's father lived until he migrated with her mother to the UK in the mid 1980s; evocatively, the name of the oil well translates as 'father of fire'. For Kurds, the discovery of oil in the region has turned the substance into a symbol of self-determination and industrial progress, even if it is now freighted with ecological ruin and toxicity. In Wahid's installation, the glow of *Sick Pink Sun (03:00 14.10.1927-)*, 2022, which takes its title from the date of the striking of *Baba Gurgur* by Britain, implies the continuing impact of fossil fuel extraction. For Wahid, this is a cosmic repercussion that produces a sickness, arguing that oil 'makes a man rich, but it is liquid, apt to run away'.

The *Salvia Spinosa* flower is the only plant species that can grow on the burning heat of the shale rocks that line the oil field. For Wahid it embodies the abundance of oil below the ground and that gushed from derricks, the towering metal frames now an icon of oil exploration in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. In nature, the flower is a modest plant with subtle white petals, almost indiscernible from the green stem and leaves. Wahid, though, has supersized it, adding a slick resin coat of olive green and navy blue, allowing its surfaces to shimmer and change colour at every curve, as if oil on water.

Wahid's lyricism and love of music is evident across her practice, often incorporated as a narrative device to intensify feelings when encountering her work. The accompanying soundwork, *Naphtha Maqam*, 2022, produced with collaborator Owen Pratt, comprises several *maqams* - a melodic improvised structure found in Middle Eastern music. This fervent 55-minute piece recalls an epic poem: it tells the story of *Baba Gurgur* over 12 sections, each taking a different point of view, from the imagined inanimate worlds of oil, the sun and



'Aftermath', 2022, installation view, Niru Ratnam Gallery, London



Baba Gurgur, 2022, installation view, Baltic, Gateshead



Cry me a Waterfall, 2021, video, installation view, Two Queens, Leicester

the landscape, to the material realities of British colonising voices and Wahid's father, who was a Kurdish freedom fighter. It also draws on Wahid's experiences of visiting Baba Gurgur and Kirkuk after the Iraq War, when her father was no longer exiled from the country. As Wahid says in an exhibition text by Thea Smith (another repeated collaborator) that 'to be Kurdish is to be made of oil and mountains: singing and dancing to the thrum of a rock or bullet'.

While preparing for her previous solo exhibition, 'Aftermath' at Niru Ratnam Gallery in London this year, Wahid began visiting the National Archives to research the peace treaty made by the UK, France and others regarding the future territories of Kurdistan and the Middle East during the fall of the Ottoman Empire. However, initial promises of independence were broken, and the 1923 Treaty of Lausanne left many, such as Armenians after the 1915 genocide, stranded. The majority of writing Wahid sought out at the archives was private correspondence between individuals, and she came across letters that were formal but also casually racist. Fragments of these official documents were extracted and reimagined as a script, *The Profitless Gift*, which uncovers how foreign policy has been instrumentalised to exercise colonial power. The work has two parts, the first, the play relating to the splitting up of the Middle East, was placed on plinths under Perspex sheets that were cut out with the word 'secret', hinting at the political drama that was playing out in the archives. In the second element, minutes from a UK parliamentary debate from the late 1980s about the interventions made in the Middle East are quoted. Here we read the now former Labour MP Jeremy Corbyn highlighting how struggles faced in the region were a direct consequence of the decisions the British government had made in the 1920s.

The Kurdish Cultural Centre, which opened in London in 1985, extends a rich cultural identity and history, spanning poetry readings, concerts and public celebrations. This research informed Wahid's vibrant resin and fibreglass wall- and floor-based sculptures. Positioned throughout the space, they feature hands adorned with acrylic nails, faces with perfectly painted lips and tendrils of falling hair - the works exude confrontational, politicised femininity. 'Aftermath' was the result of Wahid trying to understand the place of politics and history in the archive, and how it becomes a site for disentangling legacies of the past.

Music and song are significant components of her practice: in 2021 she exhibited *Cry Me a Waterfall* at Two Queens in Leicester. Akin to a long-form music video, it once again features Saeed Kurda, who now laments a long-distance relationship between a person from the Kurdish diaspora and the disputed region of Kurdistan. Similarly affecting sounds were part of Wahid's exhibition 'Rock Fortress' at CAS Batumi in Georgia, which was concerned about the deliberate destruction of ancient Kurdish artefacts as a direct result of Turkey's Southeastern Anatolia Project in 1989, an intervention which led to the entire town being submerged under water, leading in turn to the forced displacement of the Kurds. The accompanying multichannel audio installation was produced with previous collaborator Owen Pratt and created an impactful soundscape of layered drum textures and intensifying beats. The melancholically suffused score centred Julia Katarina's echoing voice, who repeated: 'What about us?'

'Newroz', which Wahid named her 2018 show at Sophie Tappeiner's gallery in Vienna, is the festival that celebrates Kurdish New Year and marks the March equinox. It also celebrates Kurdish freedom from tyrannical governments; in past festivals the Turkish government in 1992 and Syrian security forces in 2008 shot dead celebrating Kurds. In 'Newroz' Wahid explored the ways in which myth and reality are blurred in Kurdish culture. Working with jesmonite, cloth and mica, Wahid arranged over the space seven floor-based sculptures featuring titles such as *Halo of Lashings*, *Billowing Thighs of Spirits* and *Ablaze and Sashaying*. These depicted women's legs draped in shimmering tight-fitting fabrics, revealing the sway of their bodies captured mid-dance, while attached to the walls were two sculptures of the Kurdish burning sun, an icon of the Kurdistan flag which was banned in Turkish occupied Kurdistan, titled *Rock Beneath Silk Threatening Our Shimmering Flag* and *Vernal Pyre*. Here, these increasingly politicised festivities are caught in flight, sweating under a perilous heat.

Akh Milk Bile Threat, one of Wahid's works from her 2017 show at Seventeen Gallery, maintains an exploration of Kurdish cultural identity and further foregrounds her interest in the body. Here, horror and decay is expressed through perishable material and, compared with later works, feels directly visceral and messily corporeal. *Beaten Tender*, 2017, resembles the hacked innards of an animal on a butcher's counter where a glistening sheen of oil, sugar and gelatine coats the flesh. Text smeared in blood is written on the wall. Hanging from industrial steel chains are sculptures that comprise jesmonite, glass, wax, grapefruit and oozing honey. *Final Blade*, 2017, a black jesmonite horn, juts out from the wall. Two hollowed out legs of aluminium and fat linger nearby, as though recently butchered. The effect is bracing in its brutality, hinting at unresolved traumas that linger in the flesh.

Through these complex layers of theatricality, Wahid interrogates and usurps archives and the bodies found therein as places of power and containers of cultural identities. Through the shared lineages of Kurdish and British histories, Wahid leaves uncovered the complexities of colonialism, identity and the diaspora in her wake.

Alex Hull is a writer and curator based in London.



Inflammatory, Revolutionary Fever, 2021