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WORKS BY RUSHDI ANWAR: BLAKE PALMER

'THE ONLY THING YOU CAN HOLD TO IS MEMORY': THE POLITICS OF REMEMBRANCE AND ERASURE IN WORKS BY RUSHDI ANWAR

Blake Palmer

Kurdish artist Rushdi Anwar uses sculpture and multimedia installation to explore the power, problems and politics of memory in the context of colonialism, imperialism and the refugee experience.¹ In his work, he combines tangible and ephemeral elements to develop a material language that allows him to speak with sensitivity to the weighty particulars of his personal lived experience, demonstrating how it has been dimmed or distorted through a lens governed by the political expediency of dominant State powers, and finally subverting the original intent of these distortions in order to create space for his story to be brought into relation to a wider network of human experiences and questions.

This analysis will focus on two projects from Anwar's body of work, *Past in the Present* (2012–13), which is currently part of a touring exhibition with the Australian War Memorial,² and *A Few Lines of History* (2011), to examine how the artist addresses the role of memory in relation to personal or collective trauma, and the ways these memories are manipulated to serve the needs of hegemonic power in a geopolitical framework.

The artworks both draw on the 1988 chemical attack against Halabja, Anwar's childhood home city, in which some 15,000 civilians, including friends and members of Anwar's family, were killed or injured as part of the Iraqi Hussein regime's Anfal campaign of Kurdish genocide. Despite the horrific and criminal nature of this attack, Saddam Hussein was considered, at the time, to be a key regional ally for many world powers, and so very little was said or done to address crimes committed by his regime against the Kurdish people. The United States went as far to deny Iraqi involvement, initially indicating that Iran was to blame. The 1988 Halabja massacre wasn't deemed to

merit serious international attention until 1991, when it was reintroduced into mainstream cultural memory via political rhetoric and news coverage as part of the justification for western military intervention in retaliation against Iraq's invasion of Kuwait.

A multimedia photography installation, *Past in the Present* explores the mechanisms by which cultural memory or recognition of traumatic events is either suppressed or foregrounded in accordance with the needs of power. The work uses a series of images taken from non-copyrighted photojournalist images in the public domain, including the photographs of chemical clouds and dead victims that Anwar saw being sold in marketplaces after the 1991 uprising in Kurdistan and Iraq, when information about the Anfal genocide was no longer being actively suppressed. For Kurdish people, these images served as a public archive and validation of their own collective memory.

The focal point of the piece is a large image of a boy running, caught mid-stride, in front of a hazy city background. The details are made unclear by distorting effects that indicate that it has been discarded and neglected. Patches of the image are faded, as if left next to a window and forgotten for several months. Irregular crease marks give the impression of looking at a photograph that was crumpled up and thrown away, only to be retrieved later when it was deemed useful. The effect of this distortion is that the viewer does not immediately apprehend the human terror and tragedy that is being documented in the image. What at first glance could have been a distant tree soon reveals itself to be the mushroom-cloud explosion of a chemical weapon, and the youth's running stride takes on a fearful urgency.

By taking this captured moment of trauma and imbuing the image with the material markers of

Rushdi Anwar, *Past in the Present*, 2012–13, detail; photographic prints treated with smoke, smoke on sandpaper and mixed media, 118 x 88cm (large print), 20 x 30cm (small panels), installation dimensions variable; Australian War Memorial, Canberra; courtesy the artist



By presenting his story through the lens of erasure, incorporating the narrative gaps and obscured identities that are the effect of genocide and imperialism, Anwar also creates space for larger questions to emerge from his work that reach beyond the autobiographical, or even the exclusively Kurdish.

having been forgotten and discarded in a way that ultimately confounds the viewer's ability to perceive the tragedy they are witnessing, Anwar symbolically re-enacts the mechanisms by which the Halabja massacre, and other similar acts of mass violence, are suppressed, forgotten and potentially brought back into memory to serve the needs of State power, and draws attention to the ultimate human cost paid by those whose lives and deaths are deemed unworthy of remembrance.

Presented alongside the larger piece are five two-panel multimedia works. The right panel of each piece shows an image from the chemical bombing of Halabja, while the left panel is an equal-sized rectangle of black sandpaper. These works share the obfuscated quality of the first piece, but achieved through different material processes that speak to even more sinister and violent forms of suppression.

Each of the smaller pieces in *Past in the Present* has been exposed to smoke, scarring the image with trails of black residue. By using an ephemeral substance to leave lasting tangible marks, Anwar draws clear parallels to the enduring damage done to Halabja by chemical weapons. Many of the horrific effects of the chemical attack on the city were immediate: some victims dropped dead where they stood; others began retching up green liquid or laughed hysterically and uncontrollably until they died. But the damage from these attacks has extended well beyond these initial tragic and disturbing moments. In the years following, rates of cancer and birth defects increased, even until today. These and other less visible psychic, cultural and economic traumas still leave their mark on the Kurdish people, as Anwar has noted:

The gas is not there, but it went into every corner of that society. The pain of the individuals, the destruction of the place, and the victims. It affects everyone, and to clean it up, it takes time.³

The Anfal campaign of Kurdish genocide did not begin or end with the chemical attack in Halabja. It has to be understood as part of a wider operation to achieve the erasure of a people, their history and any other evidence that might serve as inconvenient reminders that victims, and by extension a crime, ever existed. In its attempt to accomplish this total obliteration, it is thought the Hussein regime ended up to 186,000 Kurdish lives, burying many of the dead in mass graves, and razed 4500 towns, including Halabja.

Once again using a language of materials, Anwar evokes this impetus towards violent erasure by coupling each of his small images with the panels of black sandpaper. The threat implied by this pairing is actually carried out in one piece. The panels have been folded and rubbed together, leaving the image, and any fragments of memory it carried, scarred beyond recognition. By doing this, the artist symbolically enacts the erasing intent of the Anfal campaign by utilising the sandpaper's destructive capacity, metaphorically and literally wiping out a carrier of cultural memory.

The people, histories and objects in these images contain aspects of the cultural record that, once destroyed, cannot be recovered. In this way, Anfal reinscribed the terrible truth that has accompanied and informed all attempts at ethnic cleansing – that violence performed against individual bodies, even if seen through to its horrific end, is insufficient to erase a people: the mutilation of the individual body must be transposed onto the collective body of memory and culture that is the object of its violence. As Anwar said, recalling a visit to the rebuilt city of Halabja:

You look for places from your childhood, but they're gone. These memories are gone forever, just like the history, just like the victims, the city is gone.⁴

In his project *A Few Lines of History*, Anwar explores the challenges that survivors of cultural trauma face

Rushdi Anwar, *A Few Lines of History*, 2011, photographic prints treated with smoke mounted on wooden boards on painted wall, 15 x 10cm (each panel), installation dimensions variable; courtesy the artist



Opposite:

Rushdi Anwar, *A Few Lines of History*, 2011, detail; photographic prints treated with smoke mounted on wooden boards on painted wall, 15 x 10cm (each panel), installation dimensions variable; courtesy the artist

Rushdi Anwar, *Past in the Present*, 2012–13, detail; photographic prints treated with smoke, smoke on sandpaper and mixed media, 118 x 88cm (large print), 20 x 30cm (small panels), installation dimensions variable; Australian War Memorial, Canberra; courtesy the artist



when attempting to recall a collective narrative of their struggles from this fragmented damaged body of memory. The piece is comprised of six rows of small photographs, the size of the intimate pictures one might find in a family photo album, set against a black wall. Images are placed on wooden boards that resemble lines on a page of notebook paper, and arranged in right-alignment in grouped sequences of two to nine images so that they mimic the format of written text. By doing this, Anwar invites the viewer to step forward and attempt to 'read' a narrative from the images he has presented.

Anwar communicates through the materials by exposing the images to smoke as he did in *Past in the Present*. He utilises a substance that mimics the suppressive obscuring quality of the violence committed in the Halabja massacre, this time to symbolically re-enact the experience of the historical and cultural erasure faced by the Kurdish people, even after the attack had ended and the smoke had cleared.

The effect of this obfuscation on the work is that, when the viewer attempts to interpret the history presented in the images, they encounter gaps in the narrative, like letters blotted out of a text. Some images are hazy and unclear, while others are almost entirely blackened by soot, leaving the viewer, or reader, to piece together a story from whatever information they can gather through the smog. From the cloudy images of police, running people and animals, and prone lifeless human forms, it becomes clear that something terrible is unfolding, though any

details that might connect the events to Halabja or the Kurdish people are lost in the smoke.

As the 'blotted words' in Anwar's affecting visual metaphor reveal themselves to be homes, streets and people – all carriers of cultural and personal memory, now lost and irrecoverable – it is possible to imagine the impact these gaps would have on a culture seeking to form a narrative that reaffirms its identity in the wake of a genocidal campaign against its very existence. By presenting his story through the lens of erasure, incorporating the narrative gaps and obscured identities that are the effect of genocide and imperialism, Anwar also creates space for larger questions to emerge from his work that reach beyond the autobiographical, or even the exclusively Kurdish.

In the years since the massacre, various State powers have sought to appropriate and exploit the experience of the Kurdish people at Halabja – to reframe it under an ideological lens that either condemns, justifies, deflects from, or ignores the genocidal violence used against the Kurds. Anwar interrupts this pattern and subverts the process whereby the events are continually abstracted and propagandised in order to shift blame and responsibility. Instead, he uses his smoke's enshrouding power to obscure the particulars of time, place and identity that trigger the layers of ideology and State politics that have been heaped on this event over the years, shifting us away from questions that ask 'Who did this and who is to blame?' towards the more broadly human questions: Why do we do this? Why does it keep happening?



Anwar is also eager to keep himself from becoming the implied subject of his work, despite his intimate ties to the events he depicts in these projects:

The personal experience, all these difficult issues, all this pain, gives me a strong foundation to understand the pain of others, and to make an artwork that is not just about me ... It's about how we understand global issues, how we understand the pain of others, and how we respond to it.⁵

Anwar points out that, although his experience as a refugee has imbued him with a special sensitivity to the sociopolitical issues his artworks confront, his experience is not unique, nor even all that uncommon. Indeed, today there are more forcibly displaced people than ever before, and as the planet is made increasingly unstable by the entangled effects of climate change, wealth inequality and ultranationalism – hallmarks of capitalism and the Anthropocene – it is extremely likely that the number of refugees fleeing armed conflicts, climate catastrophes and untenable economic conditions will continue to rise. With these new waves of displacement will come further crises of life, culture and memory – affecting the most vulnerable communities first and foremost, but ultimately all-encompassing if left unchecked.

In both *Past in the Present* and *A Few Lines of History*, Anwar draw attention not only to the particular plight of the Kurdish people during and after the Anfal genocide, but to the myriad ways in which the cultural

memory of these experiences is either suppressed in order to protect the perpetrators and their enablers, or distorted and propagandised, often to justify further acts of State violence. By leveraging these distortions, he creates the opportunity for his situated experience to be brought into a wider context of human experiences. The artist allows us to see the human cost that often remains hidden behind smokescreens of ideologies that so often prioritise the political convenience of State and capital over any moral obligations to individuals or communities, especially those who have been marginalised and devalued.

Anwar uses his own memories, as intangible as the smoke that darkens his images, to invite us to question how we arrived at this point and how much more will be lost if we continue on this path:

These are my archives. The memory of the place, the memory of my childhood, the memory of the friends who died. I cannot see them anymore. The only thing you can hold to is memory.⁶

1. Born in Halabja in 1971, Anwar currently lives and works between Melbourne and Chiang Mai.
2. 'Art in Conflict' is on view at Shepparton Art Museum until 31 July 2022, before travelling to Ipswich Regional Gallery (13 August – 23 October 2022).
3. Rushdi Anwar in an interview with the author, August 2021.
4. *ibid.*
5. *ibid.*
6. *ibid.*