

REMAIN

HODA AFSHAR

THE SUBSTATION BILLBOARDS

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REMAIN was made in collaboration with several of the men who still remain on Manus Island, PNG, five or more years after they left their homelands to seek asylum in Australia, but instead were sent to languish in the remote offshore detention centre. Comprising still and moving images, voice recordings and text, the work involves these men retelling their individual and shared stories through staged images, words, and poetry, and bearing witness to life in the Manus camps: from the death friends and dreams of freedom, to the strange air of beauty, boredom, and violence that surrounds them on the island.

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Behrouz Boochani—Manus Island (2018).

Behrouz is a Kurdish-Iranian journalist, writer and filmmaker. He fled Iran in 2013 seeking asylum, and arrived on the shores of Australia on his thirtieth birthday—four days after the Rudd Government announced its offshore detention plan.

I sent this portrait to Behrouz after I returned from Manus in April 2018, and called him. I said, this is you, Behrouz, with your passion, your fire, and your writer's hands. It symbolizes your resistance. He heard this, and paused. You are right, he said. But I do not see myself in this picture. I only see a refugee. Someone whose identity has been taken away from him. A bare life, standing there beyond the borders of Australia, waiting and staring. He fell silent, then said... This image scares me.

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Mohamed—Manus Island (2018).

Mohamed fled Sudan in 2013. I took this portrait of him during my visit to Manus in 2018. It was a dreadfully hot and humid day, like every other day on that island. I travelled with him and another six refugees by boat to a smaller island for the photoshoot. The whole time, Mohamed just stared at the ocean in silence. I later learned that it was the first time in five years he had travelled on water.

Soon after we arrived at the island, he fell very ill. He shook with a fever. We wrapped him in blankets, but he continued to shiver. His arms became covered in a red rash. I worried. Then his friend came to me and said: He will be fine in the morning. This happens whenever one of us experiences a bit of freedom. It scares us. Even the thought of it wrecks us.

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Emad—Manus Island (2018).

Emad is a Kurdish-Iraqi refugee. He arrived at the shores of Australia in 2013 and was sent to the Manus Island detention center—or prison camp, as they call it there—on his arrival.

I made this portrait of Emad when I visited Manus Island in March–April 2018. I asked him to choose something from the island, a natural element like water, or fire or birds, something that he felt would reflect his inner feelings most. He said soil. Why soil? I asked. He replied gently: It reminds me of land; the land that I was torn from; the land that has been torn from me. From us. Soil is the most precious idea in Kurdish culture, he said. But we are stateless. I've been stateless my whole life.

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Edris—Manus Island (2018).

Edris is a Kurdish-Iranian refugee. He arrived at Australia's shores in 2013 when he was only eighteen, before being sent to Manus Island—to Camp Delta, the harshest of all of Australia's prison camps, as they call them there.

Edris reminded me immediately of my younger brother in Iran when we first met. He described to me what being statelessness means, and how his dream of one day having an ID card sent him on this journey. He told me how his detention on Manus has become a nightmare equal to the one that he fled.

I asked Edris what he will do with his freedom, if ever that day comes. He went silent, and looked away. Then he shyly replied, 'I don't know how freedom feels. I haven't even seen it in my dreams yet.'

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Ari Sirvan—Manus Island (2018).

Ari is a stateless Kurdish-Iranian refugee. Like many others, he arrived on Christmas Island, Australia, in 2013, but was soon sent to Manus Island detention centre, where he would be held indefinitely. He was nineteen.

Ari was the most caring and gentle young man that I met on Manus. The wounds on his chest are a permanent memory of the violent racial attacks that he suffered in Iran because of his Kurdish identity. But even greater than the suffering he has endured on Manus is the pain he has experienced being separated from his family. He said to me, 'My mother's eyes haven't stopped weeping ever since I've been detained.'

I asked him how he survived throughout these harsh years of imprisonment. 'Brotherhood, and singing', he quietly replied. 'That's the only thing Kurdish people have left'.