

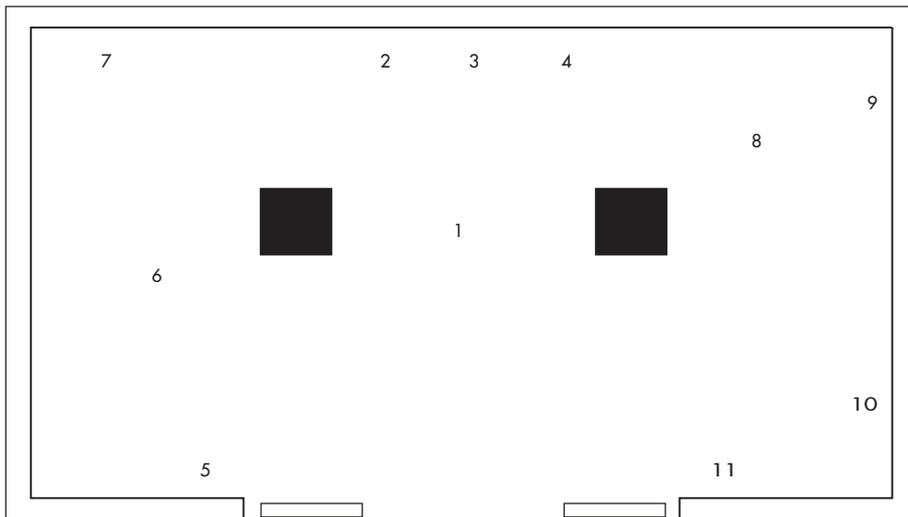
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# FASAHAT

## BECAUSE THAT IS OUR HISTORY

An exhibition by Nahed Mansour with Fatima Abdo, Raed Alhameed, Kifan Alkarjousli, Nagham Hamoush, and Mohammad Rabee Alskif

Galerie im Turm  
07/23/20 – 09/06/20



The Arabic word *Fasahat* refers to creating new spaces that give hope. This exhibition builds on a participatory art project that began in 2016, in which such a space was created by people from Syria, Iraq, and other countries in the Near and Middle East. In the project *FASAHAT*, initiated by Nahed Mansour, the residents of a refugee shelter in Berlin-Kladow worked together to create a museum. Based on their critical discussions about the Pergamon Museum's art and architecture exhibits that are from the same places that they are from and that were brought to Berlin during the German colonial era, the participants developed and built hybrid monuments and display cases for the museum *Bildende Oasen* [Visual Oases] that they created in decommissioned rooms of the shelter.

For this exhibition, former and new artists working on the project further developed the *Bildende Oasen*, which were temporarily relocated into the new context of Galerie im Turm. *FASAHAT - Because That Is Our History* takes place neither in the Pergamon Museum nor in

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the refugee shelter, but in a third place where acts of self-empowerment connect the past to what is new. The works in the exhibition speak of the stories, expectations, and hopes of people who experienced having to flee their home, as well as of their efforts to start a new life in a different society and to redefine themselves without losing their cultural identity.

The exhibition focuses on the dialogues between the participants at the Pergamon Museum and on the hybrid monuments and display cases born from these discussions. The participating artists' voices and artistic works intersect with historical traces, museum references, and everyday objects that speak of the conditions in refugee camps. *FASAHAT - Because That Is Our History* finds a new way to mediate history, one that does not neutralise the emotional resonances evoked by objects and their stories. The participants are active subjects who position themselves in relation to the museum. They articulate their knowledge and stance towards the history and meaning of the artworks and architectural elements held at Pergamon Museum. They discuss the question of who legitimately owns what, the historical context of shipping monumental city gates to Berlin, their dangerous journeys across the Mediterranean, and the colonial continuities that are still evident both in today's museums as well as in Europe's border regimes and its treatment of refugees.

One of the exhibition's central works is the **hybrid Ishtar Gate (1)** by Raed Alhameed, Kifan Arkajousli and Fatima Abdo. It is inspired by the main attraction of the Museum of Islamic Art at the Pergamon Museum: the Ishtar Gate of Babylon in present-day Iraq, built during the reign of King Nebuchadnezzar II in the sixth century B.C. The gate was part of the inner city wall of Babylon and was dedicated to Ishtar, the Babylonian goddess of sexuality, love, and war. She is symbolically represented in the lions on the connecting Processional Way that ran through the gate. The Ishtar Gate attracts millions of visitors each year. It is one of the highly prestigious objects in the Pergamon Museum's holdings that it continues to claim to be the legitimate owner of and to which the Museum Island owes much of its cultural and material capital. These monuments and artefacts were incorporated into the Pergamon Museum in a context shaped by German imperial interests and made possible by colonial infrastructures. Today, a replica of the Ishtar Gate stands in present-day Iraq at the site where, in 1899, Robert Koldewey, the archaeologist in charge of the excavation on behalf of the Berlin museums and the Deutsche Orient-Gesellschaft [German Oriental Society], made sure that the gate and the Processional Way would be dug up and shipped to the German Reich.

In this artistic interpretation of the Ishtar Gate, historical narratives meet the stories of people who also journeyed to Europe across the sea. Their experiences of arriving in Europe, living situation, and standing in society, however, is quite different from that of the monuments and buildings of past civilisations, for which dedicated railways were built and museums in the centre of Berlin to house them and for the city to decorate itself with. The gate in the exhibition is connected to objects of contemporary everyday life in the refugee shelter: the red plastic plates on which the food was served in the canteen of the collective shelter until the inhabitants

organised their resistance against it. From that point on, the red plastic plates became a symbol of resistance against the appalling conditions to which the residents were subjected.

The video in the centre of the gate's Processional Way shows the dinner happening titled *Zusammen schmeckt's besser (3)* [It Tastes Better When Eating Together] that took place as part of the initial *FASAHAT* project. The red plastic plates were a key performative element of the happening, providing a lens through which to discuss the adverse living conditions in the shelter.

The participants got together with their neighbours in Spandau to share the joy of preparing delicious food from the Near and Middle East and the common ritual of eating the self-made meals. (Please note that in keeping with the current Covid-19 health and safety guidelines, the planned dinner with neighbours of Galerie im Turm had to be cancelled.)

The video work *حرج تذكير - Unbehagliche Erinnerung (2)* [Uneasy Reminder] on the same wall was created for this exhibition by Nahed Mansour in collaboration with Cynthia-ël Hasbani. It is an experimental collage that juxtaposes objects from the refugee shelter and from the museum in such a way that the two spaces begin to intersect. Historical references to the excavations conducted by German researchers alternate with statements by people who experienced having to flee their home, speaking about resistance and how they position themselves. Another video documents the project participants' **conversations at the Pergamon Museum (4)** about the Ishtar Gate, about colonial history and its effects on the present.

The Ishtar Gate is also the framework and reference point of Nagham Hamoush's **performance ICH TAR** that will take place in the gallery on September 4th. The performance draws on a reference to the Mesopotamian goddess depicted on the Ishtar Gate to connect her own struggles against an unjust social reality with the mythological image of woman as deity. Hamoush's work speaks of the schisms experienced by women who immigrated from the Middle East and find themselves between two patriarchal worlds: the society in which they grew up and that constructs the notion of their supposed oppression, and the society that these women joined as immigrants and that again projects distortions onto them. In a performative ritual, the artist will pull apart and dissolve those projections and obstacles that hinder her freedom and self-actualisation, to assert herself as an independent woman and take up the divine role of woman leader again.

The left side of the exhibition space holds another **hybrid monument (6)**. It too is based on an icon of early Islamic art, in this case, the facade of the palace Qasr al-Mshatta, whose provenance story is marked by the colonial power relations between the German and Ottoman Empires. Since 1904, the facade of the Umayyad palace has been among the foundational works of the Museum of Islamic Art on Berlin's Museum Island. It was gifted to Emperor Wilhelm II by the Ottoman Sultan Abdülhamid II – a political act that sealed the alliance between the two powers while excluding the general population.

In this artwork by Mohammed Rabee Alskif and Musa Farejah, the display case *Hängende Hoffnungen* [Hanging Hopes] is embedded in a wooden replica of the palace facade. It shows cardboard houses made by children that were created in several workshops, in which

they reconstructed the houses they lived in their home countries as they remembered them. Recordings of their stories and memories of home are heard in the exhibition space. Another **dialogue that took place at the Pergamon Museum (5)** can be heard through headphones: participants discussing the history and art historical significance of the facade and its richly decorated relief that inspired alternative narratives of the revolutionary history of al-Walid II, the Umayyad Caliph known for having implemented new reforms of pictorial and social traditions of Islam during his reign.

Another display case shows various objects and artworks made in the context of the *FASAHAT* workshops, such as letters, everyday objects, and pictures. In the workshop **Wörter aus dem Wasser (7,9)** [Words from the Water], children and adults wrote to a person from their home country whom they missed or to an unknown person from Germany. The artworks were created in the workshop *Geschichte des Meeres (7)* [History of the Sea], in which children made paintings about their memories of fleeing to Europe via the sea route, their experiences of not only the danger but also the adventures, light, colours, and creatures of the sea.

The furniture, architectural elements, and colours (8) across from the Ishtar monument are a direct material reference to the refugee shelter in Spandau. The participants declared these objects to be monuments of everyday life. They speak of the reality of mass accommodation, the rules and regulations, the scarcity of everything, the disarray, and the lack of space. In a photo workshop, adults and youth created a wallpaper that is **a collective portrait of the shelter (10)**, based on photographs they shot of their own rooms and those of other residents. This action collectivised the perspectives of many different people on the living conditions in their immediate environment and offered a way to overcome isolation and loneliness. This part of the exhibition also presents an audio recording of the conversation *Erinnerungen der Wände (11)* [Memories of the Walls] with Fatima Abdo and Jihan Khello, who have participated in *FASAHAT* since its inception. They talk about their experiences at the refugee shelter and about the process of self-empowerment they experienced in the context of the project and in engaging with their own story and the development of the museum.

Both the Pergamon Museum and the refugee shelter are spatial structures in which colonial history and power are inscribed in bodies, objects, and architecture. In refugee shelters, people are herded, housed, constrained, and surveilled; museums are institutions in which objects are subjected to the disciplining power of regimes of representation. Histories of violence often remain obscured, as do links to the present and the cultural and historical knowledge of the people who are from the same regions that these artworks and architectural elements are from. This exhibition attempts to visibilise this marginalised discourse, by virtue of the central location of the gallery, and to temporarily create new neighbourhoods for the project.

With the hybrid monuments and performative appropriations, the artists claim sovereignty of interpretation of history and affirm a new (self-)understanding. The exhibition focuses on human experiences and marginalised knowledges while also foregrounding individual personal

interpretations and the dialogue between diverse voices and perspectives of people who experienced having to flee their home countries. Gallery visitors are invited to move through this liminal place, to see, listen, and draw connections. The everyday objects that were selected and the artworks made in the workshops have become documents of the present, which are transformed into a historical narrative by being declared monuments. In the fragmentary juxtapositions, gaps, and coincidences, the constructedness of historiography and memory becomes apparent, while also opening up space for rewriting and re-appropriation – “because that is our history” (Fatima Abdo, 2019).

## ARTISTS

**Fatima Abdo** is a Syrian artist and fashion designer. She ran a tailor shop for abayas (Islamic over-garments for women) in Aleppo for many years, until the war forced her to leave the country. In Germany, she pursued her interest in art and painting and has participated in several exhibitions. She has been an active member of the *FASAHAT* project since its beginning and worked on the concept development and realisation of the museum *Bildende Oasen* at the refugee shelter An der Havel.

**Raed Alhameed** is an Iraqi artist and engineer from Baghdad. As a trained car mechanic and self-taught painter and sculptor, he has worked in many different fields in recent years. He has been living in Berlin since 2015 and has participated in several exhibitions here since. He is part of the *FASAHAT* project; last year he worked on realising the museum *Bildende Oasen* at the refugee shelter in Berlin-Kladow.

**Kifan Arkajousli** is an artist from Syria. In 2014 he graduated from the University of Damascus with a Bachelor of Fine Arts. He has been living in Germany since late 2015 and began showing his paintings in solo and group exhibitions in 2016. For the past two years, he has been studying to become a teacher of history and art at the University of the Arts Berlin and Humboldt University in Berlin. In his art, he engages with different styles (such as expressionism or impressionism) and materials (such as colors or stone) and explores the themes of memory, ancient civilisations, and women deities.

**Nagham Hamoush** is a Syrian artist, activist, and graphic designer focusing on printing techniques and book art. She graduated with honours from the University of Arts in Damascus and came to Germany in 2015. She is currently a student in the master’s programme Art in Context at the University of the Arts Berlin. For the past five years, she has been a vocal defender of and activist for the rights of women refugees from the Middle East, which is

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reflected as a central topic in her artistic practice. She has participated in several group exhibitions and has led workshops in Damascus and Germany.

**Nahed Mansour** is an interdisciplinary artist and art educator from Lebanon. She studied fine arts in Beirut and Tripoli and worked as an educator at various schools and universities in Lebanon. In 2019 she graduated with a Master's degree from the Institute for Art in Context of the University of the Arts Berlin. She has been working as a supervisor and workshop leader in refugee shelters and in intercultural education projects for several years. Since 2015 she has been developing and leading the project *FASAHAT* at the refugee shelter An der Havel in Berlin Spandau. Her artistic practice moves between community art, performance, video art, and installation. Major themes in her work include identity, critique of representation, and the symbolic capital of the image as a possible tool of resistance.

**Mohammed Rabee Alskif** is a carpenter from Aleppo, Syria. For several years he worked as a furniture maker, interior designer, and decorator in Aleppo as well as in hotel and nightclub construction in Dubai. He has been living and working in Berlin since 2016. In 2019 he built the hybrid replica of the facade of the palace Qasr al-Mshatta for the museum *Bildende Oasen* as part of the project *FASAHAT*.

## EVENTS

We, 19/08 | 6 pm

Artist talk with Fatima Abdo, Raed Alhameed, Kifan Alkarjousli, Nagham Hamoush, Nahed Mansour and Kristina Leko

Fr, 04/09 | 6 pm

*ICH TAR*

Performance by Nagham Hamoush

## THANKS

Artistic director of Fasahat: Nahed Mansour

Curation and text: Jorinde Splettstößer and Nahed Mansour

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