



Title

Hayv Kahraman

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About the author(s)

is a curator and writer whose work focuses on transnational solidarities and exchanges across cultural boundaries. His research explores the history and theory of modern and contemporary art and architecture globally, with specific expertise in the Arab-Muslim world and its diasporas.

Cover image:

Hayv Kahraman

by Amin Alsaden • 13.09.2023

Hayv Kahraman (b.1981) [FIG.1](#) is a multidisciplinary artist based in Los Angeles. Her experience as a refugee growing up in Sweden, where her family sought asylum after fleeing Baghdad following the 1991 Gulf War, continues to inform her practice. She is primarily known for her immaculately crafted paintings, often autobiographical in the multitude of themes the canvases explore. In addition to probing the realities of diasporic communities, especially racialised immigrants living in the West, Kahraman explores questions of alterity and the othering of minoritised or subaltern groups; constructions of gender identities; the gaze and body politics; and the ravages of colonialism. Her paintings are replete with representations of women engaged in a variety of actions [FIG.2](#); these figures are not necessarily self-portraits, but they do speak to Kahraman's lived experiences and convey the possibility of a feminist collective resistance within oppressive societies.

Beyond its distinctive features, Kahraman's work continues to evolve as she conducts research and shares her findings in unique but typically interconnected series, while adding to a growing repertoire of techniques. She is preparing for her largest solo exhibition to date, to be presented at the Institute of Contemporary Art San Francisco (ICA SF) from 16th January to 21st April 2024. In addition to her interest in human anatomy, Kahraman has a newfound fascination with botany, particularly how European colonial classifications have trampled over native knowledge in the non-West, and led to a perverse extractive relationship with plants, and natural habitats more broadly. In this conversation, Kahraman speaks to Amin Alsaden about her current preoccupations, particularly her experiments in marbling – the fluidity and unpredictability of which are replacing a previous focus on geometry and abstract patterns.



Fig. 1 Hayv Kahraman at Frieze London in 2022. (Courtesy Pilar Corrias; photograph Daniel Gurton).

Amin Alsaden (AA): During our last studio visit, you mentioned a new obsession, how you have been marbling everything around you. You were also doing research about a historical figure, a Swedish botanist, and this somehow led you to this technique?

Hayv Kahraman (HK): Yes, the discoveries and alignments happened in a serendipitous way, which is how my work in general jumps from series to series. I was following some Turkish marbling artisans on Instagram and was completely mesmerised by the process. Around the same time I had come across an article about Carl Linnaeus, the eighteenth-century Swedish botanist, who was

the father of binomial nomenclature and the sexual classification of plants among other things. What struck me the most was remembering how my schooling in Sweden idealised this man, completely erasing the colonial and gender hierarchical implications propagated by his contributions. I live ten minutes from the Huntington Library and as they carry many of his rare books, I went to have a look. When I opened the first page of *Hortus Cliffortianus* (1737) I found a marbled frontispiece; that was the 'aha' moment. I immediately returned to my studio and began a deep dive into marbling techniques, as well as Linnaeus and colonial botany at large.

AA: What did you learn? Why did this technique resonate with you on a personal level?



Fig. 2 *Untitled*, by Hayv Kahraman. 2023. Oil and acrylic on linen, 292.1 by 139.7 cm. (Courtesy the artist; Pilar Corrias, London; Jack Shainman Gallery, New York; and Vielmetter Los Angeles).

HK: The history of marbling has been rather opaque in its developments, and perhaps this creates a mysterious aura around it. The form of marbling I am using has origins in the seventeenth-century Ottoman Empire, which spread to Europe when merchants returned with marbled papers. It is called *ebru*, which translates as the art of clouds. The technique was, and still is to

some extent, viewed as mystical because of its unpredictability, as well as the manifold alchemical treatments involved in creating variable results – from the pigment to the liquid bath, to the various surfactants used to change the properties of the paint and so on. This is what I found fascinating: the idea of making something that forces me to relinquish control. Instead of pushing the material to do what I want, I have a reciprocal dialogue with it – there is a therapeutic flow in this process.

Something else that I discovered was the application of marbled paper in important and legal documents in order to prevent forgery. There is no way to reproduce a marbled work as each one is unique. In fact, Benjamin Franklin proposed to marble the edges of \$20 notes but this fell through because of artisanal scarcity in the United States at that time. So, marbling is a monoprint used to solidify something: to make sure it is not stolen, claimed and then appropriated or assimilated. My history as an Arab refugee in Northern Europe in the 1990s is packed with efforts to erase myself in order to survive, so I find close affinities in processes that negate erasures of any kind and find alternative ways of being and existing.



Fig. 3 Work in progress in Hayv Kahraman's studio in Los Angeles, 2023. (Courtesy the artist; photograph Hayv Kahraman).

AA: This personal connection is fascinating, and I am drawn to the affinities you identify in the process. Do you see a parallel between your identity – or, rather, identities, because I understand you belong to multiple communities in Iraq – and this technique? For me, one's identity is not an essentialist or given category, but rather a social construct that one simply has to contend with, especially those of us on whom it tends to be imposed by dominant

powers. I wonder if your experiences as a refugee in Sweden had parallels or roots in Iraq, which we must equally acknowledge?

HK: I am not sure I would say that I see my identity, or identities, reflected in the marbling. I feel uneasy using that word in general as I find it reductive. I think it is more about connections and methodologies that perhaps offer alternative ways of thinking and being that I find interesting. My mother was Kurdish, my father was born in the south of Iraq and I spent my childhood in Baghdad, often travelling to Kurdistan. I personally do not remember being discriminated against – I was pretty young, as we fled to Sweden when I was ten years old – although I think my family at large felt various kinds of discrimination and experienced persecution. My uncle, who was a Peshmerga rebel in the 1980s, was murdered by the Ba’ath regime and both my parents were constantly harassed by the authorities. My personal memories and concerns centre the exclusion and assimilation I felt as a refugee in Europe. Having said that though, perhaps my body carries a generational sense of indignation and this is manifested in my work.



Fig. 4 Work in progress in Hayv Kahraman's studio in Los Angeles, 2023. (Courtesy the artist; photograph Hayv Kahraman).

AA: I do not mean to say that marbling explicitly reflects the complexity of your identities, but I detect a deep connection. You seem to relish the making of these surfaces. What is the process like and how do you typically create that marbled film or skin?



Fig. 5 Work in progress in Hayv Kahraman's studio in Los Angeles, 2023. (Courtesy the artist; photograph Hayv Kahraman).

HK: The process is fluid – literally and figuratively. I make the carrageenan liquid bath the day before I marble, usually up to twenty-two gallons, as my marbling tray is 5 by 10 feet. The next day I mix my pigments with various surfactants. Each pigment reacts differently, so it is always a process of trial and error. And of course, I have discovered exciting effects in the 'errors', which I try to push as far as I can. I use my homemade marbling brush and splatter the pigment on the liquid bath **FIG.3**, which expands and moves as it pleases. Sometimes I blow on the pigment or I use my hand to move it around. Once I have built up the surface, I dip a piece of linen in the bath and wait for it to dry. It is always a surprise. I am then left with an image that serves as the environment for whatever I decide to paint **FIG.4**.

AA: After your initial encounter with this technique, you

began marbling all kinds of surfaces. I saw endless tests on paper, on fibrous linen sheets that you weaved, on canvas and even on bricks **FIG.5**. Aside from the personal affinities you are recognising, in retrospect how would you explain this compulsion?

HK: For me, the marbled surfaces are reminiscent of distant landscapes **FIG.6**, histological cells and surreal habitats that make me think of refugia. I came across this word in Anna Tsing's work: refugia are habitat pockets in which various species have shown incredible resilience and survival by resisting environmental disturbances. It is important to remember, though, that they are not utopias, but spaces in which grief and loss are acknowledged. So, maybe these marbled surfaces can speak of regenerative landscapes where one can find rest and refuge, care and reworlding. This is where the compulsion lies: in finding spaces all around me that harbour life, presence and re-existence **FIG.7**.

AA: I love how your work brings together these seemingly disparate references. I want to suggest yet another. It seems to me that you are cultivating a new skin, because the marbling process involves creating a thin layer, or film, at the water's surface. But you are also transferring this skin to different bodies, those of your canvases and of the numerous figures you paint. This is why I get the impression of you grafting skin, and I wonder about the connotations of that for you.

HK: That is so poetic and well put, and perhaps this is why I am so fixated with the use of marbled paper in preventing forgery, which speaks to this idea to circumvent erasure – bodily, visceral erasure. When I am marbling things around me, I am infecting and contaminating them, much like tree grafting, when you make a small incision in the stem of one tree and insert the stem of another to create something new. This makes me think of vaccines and of arms and bodies being contaminated. Growing up, I was always told to behave. As a refugee in Sweden I was told to obey and assimilate, and as a young woman I was in an abusive relationship, so finding ways to contaminate and graft new skins has always been at the core of my life and work **FIG.8**.



Fig. 6 *Untitled*, by Hayv Kahraman. 2023. Oil and acrylic on linen, 127 by 182.9 cm. (Courtesy the artist; Pilar Corrias, London; Jack Shainman Gallery, New York; and Vielmetter Los Angeles).

AA: Speaking of skin, and your time in Sweden, you have mentioned in the past that you were the person with the darkest skin in your school. Did this make you acutely aware of your skin as a marker of difference? Even before you started marbling, I always associated your work with exquisitely rendered skin – that of the characters who inhabit your canvases. You also seem to gravitate towards raw materials, sort of like a candid expression of exposed skin. Is this consideration of skin deliberate, or is it an unconscious substratum in your practice?

HK: It is both a conscious and innate awareness, I think. The core of it all, as you have alluded to, is my concern with alterity: how it is perceived and how it is embodied. Our skins are markers that tend to place us somewhere on the scale of what it means to be human. The sense of hypervisibility I feel when I walk the streets of Sweden is palpable, yet I am completely invisible in my humanity. The idea that our epidermis is a boundary between the self and our insides is also something I find conflicting. I do not see my skin as a border. I see it as permeable, always moving and always changing. A while ago I discovered that human skin actually has multiple ecosystems of bacteria: armpits harbour a certain kind of bacteria, whereas feet and vaginas harbour different kinds. These are all symbionts living in and around our bodies. This debunks the concept of borders and speaks to connections and symbiotic relationships that, for me, can lead to understanding ‘otherness’.

AA: You are talking about permeability, and marbled surfaces strike me as a representation of that: densely patterned, twisting and swirling unpredictably. They invite multiple readings, from the microscopic to the cosmic. The compositions imply cloud

formations, as much as they evoke terrains and geological strata and scars, blemishes or the discolouration of bruises **FIG.9**. You described embracing errors in the process, but I wonder if you are also embracing imperfections in the end result, considering your work has always conveyed a high degree of control and impeccable execution?

HK: Possibly, to a certain extent. I guess the process is reflected in the end result. I am still employing my visual language, but I am trying to add accents to it and be okay with mispronunciation.



Fig. 7 *Untitled*, by Hayv Kahraman. 2023. Oil and acrylic on linen, 127.1 by 243.8 cm. (Courtesy the artist; Pilar Corrias, London; Jack Shainman Gallery, New York; and Vielmetter Los Angeles).

AA: You just dropped a linguistic reference. Over the years, you have developed a distinctive visual syntax and your work has often been interpreted as being informed by the art of the book: for example, medieval manuscripts, with their flat spaces, stylised figures and intricate patterns. Marbling is also strongly associated with books. What is the relationship between your work and writing and, by extension, history?

HK: Both my parents are linguists, and I had to learn another language when arriving to Sweden so I think about semiotics all the time. I find so much inspiration in language: sometimes it is an entire book or essay, and sometimes just a sentence or a word that can trigger an entire series of paintings. It matters how words are used. I do not personally write much, my writing is scattered and disjointed. But it somehow makes sense to me. The historical part is also significant because of course it lays the foundation for the present and so questioning and unpacking the ways of thinking, living, speaking and storytelling can not only raise awareness, but perhaps also open pathways to alternatives.

AA: If we want to scrutinise history, do you think there are colonial associations to the technique of marbling, given the strong attribution to the Ottoman Empire, even though the Ottomans did not invent it? The desire for authenticity or authentication could

be an indication of corruption, of a luxury that the metropole could afford, often at the expense of 'others' in the colonised periphery.



Fig. 8 Work in progress in Hayv Kahraman's studio in Los Angeles, 2023. (Courtesy the artist; photograph Hayv Kahraman).

HK: It may have colonial connotations, just like painting has. I have yet to talk to a historian on marbling and ask this very question. There are always contradictions in history, and one must be cautious of those and speak of them openly. I do not negate that and I would not put a moral stance on whether marbling is or was 'good' or 'bad'. That is not of interest to me. I think this is why being an artist differs so much from being a historian: I can pick things that resonate, while being completely transparent about all possible associations and work with them, transform them, question and complicate them.



Fig. 9 Work in progress in Hayv Kahraman's studio in Los Angeles, 2023. (Courtesy the artist; photograph Hayv Kahraman).

AA: There are also similar complexities in the concept of 'the body' because – at least in the realm of art and its Eurocentric history since the Renaissance – this is a Western, one could say even colonial, construct. But your work investigates ideas of embodied experience and the body as a site of resistance, which is sometimes the only tool left for the subjugated. In your approach to marbling – just like history, language and the body – do you see yourself appropriating the technique and making something else out of it?



Fig. 10 Work in progress in Hayv Kahraman's studio in Los Angeles, 2023. (Courtesy the artist; photograph Hayv Kahraman).

HK: Embodiment for me is a multitude of things. My starting point is pain. The oppression I have felt, sensed and lived as a female-identifying brown woman with unruly black hair growing up in Sweden. The pain of abuse. That is visceral pain and my mission is to heal, to shed and to rebuild. I do not think I am overemphasising the 'body' either. It is just part of multitudes. What do you do when your entire life is shaped by the way you look? The body you inhabit: the boobs, the hair and the vagina all put you in a category.



Fig. 11 Work in progress in Hayv Kahraman's studio in Los Angeles, 2023. (Courtesy the artist; photograph Hayv Kahraman).

In terms of marbling, I would not use the word appropriate. It is not a clear-cut thing. Imagine walking into a room with a thousand mirrors. Where does your picture start and end? And does that even matter? It is a refraction of pluralities that I am interested in **FIG.10**. I see the approach to my work more in terms of sympoiesis; a becoming with, a making with to become. I do not see myself as possessing something and then making it mine. Nothing is mine. It is a refraction, just like looking into a thousand mirrors. I have struggled so much with people categorising me and trying to place me in a defined and orderly place. This is exactly why I chose to dig into Linneaus's work. He was the father of placing things in boxes and examining them and defining them. Not only is this a form of colonial and nationalistic categorisation, it is also perversely sexist.

AA: I really appreciate this multitude of references, and your ever-

expansive interests. Can you elaborate on your research into the work of Linnaeus and your scrutiny of the origins and practices of botany, which I believe led you to reconsider the representations and roles of plants in our societies?

HK: As I researched the work of Linnaeus, I was startled by how much of his legacy still remains in use today and has permeated the social, economic and embodied lives of many people in the Western hemisphere. His system of binomial nomenclature – that of categorising and renaming plant species – is predominantly still used in the field of botany. I find its history of extracting, erasing and renaming not only blatantly colonial and violent, but it also pushes for forms of categorisation that elicit a framework of belonging and non-belonging – a dangerous form of rhetoric, I think, which we are plagued by today. Gender hierarchies within the sexual reproduction of plants and operations of acclimatisation, domesticating extracted plants from his voyages around the world into the Swedish climate for profit, are significant historical endeavours led by Linnaeus, and this has bled into Western epistemological beliefs.


I think what irks me the most is the fixation he had on extracting plants from elsewhere and acclimatising them in Sweden, forcing them to grow in that environment. I can not help but think of parallels between this act of constraining a plant to morph and grow in Sweden and my upbringing and what was expected of me as an asylum seeker and immigrant. I also can not help but think of the nationalistic surge and push for purity, which we are now seeing there. It is devastating and terrifying.

AA: This research has also led you to examine the palm tree, a plant that has historically defined Iraq's landscape and has a deep cultural significance for our people. You have been researching a specific period when, during the prolonged Iran-Iraq conflict and then the Gulf War, large orchards of palm trees were burned down. Why did that specific image of destruction impact you?

HK: Sometime during my research on Linnaeus, I thought to myself, 'what plant would I find close connections to?' And of course, it was the palm tree, which then led me into a simple Google search. As I scrolled down, I came across many images of dead palm trees and that just shook me to the ground. Even when these trees die and lose their fronds, they stand tall. They do not fall because of their vast horizontal root system. So, it is like they are holding onto each other for support even when dead. One of the most disturbing images I found was an immense orchard of dead, burnt palm trunks. The fact that they were burnt, scorched because of the wars, just made me cry. They look like zombies trying to communicate something. I knew I had to make a work about this.

AA: But why are you using bricks – which are made of mud or soil –

to make this new work, and to represent palm trees?

HK: I am using clay bricks that I marble and build into tall, trunk-like structures. I also paint eyes on some of the bricks . I think the reference is quite literal for me, that of rebuilding something, of healing. I like the connection to soil not because of its potential nostalgic connotations to some sort of return, but rather its connection to life and the microbial world that I think can teach us so much regarding living and thriving with other species. Perhaps this is my way of breathing life into these palm trees, but it is also about confronting and shedding light on this devastation, which is where the eyes come in. They follow you as you walk through the installation of marbled brick trunks. They exist. They might be paralysed but they are alive.

AA: Your words take me back to what you said earlier about those habitats of refugia, landscapes of protection and repair. The word 'soil' has nationalistic and extractivist undertones, but I like to think of land from a non-Western cultural perspective, seeing ourselves as custodians living in symbiosis with land, as though we are an extension of it – we are told we were made of mud, and that we return to the soil in the end. Do you also see the land as a body, and could we think of embodying the land?

HK: You are right, soil does have those associations. But I came to using bricks by accident actually. They were laying in my studio, and as we mentioned earlier, I was marbling everything, and so I just picked one up and dipped it in the marbling fluid and thought 'this is it, I have to make something with these bricks'. Honestly, I did not even think about that, our relationship to soil, probably because I am so wrapped up in thinking about soil as dirt, compost, organisms and a substance that opens up new potentials. I like the idea of thinking of ourselves as extensions of land. It sort of implies a horizontal relationship that can be collaborative as opposed to possessive. Speaking about land and body makes me a bit weary though, because of conventional gender metaphors associating women's bodies with landscape. I do not see 'land' as a body at all, and I'm always conscious about placing myself as a human at the centre of the natural world. It is much easier said than done, and I know I fall back a lot, but I try my best to keep a balanced and a non-hierarchical relationship with nature.

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