

VISUAL ART

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## Who's That Lady in *The Audience*?

Hayv Kahraman's painting at the Henry's *In Plain Sight* has me obsessed.

by [Jasmyne Keimig](#)



**I can't stop thinking about that face in the center—the gaze, the lips, the inky swirl of her hair.**

PHOTO BY ROBERT WEDEMEYER / COURTESY OF THE ARTIST AND SUSANNE VIELMETTER

am obsessed with the woman looking back at us in the center of Hayv Kahraman's painting *The Audience*. I can't stop thinking about her—her gaze, the inky blackness of the swirl that composes her hair, the way her lips look. I feel drawn to her beauty and her reason for looking back at us. *What could she be thinking?*

*The Audience* and the two other paintings in this series—*The Celebrity* and *The Kurds*—are at **Henry Art Gallery**, where they are part of the group show *In Plain Sight*. The show features artists who address communities, histories, and stories that are not typically considered part of the public sphere.

Baghdad-born, Los Angeles–based Kahraman is obsessed with this woman, too. In interviews, she has referred to the ubiquitous female figure in her work as a singular person taking on many different positions and forms. To her, this woman is a projection of an assimilated body, meaning someone who was taught to think and believe that white European art history was the ideal, in both form and thought.

This ties into Kahraman's own personal history as a Kurdish refugee, who fled from Iraq to Sweden with her family at the age of 10 in order to escape Saddam Hussein's brutal regime. Having struggled to become a part of the hyper-white society, the artist uses this recurring female figure to explore everything she's gone through.

Collectively, the series at the Henry is a comment on benefit concerts (like Live Aid), the relationship between celebrity and refugee, and the self-reflexive, feel-good nature of such shows.

In an interview with the *Art Newspaper*, Kahraman specifically recalled a relief concert in 1991 for Kurdish refugees featuring the likes of Whitney Houston, MC Hammer, and Sting. They performed in front of a video backdrop of impoverished Kurdish people. "From that, I started questioning: How do we mediate images in these humanitarian campaigns, these images of 'suffering others,' in a way that doesn't strip them of all their dignity and in a way that allows them a voice?" she said.

Stylistically, Kahraman draws on Italian masters from the Renaissance and Japanese ukiyo-e prints to create her works, and she has an immense understanding of form, scale, and how and where to draw the viewer's eye. It's no mistake that the woman I'm obsessed with is placed right in the center of the crowd. Her gaze immediately invites viewers into the work, making us a part of this audience, too, participating in this self-congratulatory spectacle. Each painting even has a perfect little slit cut into it, cleverly evoking donation boxes, forcing the viewer to reevaluate their relationship with the people depicted.

Sure, the money raised by these sorts of events is going to a great cause, but how does this centering of celebrity co-opt the struggles that refugees face every day? How does it "otherize" them? So—within this context—perhaps my initial reaction to this figure's beauty was just my own messy feelings around "the ideal." The layers of complexity in viewing and participating in Kahraman's paintings make looking at them all the more meaningful. ★

