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# Faek Rasul: Memories of Political Violence Transformed in the Materials of Painting

## Abstract

This article focuses on the artistic work of the Kurdish-Austrian, Iraqi-born painter Faek Rasul within a biographical context. Belonging to a clandestine Kurdish political organization, Rasul was imprisoned in 1980, tortured, and lost many friends and fellow prisoners to execution. He escaped from Iraq to Iran and finally came to Austria in 1987, where he artistically elaborated his memory of the atrocities he and his companions suffered in a process of constant transformation over four decades. Based on extended interviews, the article follows Rasul's biography and trajectory of memory after fleeing and settling in Austria. The course of memory is differentiated along intertwining aspects of involuntary, intrusive memory and deliberate, active memory. Active memory is explored in different settings. They comprise the artistic work process, in which arts and crafts materials are imbued with specific meanings, as well as former sites of suffering in Iraq, where Rasul recollected traces of victims that again became part of his art.

## Keywords

Migration, art, intrusive memory, transcultural memory, political atrocities, Iraqi Kurds

## Faek Rasul: Erinnerungen an politische Gewalt, transformiert in den Materialien der Malerei

## Zusammenfassung

Der Artikel untersucht das künstlerische Werk des kurdisch-österreichischen, im Irak geborenen Künstlers Faek Rasul im biografischen Kontext. Rasul wurde 1980 als Mitglied einer klandestinen kurdischen Organisation verhaf-

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tet, gefoltert und erlebte die Misshandlung und Exekution zahlreicher Freunde und Mithäftlinge. Nach seiner Freilassung floh er in den Iran und gelangte schließlich 1987 nach Österreich, wo er seine Erinnerungen an die Gräueltaten, die er erlitt und bezeugte, in einem Prozess konstanter Transformation über vier Jahrzehnte künstlerisch bearbeitete. Auf Grundlage mehrstündiger Interviews folgt der Artikel Rasuls Biografie und dem Erinnerungsprozess nach seiner Flucht und nachdem er sich in Österreich niederließ. Die Gedächtnisvorgänge werden nach Aspekten der unwillkürlichen, traumatischen Erinnerung (*intrusive memory*) und nach bewussten, aktiven Erinnerungsakten analysiert. Aktive Erinnerung wird in unterschiedlichen Settings untersucht: im künstlerischen Arbeitsprozess, in dem die Materialien der Malerei mit spezifischen Bedeutungen verknüpft werden; und im Zuge der Rückkehr zu Orten des Grauens im Irak, wo Rasul Spuren von Opfern dokumentierte, die er wiederum künstlerisch verarbeitete.

### Schlagwörter

Migration, Kunst, transkulturelle Erinnerung, traumatische Erinnerung, politische Gräueltaten, irakische Kurden

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## 1 Introduction

For those who survive torture, political atrocities, or a pogrom, memory is haunting. Jean Améry defined torture, beyond the physical violation, as a breach of the basic social contract that can never be restored: »Who was tortured, stays tortured.« (Améry 1977, p. 64) It is a life-changing existential condition—a fundamental alienation he called the loss of »trust in the world« (Améry 1977, p. 55 f.). The haunting return of traumatic memories, through their intrusive character, is the exception from the generic dynamic of memories that are reconfigured and reintegrated by new layers of experience and learning—neuroscience calls that the reconsolidation of memories at retrieval (Kroes and Fernández 2012). When it comes to collective and communicative manifestations of memory in the arts and literature, the active reconfigurations of memory play a role of critique, reflection, and renewal (Erlil 2005, p. 2).

If we follow Améry, it is clear that the existential trauma of torture, however important it is for the tortured to escape the tormentors' reign, will outlast fleeing, migration, and naturalization as a free citizen of a democratic country. Nonetheless, migration decisively changes the conditions of

memory, more so for those who have the capacity and will to politically conceptualize memory in scientific, literary, or artistic research. A safe distance from the immediate cause of violence provides a space for creative activity and politically free expression. However, migration also implies a shift of perspective, an extensive reconfiguration of social context—including the presence or absence of those who share or cannot share memories—as well as a cultural reorientation that includes modes of intellectual and artistic expression. Thus, migration entails a reconstitution of memory; it can cause forgetting and gaps, but also the »freezing« of memories in the anxiety of losing one's origin and identity (Creet and Kitzmann 2011). Furthermore, it is important to note that artistic and literary constructions of migration memories are very often created in cosmopolitan environments that have long been determined by multiple forms of global mobility and exchange, thus blurring the distinction between the »autochthonous« and the »migrant«, between the context of »origin« and »immigration« (Crownshaw 2014; Dagnino 2015). In her conception of »transcultural memory«, as opposed to a nationally defined collective memory, Astrid Erll claimed that »all cultural memory *must* ›travel‹, be kept in motion, in order to ›stay alive‹, to have an impact both on individual minds and social formations«; she distinguished »among five dimensions of movement: carriers, media, contents, practices and forms« (Erll 2014, p. 17). Thus, »traveling memory« comprises migration as an important element but goes far beyond that. For the arts, it can be added that the mobility dimension »media« is of particular importance and complexity. In painting, the materials and techniques provide an endless resource of experiment and exert an agency of their own, as will be analyzed in Faek Rasul's oeuvre.

When it comes to artistic representations of political atrocities of later 20<sup>th</sup> century wars, philosophy, and aesthetics engaged in an intense debate on the »unrepresentable« of political violence, attacking and defending the use of photography and the (re-)production of images (Sontag 2003; Didi-Huberman 2008; Rancière 2009). The debate goes back as far as Theodor Adorno's ambiguous, much quoted, and controversially discussed sentence from 1949, »To write a poem after Auschwitz is barbaric«, which was also applied to the arts beyond poetry (about the context of the statement and the debate: Ryland 2006). The debate had a major impact on the conception of public monuments of the last decades (Silveira 2019), and 20<sup>th</sup> as well as 21<sup>st</sup> century modern art reacted in innumerable ways to the challenge of representing the »unrepresentable« of political atrocities: in abstract painting (e.g., Gerhard Richter) and plastic arts (e.g., Zbinek Sekal), photography (e.g., Christian Boltanski), video installations (e.g., Harun Farucki), conceptual art (e.g., Khaled Barakeh), animated film (e.g., William Cantridge), etc.

This article focuses on the artistic work of the Kurdish-Austrian, Iraqi-born painter Faek Rasul and on the question of how painting manifests and transforms memories of political violence in a biographical context of migration. Belonging to a clandestine Kurdish political organization in opposition to Saddam Hussein and the Baath regime, Faek Rasul was imprisoned in 1980, tortured, and lost many friends and fellow prisoners to execution. He escaped from Iraq to Iran and finally came to Austria in 1987, where he artistically elaborated his memory of the atrocities he and his companions suffered, in a process of constant transformation over four decades. A persistent return to the memories of political violence—its places, victims, and psychic effects—coincides with the constancy of artistic transformation. Based on extended interviews with Rasul, the article follows his biography and trajectory of memory after fleeing and settling in Austria. The course of memory is differentiated along intertwining aspects of involuntary, intrusive memory and deliberate, active memory. Active memory is explored in different settings. They comprise the artistic work process, in which arts and crafts materials are imbued with specific meaning, as well as former sites of suffering in Iraq, where Rasul recollected traces of victims that again became part of his art. Rasul's artistic inquiry of memory is positioned within a certain strand of art history concerning the conception and physical treatment of the picture surface as an equivalent to walls and graffiti, that is, to real-life media of non-artistic, random signs.

Faek Rasul was one of the 40 artists of the exhibition *Traces and Masks of Refugees*, curated by the author together with Günther Oberhollenzer (Bauer et al. 2020; Traska 2024). Rasul participated with figurative drawings of traumatic memories from 1986 to 1991—his first years after fleeing Iraq (Fig. 1, 2), and his most recent works from 2017 to 2020, which do not adhere to any recognizable iconography (Fig. 10–12). Thus, the exhibited works showed a maximum range of conceptual differences in the artistic transformation of suffered and witnessed violence. This article explores and contextualizes the many steps of this transformative process more in detail, based on a presentation at the conference »Laboratory for art-based research: Reappropriation and re-presentation of documentary films and (mediated) memories.«<sup>1</sup>

## 2 Biography

Faek Rasul was born in 1955 in Shoraw (Morad 2015, p. 33), a suburban village of Kirkuk, the oil-rich Northern Iraqi city, which during his childhood had a cosmopolitan and multi-ethnic character (Bet-Shlimon 2019). His father

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1 Project financed by the Austrian Science Funds (PEEK project AR 682).

worked there for the British-led Iraq Petroleum Company (IPC). Prosecution of the Kurdish family started in 1963, after the first Baathist coup, with a pogrom (Bet-Shlimon 2019, p. 161, note 122). Faek Rasul (2020, part 1, min 00:01) recalled the sudden uprooting of the family's civic life and the eruption of violence with people hanging in the streets. The family was temporarily expelled from Shoraw and found refuge at relatives' houses in Kirkuk. From then on, his father—whom Faek Rasul described as a liberally thinking person who had learned English from the British and, although illiterate as a child, had become a book lover while staying away from politics—was repeatedly detained without accusation, according to Rasul's knowledge. This was all shocking and incomprehensible for the child. At the Imam Qasim school in Kirkuk he now had to attend, only Arabic was spoken, and at first, the Kurdish-speaking child did not understand a word. His entire world was shattered and disrupted. In 1966, the family moved from the predominantly Kurdish quarter Imam Qasim to »New Kirkuk«, erected by the British. There, all the ethnic groups of the city lived together—Turkmen, Kurds, Armenians, Arabs, Assyrians—speaking Arabic as a *lingua franca*. Despite the ethnicized tensions between the groups (Bet-Shlimon 2019, pp. 135–173), the ground of Faek Rasul's anti-nationalist conviction—which was as much against Kurdish nationalism as against any other—was laid there, according to his own understanding (Rasul 2020, part 1, min 00:18:00).<sup>2</sup>

In 1974, he became politically active in the clandestine Marxist-Maoist Kurdish organization Komala, one of the three major groups of the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (McDowall 2007, p. 343; Hevian 2013, p. 99). In his biographical account, Faek Rasul dwelled on the accentuated ideological character of Komala's and his own identification with the radical left movements in Europe and China; and on their ignorance of the social costs of the Chinese Cultural Revolution. In 1977, he moved to Baghdad where he spent highly productive years occupied by art studies, intellectual life, and work as a graphic designer, not without feeling discrimination as a Kurd (Rasul 2020, part 1, min 00:45:00).

The beginning of the Iran-Iraq War destroyed Faek Rasul's basis of existence. In 1980, he was drafted and received a six-month training in the Iraqi radar service. However, on September 26 of the same year, he was arrested in the streets of Kirkuk by members of the civil secret service, transferred to the military remand prison, and brought in front of a military court in Kirkuk.

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<sup>2</sup> After the nationalization of the Iraq Petroleum Company in 1973, and in the course of the Arabization policy of the Baath party in Kirkuk (Bet-Shlimon 2019, pp. 173–188), the family was dislodged from the house and the quarter. At that time, Faek Rasul had already moved to Baghdad (Rasul 2020, part 1, min 00:29:30).

Many of his friends and comrades from Komala were killed (Rasul 2020, part 1, min 00:57:20). After five months in remand, interrogation, and torture by the civil and later the military secret service, constantly fearing execution, he was convicted and detained in the Abu Ghraib prison close to Baghdad.<sup>3</sup> These months of arrest, interrogation, and torture were also a period of intense self-interrogation, resulting in the decision to refrain from any further political activity.

In 1981, Rasul was freed from prison in order to be drafted again in Kirkuk. As the war went badly for Iraq in that period, the armed forces needed every man. After several months in the military, he was discharged again, since the Kurds were considered traitors and unreliable as soldiers. He and his family were constantly harassed by the secret police, and his mental state deteriorated. When conscripted one more time, he did not follow the call but went into hiding in Sulaymaniyah. For two years, he worked at a friend's printing shop there. He also married Tania Raschied, and they had their first child in 1984. Yet, although he was no longer an active member of Komala after his release from prison, the situation remained so dangerous and the permanent threat of being recognized so unbearable that, in 1984, he decided to flee further north into the mountains. Although this area was not under Iraqi military control, it was regularly bombed. After his release from prison, he no longer wore a weapon, even when he was among the Kurdish partisans in Northern Iraq where moving unarmed seemed entirely inappropriate (Rasul 2020, part 1, min 01:09:00–01:21:00).

In early 1985, he finally crossed the border to Iran, defecting to Iraq's enemy of war, together with his wife and child. This was the major route of Kurdish refugees from Northern Iraq in that period (McDowall 2007, pp. 361 f.). After a very difficult journey through the snowy mountains full of mines and threatened by rockets, the family spent two-and-a-half years in various refugee camps in Iran. There, he and his family were isolated and regularly questioned by the Iranian secret service (Rasul 2020, part 1, min 01:22:00–01:40:00) before finally getting an opportunity to come to Austria in summer 1987. As part of a contingent of 100 Kurdish refugees, they were flown to Austria with a special refugee visa (Declaration of the Minister of the Interior, January 20<sup>th</sup>, 1992, as cited in Hennerbichler 1992, p. 213).

In Vienna, Faek Rasul had a professional career as a gallerist. As an intellectual Kurdish refugee, he was welcome to work at the AAI Gallery, the art gallery of the Afro-Asian Institute in Vienna led by Karl Strobl. At that time, the AAI Gallery was one of the city's major meeting points for students and intellectuals from all over the world. Soon after, he organized exhibitions for

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3 Even in the times of Saddam Hussein, Abu Ghraib was the central prison of Iraq.

the Kurdish Center of Vienna at the WUK (Werkstätten- und Kulturhaus) open cultural center. After having acquired basic knowledge at these places, where individual initiative was appreciated but not well paid, Rasul started working at for-profit galleries. He led the *Galerie M* (Börseplatz, Vienna) from 2000 to 2005, as well as the municipal art gallery *Kleine Galerie* from 2006 until his retirement in 2020. His considerable private art collection mainly contains Austrian art and a small asset of Kurdish artists. For several years, his workshop served as the »Salon Modena Art« for short-term exhibitions and as an event space.<sup>4</sup> The salon also published a book with works of Kurdish artists living in Austria (Salon Modena Art 2018).

### 3 Faek Rasul as a Painter of Memories

Faek Rasul was always painting, but until he retired from his work as a gallerist, he never made painting the exclusive basis of his life. As a Kurd in Iraq, he could only study for two years at high school (Ma'had al-Funun al-Tatbiqiyya), mainly in graphic design and photography. The four-year course of fine arts at the academy (Acadimiyat al-Funun al-Jamila) would have required enlisting in the Baath party (Rasul 2020, part 1, min 00:31:00), which he, as a Kurd and as a communist, felt morally intolerable. After the outbreak of war in 1980, as well as during his military service, arrest, going into hiding, and his life as a refugee in Iran, any kind of safe civilian life and regular artistic production was impossible. From his detention in the Abu Ghraib prison and the Iranian refugee camps, he was able to preserve several of his works (Rasul 2015, pp. 178, 180 f.). When he was settling in Vienna, having to support a family of two children, he put most of his energy into becoming an art gallerist. However, he had never stopped drawing and painting. He always had a workshop as a place to withdraw to and inquire into his feelings and memories in the wordless use of art tools and materials.

Following the titles of the books he has been editing for 17 years, constituting something like a continuous oeuvre catalog (Rasul 2006; Rasul 2015; Salon Modena Art 2023), as well as the title of his extended work series, the bulk of his oeuvre appears to be based on memory or, in Kurdish, *yadgari*. Yet, in most cases, the subject of memory remains oblique, cryptic, and ambiguous to the beholder whom Faek Rasul does not offer further explanation unless asked for it. The »wordlessness« of pictorial language is essential to him. He explains that even as a child, he felt safe in a sphere of wordless

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4 <https://www.modenaart.at>. Accessed: 22.7.2024.

expression because of his language difficulties.<sup>5</sup> In principle, the commitment to memory has to do with the violence and prosecution he suffered and witnessed, his survival, and with what and whom he left behind when fleeing Iraq.

Only a few works produced prior to his arrival in Austria have been preserved, not surprisingly given the years of imprisonment, hiding, flight, living in refugee camps, and the transitions between those stages that allowed only minimal luggage. Faek Rasul's works from the late 1970s until the early 1990s show sufferance and torture figuratively. The series *Dreams* was started in Iran and continued after his arrival in Austria. It represents the physicality of torture and killing in fragmented spaces and fragments of bodies, indicating the disruption of physical integrity and its traumatic aftermath (Fig. 1). Band structures produced from fine black ballpoint pen hatchings are the main constructive element. They either appear as ropes or bandages, or they stretch into blades or solid straps. When they combine into faces and limbs, they resemble muscles and make the bodies appear to be skinned alive. Fragmentation of body parts goes ahead with either moments of penetration, taping, and strangling, or the punching of holes. Eyes stare without lids, and in these waking dreams of torture, it is not death but a ghostly survival that seems the most shocking.

In most of the works, the figurative elements emerge from portions of white paper left over from the highly densified fine black hatchings—obviously a procedure of countless hours in formats of mostly 50 to 70 centimeters. The development of figurative elements out of the black background expresses the mental emergence of image fragments from dreams or other semi-conscious states that play a major role in Faek Rasul's entire art production. To some degree, this direction from undifferentiated black to recognizable elements may also coincide with the surfacing of figurative images in the actual work process. However, the symmetries and regular dispositions on the picture surface as well as the graphic precision speak of a more carefully developed composition.

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5 »We had a workshop in most schools. It was beautiful for me [there]. I always had language problems. Through painting, I was clearer with myself.« (Rasul 2020, part 2, min 00:46:30) And: »I wonder about some artists who tell beautiful stories about their paintings. If I knew exactly what it [was about], then I would write rather than paint. In painting, symbols help. The story can remain hidden. Like in music where we don't ask for a meaning. For instance, in jazz.« (Rasul 2020, Part 2, min 01:48:50; translation from German by the author)





Fig. 1: Faek Rasul, *Dream*, 1986, ballpoint pen on paper, 45 x 33 cm.



Fig. 2: Faek Rasul, Dream, 1991, ballpoint pen on paper, 70 x 50 cm.

The last drawings of this series, from 1991, developed into more complex symbolic compositions. These works are characterized by a picture division into small sections that implode in small scale details and open thematically beyond the artist's own sufferance and immediate testimony. The inclusion of a gas mask (Fig. 2) refers to the major event of the Iraqi Kurdish genocide, the »Anfal operation«,<sup>6</sup> which happened when Rasul and his wife and child had already escaped. With the portraits of Samuel Beckett (in the drawing *Waiting for Godot*, Rasul 2006, n. p.), and the Kurdish poet Abdurrahman Sharafkandi, known by the pen name Hejar (in the drawing *Fleeing*, Rasul 2006, n. p.), Rasul included two writers who had recently died from natural causes: one contemporary Kurdish »national« poet; and one European, whose representations of human misery, failure, existential vanity, and absurdity can be regarded as »universal.«

In a sudden break around 1992, the meticulous black and white drawings gave way to an explosion of bright colors, flowing movements, and rich textures in symbolic expressionist paintings. These works were more abstract than figurative, with titles allusive to religious or mythological concepts.<sup>7</sup> These paintings broke out of the torturous memories that had completely determined the *Dreams* series. However, after several years, around 1998, Faek Rasul's artistic activity circled in on »memory« again and has never really stopped.

#### 4 Solid Fabrics Carrying »Archaic« Signs and Anonymous Memories

Along with this movement, a lasting change in the principal conception of the canvas happened. Whereas the picture surface had, thus far, always been the level of entrance into an imaginary space, now it was to become associat-

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6 The Anfal operation, or Anfal campaign, was carried out by the Iraqi armed forces led by Ali Hassan al-Majid on the order of Saddam Hussein, directed mainly against rural Kurds (but afflicting also Turkmen, Assyrians, Shabaks, and others) in the region of Northern Iraq towards the end of the Iran-Iraq war in 1988. In 1993, it was defined by the Human Rights Watch as genocide. The Human Rights Watch determined a death toll of 50,000 to 100,000; other estimates go far beyond that. In the Anfal campaign, tens of thousands of civilians were executed or disappeared, and entire village populations were killed in chemical attacks with mustard gas and sarin, including the 5,000 inhabitants of Halabja, among others. Some 2,000 villages were destroyed and their populations expelled, displaced, and often imprisoned in camps where many died of malnutrition and disease (Human Rights Watch 1993; McDowall 2007, pp. 352–364).

7 See the last part of Rasul 2006 that follows the works from the more recent to the oldest pieces: from *Tanz des Pfäus 1 (Dance of the Peacock 1)*, 1998) to *Adam und Eva (Adam and Eve)*, 1992); for the religious concepts, see Six-Hohenbalken 2015, p. 29.

ed with more solid fabrics and textures like parchments, carpets, stone, or wall surfaces. These solid fabrics hold or contain all further signs and lines as if they were materially attached to them, thus altering the nature of those signs and lines (Fig. 3). Accordingly, Faek Rasul used new pictorial materials, such as sand, and developed techniques of roughly working upon subsequent layers through trowelling, scratching, or engraving. The imaginary of the paintings is no longer figural or spatial but rather linked to completely different mental and cultural resources: those of simple signs that do not feature subjective expressiveness—such as crosses, arrows, letters from different writing systems, and further »graphic« elements.



Fig. 3: Faek Rasul, *Memory*, 2004, mixed technique on canvas, 100 x 100 cm.

As in this movement, the concept of »memory« or, in Kurdish, *yadgari*, happened to become universal in Faek Rasul's oeuvre. The question is: What memories do these paintings adhere to? There are certain cultural and (pre-) historic references the artist repeatedly mentions: Iraqi (Assyrian) cave paintings from the Kurdistan region (Voggeneder 2015, p. 17; Kienast 2015, p. 23) and, as an origin of his love for »archaic« signs, a talisman he had been given to wear around his neck. As a child, he could not help but open the talisman out of curiosity, feeling so attracted by the beauty of the strange signs on the little piece of paper that should protect him from headaches (Voggeneder 2015, p. 17; Rasul 2020, part 2, min 02:16:00). The talisman is a dear memory trace of his prematurely and abruptly ended childhood, and he eventually used *Talisman* as a title of paintings (Rasul 2016, pp. 127, 137, 157, 173). Yet, when Faek Rasul talked about his fascination with the talisman as a child, and later on, in this narrative, the signs had already been depersonalized, alien, coming from »afar«, and so they were when he later introduced them into painting. They are not specifically meaningful out of themselves but rather placeholders through which something else may enter.

At one point, the artist called an extended series of paintings *Gravestones*. These paintings were specifically dedicated to those who were killed or executed by the Iraqi forces and disappeared without leaving any relic or grave to their families and loved ones (Six-Hohenbalken 2015, pp. 30 f.; Rasul 2020, part 2, min 01:22:00–01:24:00). Compared to the *Dreams* series, no matter if entitled *Talisman*, *Yadgari* or *Gravestone*, his own sufferance and witnessed violence is not an obvious subject matter. Or, if it is alluded to by the title *Gravestones*, it remains enshrouded and silenced by non-mimetic, depersonalized signs.<sup>8</sup> As such, it differs from most literary or artistic representations of the »disappeared«, a major topic, for example, in the memory of Latin American dictatorships and dirty wars. While in these cases, mostly relatives and descendants, sometimes in exile, individualize the disappeared (Cotter 2007; Pardo 2023), Rasul's *Gravestones* remain abstract. There is a new balance between memories »wanting« to be manifested and the objectivity and materiality of the arts in their own right.

The new handling of the painting's material surface and the »archaic« and »primitive« signs inscribed onto it cannot only be traced back to his personal and Middle Eastern cultural roots but also to an art-historical genealogy that had been well known to Faek Rasul since the 1970s; this lineage was

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<sup>8</sup> The earliest paintings of this new abstract style of signs on solid fabrics still have specific titles, not just »memory«. One of these titles is *Kunst der Verdrängung / Art of Repression* (from the year 2000, Rasul 2006, n. p.) that may be understood in the psychological or psychoanalytic sense of the term.

of specific relevance to the painter, who had studied in Iraq and spent most of his artistic life in Europe. Many strands in modernist painting have given new relevance to the materiality of painting and the pictorial surface. They all break in some way with the tradition of Western art. Since the early modern era, Western art has conceived the picture surface as half-transparent toward an imaginary space that the eyes had learned to be »deceived« by, in addition to the observational field of artistic skill (Alloa 2011). In some of these strands, the experiments of the material surface go hand in hand with the predilection of »primitive«, anonymous signs and graphic elements that ought to invalidate the boundaries of elitist high-art aesthetics. In the oeuvre of Jean Dubuffet and Jean Fautrier—to mention just two important figures of such experiments in French art—resources for that search could come from spheres as different as children’s drawings, non-Western art, prehistoric cave paintings, or »psychopathological« Art Brut (Peiry 2001).

In this context, it is particularly noteworthy that one of the most eminent figures of modern Iraqi art, Shakir Hassan Al Said, who was also an imperative art and art history teacher of Faek Rasul during his time in Baghdad, had spent the second half of the 1950s in Paris and traveled in Europe during his stay. He was familiar with the above-mentioned artists and the artistic movement of the early Informel.<sup>9</sup> Back to Iraq, Al Said used Western-modernist means and concepts for the foundation of a new, non-Western, Arab art integrating Islamic and pre-Islamic non-figurative traditions of art. This art was often based on letters and the graphics of writing: It used Arabic and pre-Arabic characters, yet not Arabic calligraphy (in the sense of an artistic genre), popular writing, such as graffiti (Dagher 2021, p. 167; Fig. 4). Al Said was thus building a bridge between Western and non-Western art from the »other side« and with inverted intentions, in comparison to Western modernism. A post-colonial perspective has put the use and quotation of »primitive« or »exotic« art in early Western modernism, e.g., by Picasso and Man Ray, under suspicion of creating and exploiting a cultural »other«—this concerns mainly ethnographic collection pieces but also the artworks of »outsiders« and the »mentally handicapped« (Hay 2017, 2018; Tythacott 2003; Scherr 2022). However, Al Said intended to »bring back«, or rather »bring forth«, this conceptual movement to a more profound cultural-spiritual foundation in the Arab world by linking ideas of the »line« and pictorial abstraction to Sufi mysticism.

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<sup>9</sup> Al Said also used the term »Informel« in his theoretical writings (Dagher 2021, p. 234). The Informel is an important term from post-World War II, non-geometrical abstraction coined by art critic and curator Michel Tapié.

In conversations, Faek Rasul is not very explicit in giving priority to certain artists as sources of inspiration or influence. In terms of individual artistic development, traces of Al Said's concepts and style cannot be found in Rasul's *Dreams* series, but only in later works produced long after settling in Austria: when he reinterpreted the pictorial surface and the signs inscribed into it. How close Rasul comes to certain works, and even more to Al Said's pictorial concepts manifested in theoretical writings, will be explored in a later chapter about the »wall« in painting. However, the »wall« is not only an artistic concept for Rasul, but it has a highly significant biographical-historical rooting that must be examined for its own sake. Before developing the new concept of the »wall«, the materially concrete, yet semantically vague character of these paintings can be seen as a reflection on how to represent atrocities and their memories, both for the sake of a collective and for the mental possibilities of the artist who had suffered and witnessed the violence.



Fig. 4: Shaker Hassan Al Said, *Untitled (Black)*, c. 1970, Oil on wood, 46 x 65 cm. Barjeel Art Foundation.

## 5 Returning to the Prison Walls of Kirkuk

After the establishment of an autonomous Kurdish Regional Government in Northern Iraq in 1992, and after receiving Austrian citizenship in 1993, Faek Rasul returned to Iraq for the first time. This trip was dedicated to meeting his family and friends. His family had suffered much because of his political activity and flight to Iran, and his father had already deceased before his return—all of which was very painful for him and produced persistent feelings of guilt (Rasul 2020, part 2, min 01:03:10).

More decisive for his individual history of memory and his art was the return to Kirkuk in 2005 and 2007—after the American invasion in Iraq and the fall of Saddam Hussein in 2003—together with his wife, photographer Tania Raschied. At a distance of one quarter of a century, Faek Rasul was searching for two of the prisons in Kirkuk where he had been interrogated and tortured and many of his comrades and friends had been killed. He could find one of the two: the military remand prison that had been specifically established for the Kurds. He found the cell where he had stayed together with other men, many of whom were illiterate farmers from the border region to Iran. They had been ordered to leave their farms and land<sup>10</sup> and, for not doing so, were sentenced to death by a military court, not even understanding in basic terms the reason for their own execution (Rasul 2022). Faek Rasul and his comrades at least knew why they had been captured and were waiting for condemnation to death or prison, since they had engaged in a political fight against the regime.

When coming back to the remand prison in 2005, research for the specific cell was difficult and embarrassing, as the abandoned prison was inhabited by internally displaced refugees and homeless people. Since they knew that the traces on the walls of these rooms stemmed from mostly executed prisoners, they wanted to paint the rooms so that they would not have to face this gruesome history every day. Towards them, Faek Rasul's interest was hard to explain, and taking photos in these rooms appeared to be an intrusion (Rasul 2022).

What motivates a person to search for the very place of torture, utmost threat and killing, where surviving was a matter of very good luck? Faek Rasul said that among his former comrades who had also been imprisoned, he had not found anyone interested in this place or in preserving it as a memorial site. They turned away from the dark past, and he was alone in his

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<sup>10</sup> For the 1975 agreement between Iran and Iraq about the border, in the consequence of which Iraq created a security belt along the Iranian and Turkish border of first five, later 30 kilometers and demolished hundreds of villages, executing everyone who returned to this area, see McDowall 2007, p. 339.



striving for memory and memorialization. I think various motives and causes contribute to Rasul's determination.

One is biographical and goes back to the period of incarceration. The prison was not only the place where he survived, whereas so many others did not. It was here that he understood that he was not made for armed resistance; from then on, he would never bear arms again, even in a situation where all men did (such as in the »liberated« villages of Northern Iraq where many Kurdish men went into hiding during the Iran-Iraq War and were regularly attacked by military helicopters). According to his own narrative, it was during his imprisonment that he decided that he only wanted to live and act as an artist and stay away from political activism, ideology, and any politically legitimated violence (Rasul 2022).

When living in Austria, Faek Rasul studied the history of the Shoah, visited many concentration and extermination camps in Europe as well as Yad Vashem, and took his own children to the Theresienstadt concentration camp (Rasul 2022). He learned how important the memory of the Shoah was not only for the victims, but for the post-war democratic development of society in Germany and Austria. Based on this, he also considered the testimonial value that memorial traces of the crimes committed against Kurds by the Baath regime under Saddam Hussein would produce. In that sense, dislocation from the place of atrocities and recontextualization of memory after migration may have contributed much to Rasul's resolve to return there.

Another part of the answer lies in what he found in the former prison in Kirkuk: how the findings, by their physicality, linked to Faek Rasul's paintings and their memorial character; and how his wife Tania Raschied photographically documented the findings. He recovered traces engraved into the cell walls by inmates. One of them is his own name in Arabic and Latin letters: his own minimal »gravestone«, a »last trace« he had left there 25 years earlier for the case of his execution and disappearance (Fig. 5). Right next to it, another prisoner had left behind a calendar of the days passed there in order not to lose sense of time. In the few remaining days of arrest in the remand prison after having received his own prison sentence, Faek Rasul had tried to find out as much as he could about those who were sentenced to death. He would engrave names of inmates condemned to death or enchain the names of their loved ones for them. He said that even in those last days of detention, leaving traces on the prison walls and engraving the names of the executed was linked to his being an artist (Rasul 2022). After his return to

Kirkuk, the prison walls became a central motive of memory that he would incessantly pursue in his entire artistic production.<sup>11</sup>



Fig. 5: Tania Raschied, documentary photo of Kirkuk prison wall: engraving of the name »Faek« and calendar, 2005.

## 6 Which and Whose Kurdish Memory?

As resolutely as Faek Rasul searched for his former prison cell, he also searched for a woman he wanted to meet again. He linked those two story-lines in his biographical narration by emphasizing that »he always stayed true to this story« or »to history« (Rasul 2022), that is, committed to its memory. This woman was a member in the Komala group, and like so many others, she had been arrested, interrogated, and tortured. Yet, among other forms of violence in her case, the torture was innumerable acts of rape. Outrageously, and stressed as an outrageous cruelty and injustice by Faek Rasul, no one among the former comrades was in contact with her. In this community and in her family, her sexual violation was concealed like shame—the

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<sup>11</sup> When Faek Rasul returned to the prison one more time in early 2023 for further research, he could not enter. The building was being used again by the Iraqi secret service.

shame of the perpetrators turning against the victim by stigmatization and exclusion, which is known to be a typical behavior toward sexual assault victims (Boskovic and Misev 2022). This concealment and shaming of the victim decisively aggravate the effects of trauma and its perpetuation in post-traumatic stress disorder (Schmitt 2021). Understanding the perversion of guilt and shame, Faek Rasul insisted on meeting this woman, but he was not given any contact data from the community of former Komala members. He was able to finally reach out to her through the office that organizes compensation payments. He said that he and his wife Tania Raschied were the first former comrades to meet her (Rasul 2022). This parallel incident shows that Faek Rasul, when coming back to Kirkuk, intended to confront traumatic wounds—his own trauma and the trauma of the most vulnerable and most repressed of his (former) community.<sup>12</sup>

It is remarkable that, however decided he was in his own research, Rasul was hard to access by other researchers who wanted to meet and interview him on his role in the history of Komala. He justifies this by arguing that he wants to keep his distance from everything that has to do with political ideology, even in historical terms. In the same vein, he distances himself from every kind of Kurdish nationalism, also within his own family, and he is very critical toward the cultural conservatism of present Kurdish society in Iraq (Rasul 2022).

This critical distance also applies to the sphere of the Kurdish diaspora in Vienna. Rasul exemplified that in an episode that happened in a Vienna café he visited with a friend, Syrian-Kurdish painter Adel Dauood. Two Kurds sitting at a table nearby heard the two speaking Arabic and asked why they did not speak Kurdish. The pragmatic reason was that because of the difference of Kurdish dialects from Iraq and Syria, Rasul and Dauood understand each other better in Arabic. Yet, in Faek Rasul's understanding, it was nationalist thinking, playing one language against the other, that motivated the two strangers' interference. For this reason, he was upset that they claimed

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<sup>12</sup> The use of the term »trauma« was discussed with the organizers of the conference »Laboratory for art-based research.« Since Faek Rasul did not explicitly use that word in the biographical interview (2020), I came back to him to ask if he agreed with the way I use the term here. He consented. In the interview, Faek Rasul (2020, part 1, min 00:57:00) spoke about the traces of the remand prison, indicating gesturally their spreading across his whole body surface, »but here, what is in my head, that's very big. Until today, nobody can take that away.« There are further passages (such as Rasul 2020, part 1, min 01:03:20) that I understood to be a description of traumatic memory. However more importantly in the conception of this article, trauma is conceived as only one level of memory active in Rasul's life and work, that is met by other conscious and intentional activities of memory and remembrance. Artistic work is understood as a deliberate processing and transformation of memory, including traumatic memory.

the right to intrude in his and his friend's private conversation at a public place in Vienna (Rasul 2022).

When Faek Rasul brings together and supports Kurds in Austria, it is always and exclusively for matters of art and culture (Salon Modena Art 2018). In his ongoing activities as an art collector and in his exhibition space of Salon Modena Art, the focus on Kurdish art is never exclusive or even dominating. It could be legitimate to compare Rasul's stance toward the Kurdish community and his being Kurdish with the intellectual profile of the webpage »Culture Project. Art, Feminism and Gender«<sup>13</sup> run, among others, by Faek Rasul's friend Ismail Hamaamin Hamalaw, who is much more explicit in defining the cultural values behind his publishing activities:

»We thought about Culture Project as a way to break the usual image of Kurds as victims or as a fighter or worse—as political figures! Even the Kurdish publication in English is gathering around political issues, but we have very nice art, music, literature, feminism, activism. So, we decided to establish Culture Project in diaspora and in Kurdistan. Critical thinking, gender, and literature is a new way for new awareness out of the old clichés of the traditional politics of Kurdish political parties who until now belong to tribes' or clans' tradition and Islamic values, more than the value of gender equality and human rights.« (Hamaamin Hamalaw 2018)

However, it is not random that Faek Rasul never defines his intellectual orientation as explicitly, but rather expresses it episodically or implicitly, preferably in painting as a non-verbal language.

## 7 Pursuing the »Wall« in Painting

No matter if Faek Rasul had planned to have the traces of the prison walls become part of his paintings from the beginning (from before the trip to Kirkuk), or if they found a way into his work subsequently, his research of memory traces was certainly motivated to some degree by visual and material interests intrinsic to artistic thinking. Therefore, it is important to consider the artistic tradition of the »wall« in modernist painting, which, in one way or another, may have contributed to his desire to see and document the material relics of the prison walls and include them into his own artistic production.

In broader conceptual and art historical terms, interpreting the pictorial surface as a »wall« was one aspect of the manifold ways 20<sup>th</sup> century painting reinterpreted the canvas by literal associations with solid surfaces of writing, posting, or affixing—such as blackboards, billboards, and other paper or

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13 <http://cultureproject.org.uk>. Accessed: 15.7.2024.

textile fabrics—in order to cut it off from »high art« aesthetics and bring it closer to anonymous, common, or debased image and sign systems. An important starting point was laid not in painting, but in photography by Brassai. Since the 1930s, Brassai produced his Paris *Graffiti* series by showing only engraved signs and drawings (according to the proper meaning of the word »graffiti«). He first published these photos in 1933 in an essay describing the signs as the archaic, transhistorical beginnings of writing, which were derived from the same »anguish« in modern factories as they did in prehistoric cave paintings (Brassai 1933).

In the work of Jean Dubuffet, the wall appeared as a distinctive motive to determine the design, style, and semantics of a painting in a specific moment around 1945–46. It was related to his illustrations of Eugène Guillevic's poetry cycle *Les Murs* (Kaplan 2014; Patkowski 2014). Otherwise, in his oeuvre, as in Jean Fautrier's material experiments, the »haute pâte« (a thick color paste with different components such as sand and gravel) produced a relief that resulted in cracks. This allowed further processing by incisions and scratching, possibly reminding the viewer of wall and graffiti structures, but in a wider continuum of possible associations with the material real.

Among the European painters dear to Faek Rasul, Antoni Tàpies is probably the one who evoked the »wall« with the most intensity, especially in the 1950s. However, here, the wall also remains open to transformations in matter and mental associations whose sheer infinity Tàpies listed in his famous article from 1956 »Comunicació sobre el mur« (»Communication on the Wall«; Ishaghpour 2006, pp. 115–117). He described the wall as a base where abundance of feverish artistic activity finds a static moment of silence. Nevertheless, this is a transient moment in his oeuvre, soon proliferating beyond the wall's dusty simplicity.

Shakir Hassan Al Said, about the same age as Tàpies, introduced this »Western« art discourse and procedure into a Middle Eastern, Arabic, and Islamic context. Here, the letter, the highly developed art of calligraphy (in a context of religious iconoclasm) and the practices of writing brought along different artistic, spiritual, and religious traditions. Subsequently, its intersections with common everyday signs opened a different significance. In the 1974 text *Introduction to Realistic Contemplation*—published shortly before Faek Rasul studied in Baghdad as Al Said's student—Al Said conceived a straight link between »the street« and a contemplative sphere of the human spirit:

»The letter is not just a linguistic sign, it is the isthmus in the realm of thought for penetrating into the world of being. Nevertheless, its importance in my paintings is still indebted to the nature of its appearance as a ›trace‹. Hence, I choose it as a popular reality that stems more from the ›wall-environment‹ than the ›advertising-environment‹

or the ›book-environment‹. I like to write the letter in my paintings in the manner of children, school students and half-educated people rather than writing it as a typewriter or a calligrapher would. It is, therefore, the letter of the street and the school room, not the office. In this sense, it is the emanation of the contemplative human spirit, and is at the level of the unconscious or even the fetal level.« (Dagher 2021, pp. 239–241)

Thus, when Faek Rasul, as a person who witnessed and survived the utmost political violence, introduced the experience and documentation of the Kirkuk prison walls into his paintings 25 years after having been incarcerated there, he did so on the basis of this artistic discourse of the ›wall‹ that links the mean and base to the sublime and arcane. Furthermore, he acknowledged Antonio Tàpies, Shaker Hassan Al Said, and Cy Twombly as sources of inspiration (Voggeneder 2015, p. 15; Kienast 2015, p. 24; Six-Hohenbalken 2015, p. 30).<sup>14</sup>

The *Memory* or *Yadgari* paintings from 1998 onwards prepared Faek Rasul's new conceptions of wall-like paintings. These pieces combine the handling of the pictorial surface as a solid fabric with signs that do not transcend it spatially, fostering associations with prehistoric cave paintings and the same anthropological strands of the transhistorical anonymous signs evoked by Brassai or Tàpies. After the Kirkuk trips, this conception has become more specific and simpler. The pictorial surface is more univocally a ›wall‹, and the attached signs appear to have been added to the wall afterwards, as an independent step of procedure. The material preparation of the ›wall‹ has varied relatively little from 2007–08 until the present of 2024. However, in 2011–12, there was a darker layer underneath, mostly of brighter colors, covered throughout the canvas by a thick dirty-white wash including sand and often showing traces of either an irregular flow of paint or the ›wall's‹ rough and irregular sealing—demonstrating how the tools of the upper layers' processing were lent from house painters' and decorators' craft. When the upper layers have set (not yet completely hardened), small portions of the brighter underlying strata are scratched out along the edges of the painting and in some inner sections of the canvas (Fig. 6–12).

The subsequent material and graphic procedures have varied throughout the years. Faek Rasul went on inserting relatively big, regularly outlined crosses and arrows (Fig. 6), similar to paintings from 2003–06. He then (not in a precise time sequence) would experiment with regular engravings (Fig. 7) or scratching free the colorful underlayers either more evenly or more randomly spread across the painting (Fig. 8; Rasul 2015, pp. 85–120). The artist balanced, with varying tendencies, the mimetic recreation of the ›wall‹ and

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<sup>14</sup> For Cy Twombly's conceptions of wall-like paintings and their art-historical genealogy, see Göricke 1995, pp. 36–40.

graffiti against the possibilities of pictorial abstraction, gained from the same material procedures. When the paintings' conception is based solely or mainly on the means of layering, and the scratchings are evenly spread across the picture plane, with no or few additional graffiti-like signs, the effect is rather abstract (Fig. 8). In many paintings from 2013–15, now called *Traces*, the »wall« structure and the added signs reach a kind of bottom line in search of the most random, least »artistic« execution of rough anonymous graffiti: scratches and inarticulate lines, jotted calculations, or children-like or erotic drawings that were often drawn with a pencil that could be found in any »passer-by's« pocket (Fig. 9; Rasul 2015, pp. 60–84).



Fig. 6: Faek Rasul, *Memory*, 2008, mixed technique on canvas, 100 x 100 cm.

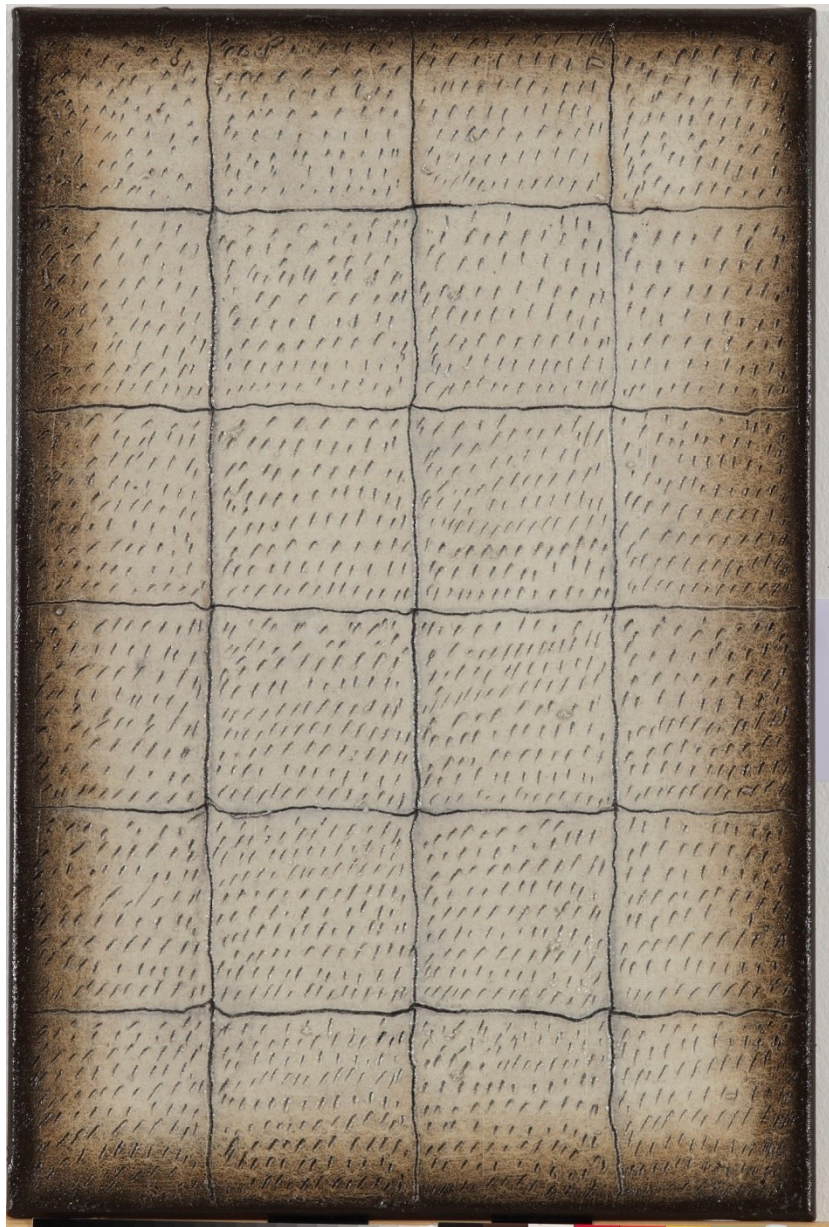


Fig. 7: Faek Rasul, *Talisman*, 2011, mixed media on canvas, 50 x 40 cm.





Fig. 8: Faek Rasul, *Traces*, 2013, mixed technique on canvas, 100 x 100 cm.

Still, the most apparently artless of these »wall« paintings can contain traces that are specifically reminiscent of the Kirkuk prison walls and his prison companions, the tortured and the killed. For example, many of them show the inscription of the name »Faruq« in Arabic (Fig. 8; Rasul 2015, pp. 93, 101, 121 etc.). This was one of Faek Rasul's companions who had a deformed back, whose »hunch« the torturers did not get tired of beating until he was sentenced to death; he had to wait two years for his execution (Rasul 2022). Some pieces show areas of highly condensed letters that either obliterate each other in the layering, are scratched out, or painted over (Rasul 2015, pp. 91–94). Often recurring tally lists correspond to the counting of days in prison (Rasul 2015, pp. 67, 73 etc.). Rectangular systems of lines and signs are remi-

niscent of rudimentary calendars (Fig. 9). Yet, even for a fluent reader of Arabic, the meaning of these signs is vague and open if their context of origin is not explicitly evoked. In some paintings, they show up in a neighborhood of signs that could be found in any public toilet or pedestrian underpass (Fig. 9). In the remand prison, where the inmates waited for their sentence of death or jail time, the same mix could be found: ultimate traces of existence next to erotic and sexual signs or anything else, without any cross-reference.

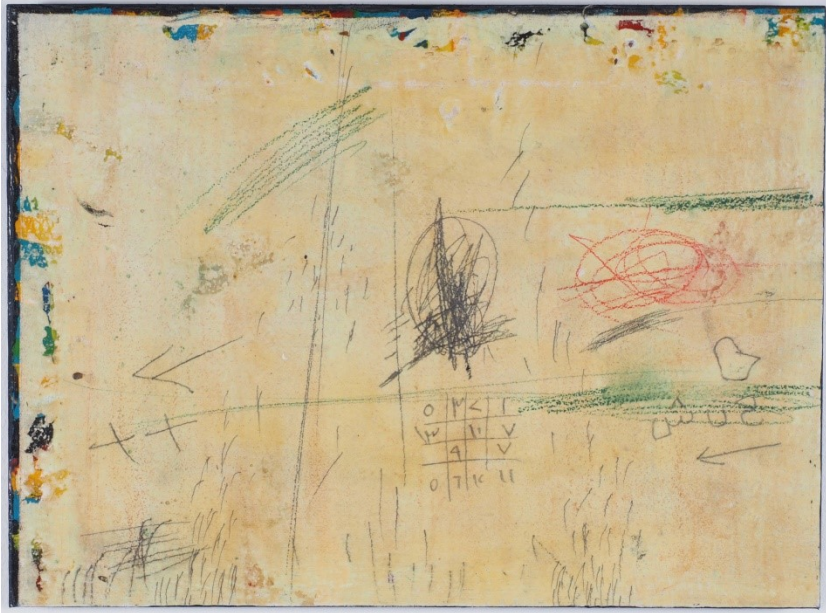


Fig. 9: Faek Rasul, *Traces*, 2015, mixed technique on canvas, 29,5 x 39,5 cm.

The random character of neighboring signs that stems from the multiplicity and heterogeneity of authors and their subsequent manipulations is itself typical of the »wall« and graffiti, as an opposite to the principle of composition, in which every adjacency in the picture surface is potentially meaningful. Faek Rasul consciously exploits the random character of such adjacencies, thus concealing the memorial traces of the killed friends from uninformed beholders. In other words, the display of random adjacencies of often banal signs keeps the pictures' range of interpretation wide open and, despite the persistence to keep memories alive in the paintings, rejects the dramatization of this memory or its instrumentalization for any political or ideological purpose.

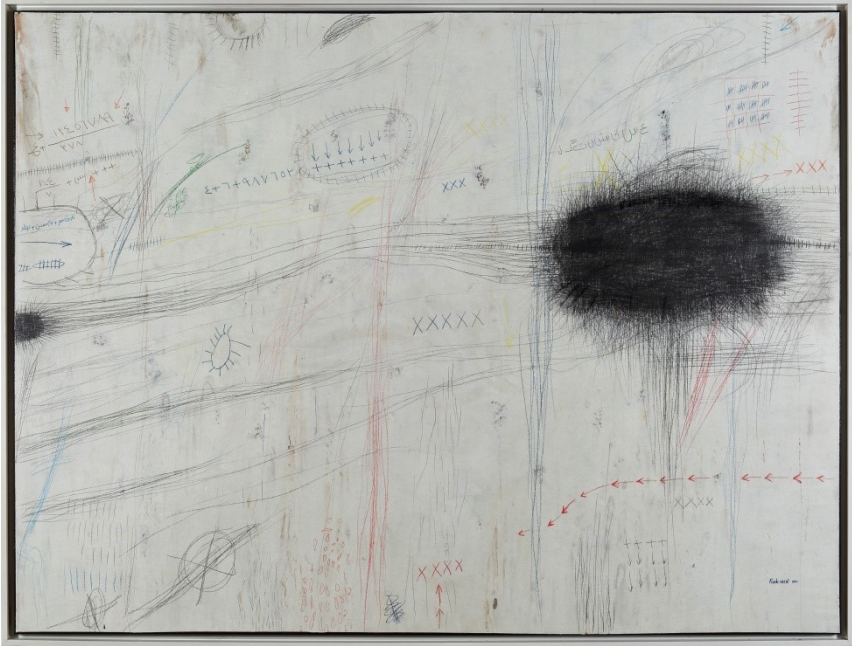


Fig. 10: Faek Rasul, *Traces*, 2017, mixed technique on canvas, 150 x 200 cm.

## 8 The »Wall« and the Black Shapes

Around 2017, Faek Rasul started to redevelop the character of the drawings on top of the wall-like surface, in a continuation of the series called *Traces*. While his handling of the »wall« layers does not change, the emphatically artless signs give way to a new kind of drawing. With a black aquarelle pencil, he draws round shapes or planes along the canvas edges, consisting of very fine, dense hatchings. A painting from 2017 (Fig. 10) appears as a moment of transition: showing how this black structure invades—as a new, alien element—the former »pure« wall-and-graffiti conception. The black drawing then gradually pervades the entire painting, in such a way that the wall-like surface and the black structures become two independent layers (Fig. 11, 12).<sup>15</sup> With increasing density, the hatchings' black turns into a silvery shimmer and, thus, creates a spatial ambivalence: the dense black suspending the solidity of the »wall« surface.

<sup>15</sup> The largest selection of paintings from the *Traces* series is published online at: <https://www.modenaart.at/artist/faek-rasul>. Accessed: 22.7.2024.

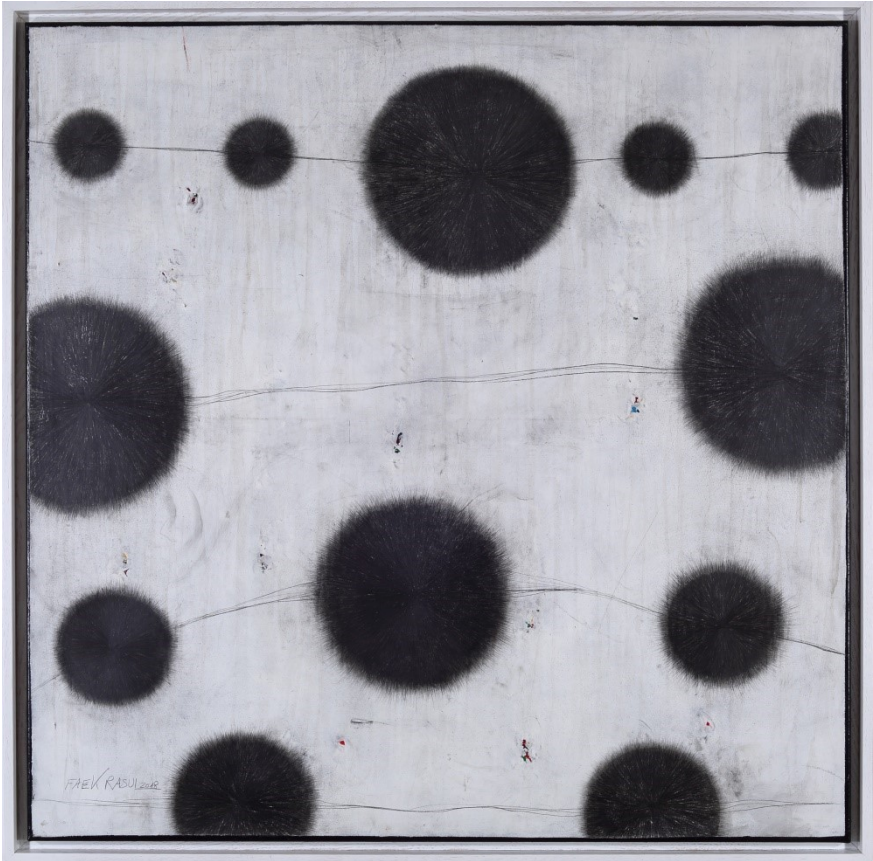


Fig. 11: Faek Rasul, *Traces*, mixed technique on canvas, 2018, 120 x 120 cm.

For a period of around one year in the course of exploring the effects of the new graphic structure, multiple round shapes are horizontally connected by black lines that somehow keep the shapes on a spatial level (Fig. 11). Then the connecting lines disappear, and the black shapes increase in size, which radicalizes the spatial ambivalence (Fig. 12). Depending on the lighting, angle of perception, and distance, one either sees them as »openings« into a black depth the eye cannot grasp, or as shapes shimmering somewhere in front of the »wall« surface.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> Photographic representations hardly convey this ambivalence.



Fig. 12: Faek Rasul, *Traces*, 2020, mixed technique on canvas, 200 x 150 cm.

When the beholder stands close to the paintings and grasps the graphic texture of the black elements, each line of which can be singled out at the border (no zigzag hatchings, but individual lines), he or she can guess the gradual solidification of lines toward a shape. Faek Rasul (2022) said that this solidification process takes long days of uninterrupted work and consumes bundles of aquarelle pencils. By its nature, this procedure immerses the painter's body and soul into a kind of thoughtless objective ritual controlled by his eyes as from the »outside«—a ritual out of which »something« between the subject and object, between traumatic memory and material presence emerges or, in terms of space, between bodies and spatial openings. Aesthetically and procedurally, the ritual and its product follow—in a distance of three decades and within a completely different pictorial concept—the dense ballpoint pen hatchings that constituted the *Dreams* drawings (Fig. 1, 2), and both *Dreams* and *Traces* touch traumatic memories.

Faek Rasul himself related this process to the surrealist concept of the »automatic drawing« for its unintentionality, an attempt of »direct work« in a mental state like under drugs or in fever (Rasul 2020, part 2, min 01:41:40). However, the automatic drawing in surrealist tradition (e.g., by André Masson) intended to be understood as revealing something unconscious through spontaneous expressive lines, brought forward by the hand's free dance (Maclagan 2014, pp. 105–130); whereas Rasul restricts his body to an objective hermetic ritual, expressive maybe, but not due to a spontaneous flow. In terms of expression, a certain representational muteness or numbness is decisive of the pictures' effect. Nevertheless, in its vibrant visuality, this muteness is not dull but rather descriptive of an absence: an absence or muteness that also lies at the core of psychic trauma and its aftermath. In medical terms, »dissociative disorder« is a part of posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD), including such phenomena as memory gaps, feelings of alienation, analgesia (inability to feel pain), or akinesia (motionlessness) (Frewen and Lanius 2006). In aesthetic terms, this absence or muteness makes a specific contribution to 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> century artistic engagement with the unrepresentable of political atrocities.

Concerning the roots of painting in Rasul's personal history, the black shapes do not have any link to the outer material or historical world. Rather, they are fragile echoes of the inner world—a difference that also translates into the visual values of painting: into the new spatial-imaginary character of the pictures. Faek Rasul (2022) connected these shapes to certain »black spots« or »zones« (»*schwarze Flächen*«) he »always had before his eyes« after heavy torture, when he remained in a state between »the conscious and the unconscious«—a state he has entered numerous times over the last few decades after receiving anesthesia before a surgical operation. So, in this case, it

was not a return to a historical site but rather a medical intervention that has allowed him to re-observe a psychic phenomenon of »inner images« that was closely related to torture, as a state of in-between: between the conscious and the unconscious but also between life and death; a state of »peace« before painfully returning to life (Rasul 2022). It is noteworthy that, after decades in which Rasul had turned away from most drastic images of torture and atrocities toward remembering—in more subtle ways—those executed and killed under the Baath regime, he found inner images to inquire into the memory of his own torture and vicinity to death.

The walls in the Kirkuk prison and the »black shapes« are sources of painting from life experience, and certain material techniques allow some kind of re-activation of that experience in art. These sources give individual authenticity to the aesthetic sphere of painting and contribute to the artistic uniqueness that is important to Faek Rasul as a painter. However, the painter does not care to provide the beholders with the means or information to re-trace the experiential and historical sources incorporated in his art. Rather, he definitely insists on the paintings' polysemy, which he enjoys affirming, ironically, by an anecdote: A customer interested in buying an exhibited painting asked him for the title. Upon learning that the title was *Gravestone*, the customer commented: »And you think that I am going to buy a gravestone?« (Rasul 2020, part 2, min 01:23:00) Yet the painter did not take that comment as an insult by virtue of ignorance, as he did not mind renouncing the title. He conceded that it is equally fine for him if the *Traces* paintings are interpreted erotically, as a friend of his suggested, or in any other way.

## 9 Conclusion

Within the wider context of migration studies, it is interesting to differentiate the individual and collective aspects along with the »locations of memory« that are inherent to their artistic elaborations. Locations of memory concern the events, humans, and objects that are recalled; the spaces where the acts of memory happen; as well as the social settings and collectives into which »painting as memory« is inscribed. The differentiation of individual versus collective memory is relevant in this context because individual memory stays, to some extent, continuous in the course of migration, since the person who remembers is also an integral part of what is remembered; while collective memory changes more radically with the social recontextualization inherent to migration. Therefore, the attempt of a diaspora community to keep a frame of collective memory constant beyond migration can be seen as a resistance against the flow of memories' reconfigurations. Lorenn Guyot (2011) called this attempt to »freeze« memory and group identity a »memory

ghetto«, which she analyzed in a case study of a French Turkish-Kurdish community.

This article started with a notion of »torture« Jean Améry defined as an irrevocable existential condition of alienation and, historically, as the »apothecosis of national socialism.« In Améry's account, the tortured is absolutely lonely in his experience—confronted only by his tormentors—and so he is in his individual memory and literary reflection (Améry 1977). Only in the wider frame of literary reception does Améry address collective memory in Germany and beyond.

Faek Rasul's pictorial elaborations of political atrocities are also based on intrusive memories, but this memory is not conceived as an existential loneliness without an alternative. Rather, intrusive memory is inserted into continuously transforming settings regarding events, locations, and subjects remembered as well as the acts of memory. In the *Dreams* series, the memory of Faek Rasul's suffering and testimony of atrocities is converted into an individual imaginary space (of dreams, nightmares, and mental intrusions). Several years after Rasul's arrival in Austria, the imaginary space of *Dreams* is opened to a wider historical and cultural context. While the motive of a gasmask (Fig. 2) is a rare moment of concrete historical evocation in Rasul's oeuvre, referring to the genocidal »Anfal operation«, the portraits of Hejar and Samuel Beckett (Rasul 2006, n. p.) relate the dreadful memory to a Kurdish poet—owing to one poem about the longing for death (Rasul 2022)—and to a European writer associated with existential misery, failure, and absurdity. With the concept of *Gravestones*, the focus shifts clearly to those murdered by the Baath regime. As a result, this emphasis led Rasul to travel back to the site where his fortune to survive was separated from the many who were executed, that is, back to the Kirkuk prison walls where he found material traces of his own and his former fellow inmates. These »walls«—which, according to Rasul, have not attracted the attention of anyone else among the local Kurdish community or former comrades—have remained the »substrate« of his painting ever since, throughout various phases and pictorial concepts, up to the *Traces* series.

The location of Faek Rasul's pictorial memory is one of complex mental and physical movements, back and forth between Iraqi Kurdistan and Austria. Did fleeing to and settling in Austria contribute to memory becoming the main pivot of his painting? Generally speaking, »migration has an effect on how and what we remember« and »displacement intensifies our investments in memory« (Creet 2011, p. 10). As long as Kurds were politically suppressed in Iraq and could not freely publish or establish cultural institutions of their own, the »weight of memory« was substantially transferred to the diaspora (the same applies for Kurds from Turkey, Iran, and Syria). In Iraq,



this was the case until 1991, when a de facto autonomous rule was established »which provided the fertile ground for Kurds to return from exile and produce in their own country« (Sustam 2021, p. 781). Yet, for Kurds who went on living abroad, this did not mean that they would disengage from their responsibility of memory. For Faek Rasul, the political events of 1991 did not mark a turning point in his art. Socially and professionally well established in Austria, he created a transcultural artistic identity facilitated by his career as a gallerist. After the establishment of Kurdish autonomy in Northern Iraq, and after having received Austrian citizenship in 1993, he has been returning regularly to Iraq, even more often since retiring from his work as a gallerist in 2020. However important these trips have been for his personal and artistic memory work, they have never created the wish to move back to Iraqi Kurdistan. Hence, his socio-cultural position is not well described by the terms »exile« or »diaspora«, with their implications of a separation imposed from the outside. Furthermore, Rasul's Viennese circle of friends and acquaintances is diverse beyond a distinction of »Austrian« versus »Kurdish.« In his first years in Vienna, Rasul organized cultural events at the Kurdish Center in WUK but then turned away because Kurdish political voices were too loud there for his interests and desires (Rasul 2022). For him, it is central that the victims of political atrocities are remembered independently of the political fight for a »national« Kurdish survival and beyond any political ideology.

If the national framing of collective memory tends to »reify« culture and memory itself (Erlil 2014), this may as well, or even more so, be the case for diasporic communities, following Guyot's concept of »memory ghetto« (Guyot 2011). In this perspective, Faek Rasul's distance from the accentuated »Kurdish« diaspora and national politics can be connected with his insistence on polysemy—that is, the insistence on the mobility of interpretation and meaning—as well as with the particular ambivalence of simultaneously manifesting and concealing the memories of his deceased friends, as to protect their remembrance from political or ideological exploitation as well as to protect his own freedom of perception and expression. In the case of the *Traces* series, polysemy also has to do with the mental state the paintings allude to: If the black shapes are echoes of the »black spots« he saw in a half-conscious state (after torture and, much later, after anesthesia), it is not clear »what« they actually are. They belong to a sphere that cannot be decoded, and every representational approach has to be reticent.

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