

SHORSH SALEH



FORCED TO FLEE

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The works include five miniature paintings and two handwoven carpets based on my experience as a stateless person and journey from the Iraqi Kurdistan to the UK.

The carpets were designed by me and made by a group of Kurdish weavers as part of my project Chenin, which aims to revive the ancient tradition of Kurdish weaving in Iraqi Kurdistan.

No Friends but the Mountains

As a Kurdish artist my works relate to my experience as a stateless person, becoming a refugee and witnessing the death of hundreds.

Art kept my soul alive during the process of leaving my homeland, the 2 years of travelling across borders illegally and the 8 years of waiting for asylum in the UK.

Shorsh Saleh

Following the division of the Ottoman Empire under the Sykes-Picot Agreement of 1916, the land of Kurdistan was divided between the UK and France.

In 1920, the Sevres Agreement between the French, British and the remains of the Ottoman Empire promised that the Kurdish people would be given an independent land but this promise was never carried out.

This was followed by the Treaty of Lausanne in 1923 when the Kurdish territory was again partitioned between Turkey, the French mandate of Syria, the British mandate of Iraq, and Persia.

Since this time, Kurdish people have been stateless and victims of persecution and displacement. Kurds describe themselves as having 'no friends but the mountains'.

1-DIVISION

Division relates to the genocide of hundreds of thousands of Kurdish people over the past 100 years, which continues to the present day.

The imagery in the painting has been inspired by a photograph of the beheading of an Alevi Kurdish tribal leader surrounded by three Turkish soldiers. Around 30-40.000 deaths of Alevis, a Kurdish sect, were perpetrated during the Dersim Massacre by the Turkish army in 1937-38.



Dersim massacre 1937-38

In Division this scene has been altered to include three figures from Iran, Iraq/Syria and Turkey, kneeling on a carpet and holding the decapitated head of a deer. In carpet symbology the deer often represents the victim.

Above the figures, a map shows the division of Kurdistan. British planes fly overhead, symbolising the enforcement of the agreement by the British. A British flag on the rifle held by one of the soldiers signifies the involvement of the British government in supplying arms to the Middle East, which continues to the present day.



Division, natural pigment and walnut ink on paper, 50 x 70 cm, 2019

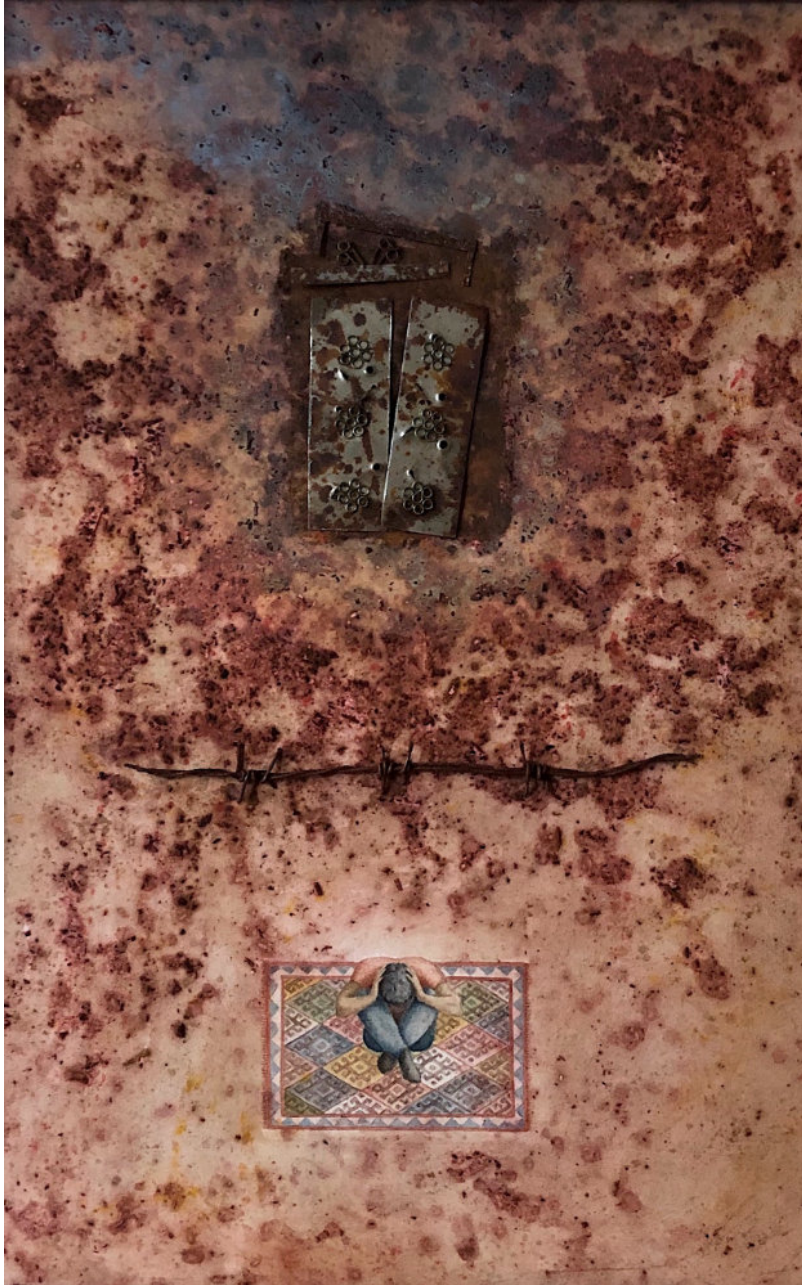
2-DESPAIR

Nothing is worse than being born in a war zone, you are only faced with two options, certain death or life in a void.

Iraqi Kurds have been the victims of genocide under Saddam Hussein's brutal regime since the 1980's. When I was seven years old we were forced to flee my home town in Northern Iraq and to live in the mountains for many months. This forced displacement reoccurred at least ten times during my childhood.

In 1988 our town was completely flattened by Saddam's bulldozers and we had to live in a camp for 3 years until the first Gulf War in 1991.

The background of 'Despair' is reminiscent of burnt flesh and refers to the repeated use of chemical weapons against the Kurds since Halabja in 1988, to the current genocide being perpetrated on Kurds in Rojava, Northern Syria by the Turkish government.



Despair, natural pigment, barbed wire and iron on paper, 50 x 70 cm, 2019

3-DEPARTURE

Between certain death or living in a void, I chose to flee.

I left Iraq in 2001 as a result of the regime and the impending invasion of Iraq by the UK and the USA. During two years of illegally travelling across borders in the Middle East and Europe, my homes were mountains, camps, streets and squats.

The figure on the carpet refers to the imaginary notion of flying carpets as portrayed in Arabian Nights, something that I dreamt of having during my tortuous journeys attempting to cross borders.



Departure, natural pigment, stone and clay on paper, 50 x 70 cm, 2019

4-DROWNING

Death has many different faces

Drowning refers to my journey across the Mediterranean Sea by boat, a journey that many do not survive. Vast numbers of Kurdish people attempt to reach Europe by sea from Syria, Iraq and Iran.



Drowning, natural pigment, iron and copper on paper, 50 x 70 cm, 2019

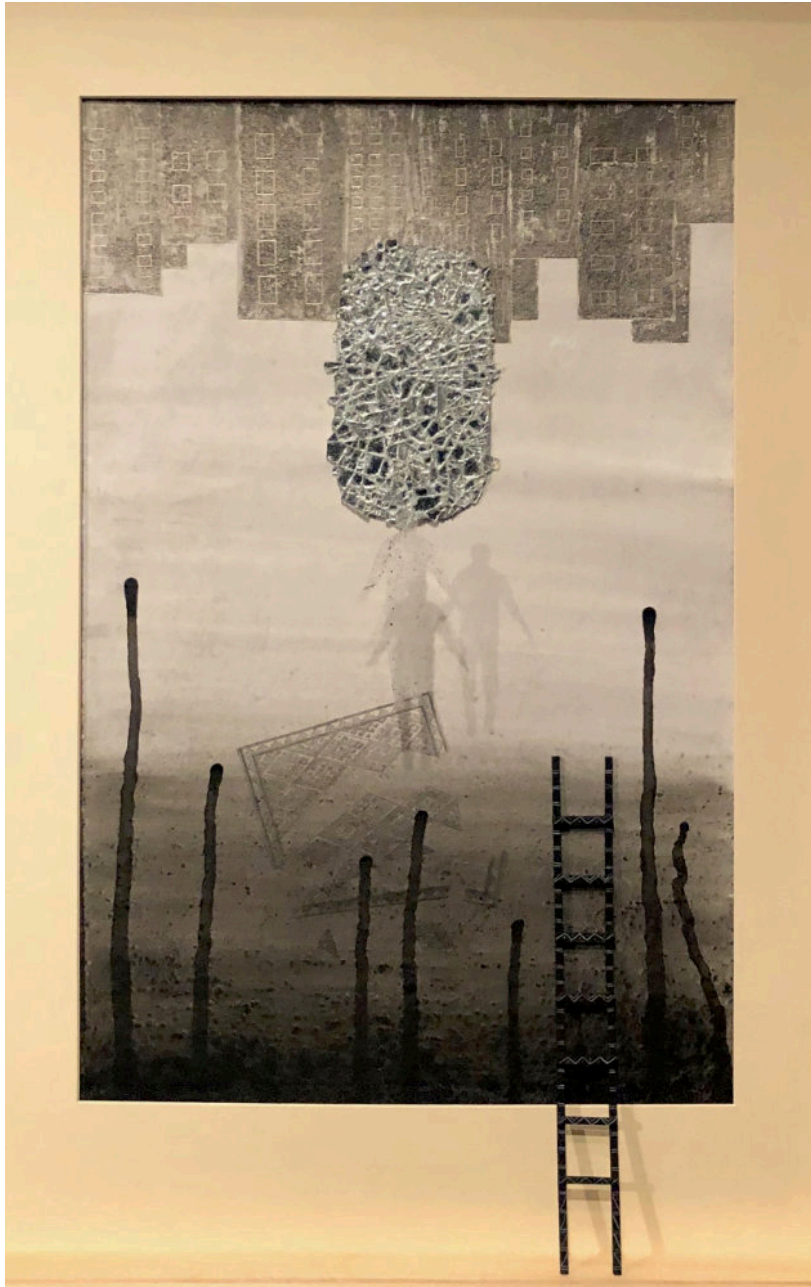
5-DETACHED

Suspended, a man with two shadows

After safely arriving in the UK I was forced to wait for eight years for my asylum claim to be granted. Unable to work or to have freedom of movement, I was constantly moved between hostels in five different cities.

The fragmented mirror reflects my identity being divided between my homeland and my life in the UK. The fragmented carpet signifies the loss of culture.

To me, home is not a place, it is people. The Kurdish term for a 'dear friend' or loved one is 'malakam' which translates as 'my home'.



Detached, natural pigment, gold leaf and mirror on paper, 50 x 70 cm, 2019

Carpet introduction

The ancient tradition of carpet weaving has largely been lost in Iraqi-Kurdistan as a result of decades of conflict and displacement. Prior to the conflict, most houses had a loom for weaving.

Carpet weaving was predominantly done in mountainous areas where people lived in harmony with nature, surrounded by all the materials necessary for weaving; wool and plants for natural dyes.

Between 1960-1990, almost five thousand towns and villages in the mountainous area of Iraqi-Kurdistan were destroyed as a consequence of the repeated conflict between the Iraqi regime and Kurdish guerrillas and the Iran-Iraq war.

The people from these mountainous areas were repeatedly forcibly displaced from their homes to urban camps and cities. This displacement meant that looms and livestock were left behind. Without access to the necessary materials people became disconnected with the skills and traditions of carpet weaving.

In addition, globalisation and industrialisation meant that machine-made carpets and synthetic dyes provided a cheaper and less labour intensive method of producing carpets.

Local traditional designs have also been replaced by modern imagery.

Chenin

Chenin (meaning 'weaving') is an organisation set up by Shorsh Saleh to revive the ancient tradition of Kurdish carpet weaving in Iraqi Kurdistan. Chenin aims to provide a sustainable income for local people through the art of weaving.

The two carpets in this exhibition are Chenin's first project, using Saleh's designs they were hand woven by Kurdish women at the 'Workshop of Spinning & Weaving' in Sulaymaniyah, Iraqi Kurdistan.

www.chenin.com

6-DESTRUCTION

Destruction is inspired by an image of Qala Diza, a town of 70,000 Kurds in Northern Iraq, destroyed in a border 'clean up' operation during the Anfal campaign in 1989. (Susan Meiselas/ Magnum).



Susan Meiselas/Magnum, 1992

In Middle Eastern culture the carpet represents home, each home has a carpet. The breakdown of the geometric elements in the carpet symbolise the destruction of 5000 Kurdish villages and towns in Iraq, the majority of which happened during the Anfal genocide between 1986-1989.



Destruction, naturally dyed wool and cotton, 130 x 200 cm, 2020

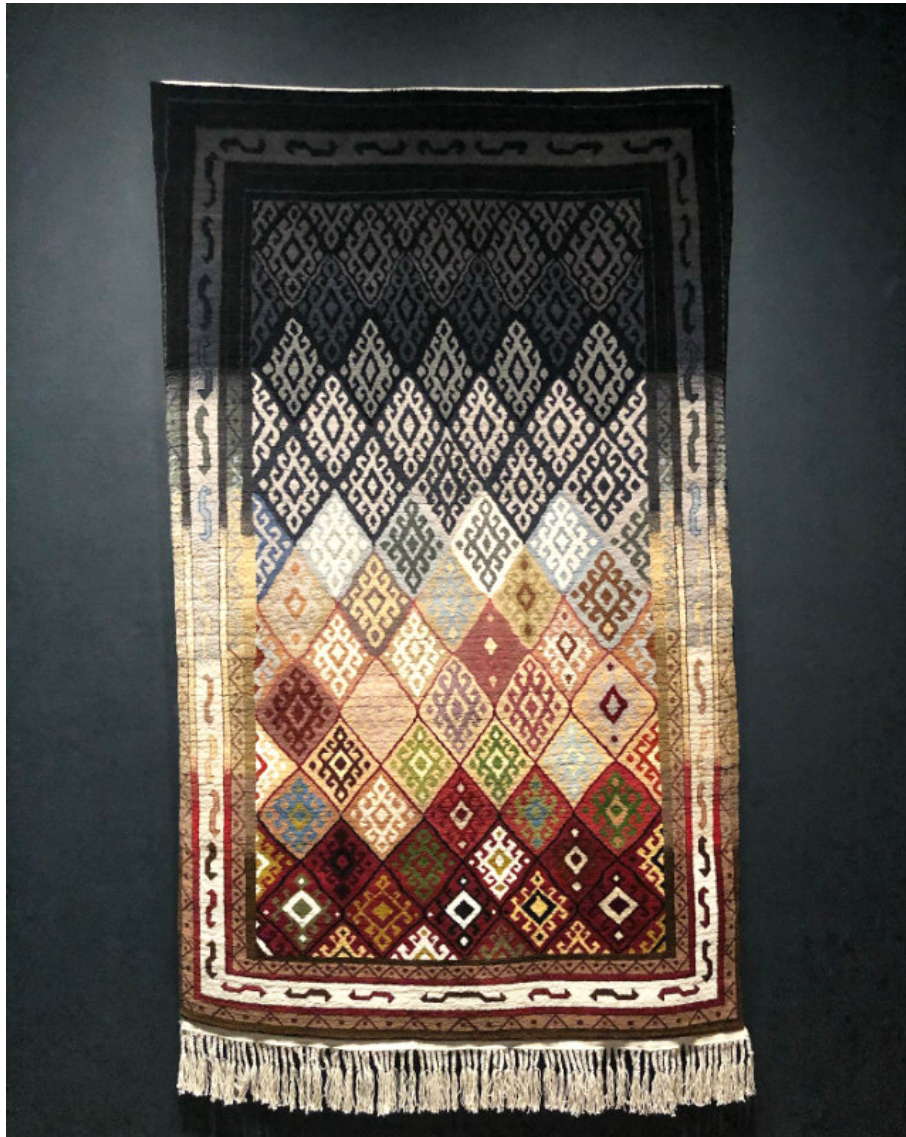
7-DISPLACEMENT

The design for Displacement is inspired by a photograph of Iraqi-Kurdish refugees fleeing Saddam Hussein's attacks in Northern Iraq, heading towards the border of Turkey in April 1991.



Coskun Aral/Sipa Press, 1991

The design uses the traditional Jaff motif, which symbolises mountains. The fading of the motif signifies the disappearance of Kurdish culture through displacement.



Displacement, naturally dyed wool and cotton, 100 x 200 cm, 2020

ALL TEXTS & ARTWORK

SHORSH SALEH



This project was a part of the exhibition 'Refugees: Forced to Flee' at the Imperial War Museum, London, 24/09/2020-24/05/2021

Shorsh Saleh is a Kurdish mixed-media artist. He deals with the subjects of migration, borders and identity through his work, with a particular focus on the Kurdish people, who have been stateless and subject to persecution for the past 100 years.

Saleh's works employ the traditional techniques of miniature painting in a contemporary context. As an experienced Persian carpet maker many of his paintings are inspired by the symbolic motifs used in traditional carpets, combined with contemporary imagery. He also uses found objects to make large scale sculptural works.

Born in Kurdistan, Saleh studied MA Traditional Arts at The Prince's School of Traditional Arts, London, where he has been teaching carpet weaving since 2015. He has also been teaching at the Museum of Islamic Art in Doha since 2017. Saleh has exhibited in Germany, Iraqi Kurdistan, Lebanon, UK and the USA.

His work was part of the Prince & Patron exhibition at Buckingham Palace, 2018. His solo exhibitions include Remembering Yezidis, Faculty of Human Sciences, Iraqi Kurdistan, 2015 and Always Colour, Always Rain, Iraqi Kurdistan, 2000. Saleh was Artist in Residence at the Migration Museum, London, April 2019. His works are held in the Royal Collection Trust, the British Museum, the Bagari Foundation and the Islamic Art Museum, Malaysia. He is currently showing his works at Refugees; Forced to Flee exhibition at the Imperial War Museum, London.

www.shorshsaleh.com

Imprint

Forced to Flee

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www.shorshsaleh.com

Cover work (back):

Kurdish women weaving the Destruction Carpet in the Kurdistan-Iraq

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This special edition
of Saleh's exposition
'Refugees: Forced to Flee'
is presented by:

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