

What permeates the invisible warp and weft

By Elisa Rusca

Located at the centre of the International Geneva area, for more than 30 years the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Museum has been voted to the history and the activities of the ICRC worldwide. Today, the MICR is a place that is alive and offers exhibitions and events that aim to expand the reflections about the meanings of the humanitarian action today. A large part of the temporary exhibitions' programme is dedicated to the work of living artists, such as Petrit Halilaj.

Halilaj was born in the heart of Kosovo in March 1986. He just turned 13 when he had to flee his hometown with his mother and five younger siblings because of the violence of the Yugoslav-Serbian army towards the ethnic-Albanian population. His father was taken, together with all the men older than 15 years old; Halilaj and his family first took refuge in his grandfather's home, then had to escape from there too. Perched on the grandfather's tractor for almost 90 km, they finally arrived in the refugee camp of Kukës, in Albania, where more than 30'000 people had been staying since their expulsion. In Kukës, Halilaj met Giacomo Poli, an Italian volunteer psychologist who encouraged him to draw his fear and nightmares, but also his hopes and dreams for the future. With Poli, Halilaj realised 38 felt-tip drawings on A4 pages.



After the war, he went to Accademia di Brera in Milan and became an artist whose practice, using sculpture and monumental installations, revolves around notions of identity, home, and feeling of belonging. During the pandemic, Halilaj decided to reopen the unfinished history in his personal journey as a war survivor. He contacted Giacomo Poli, with whom he has been in touch through all these years and whom he calls 'his Italian father' and re-discovered the 38 drawings made in Kukës. Halilaj then decided to extract details from the original drawings: they are scanned, blown up, and printed on felt. The felt sculptures are suspended and come to inhabit the space. One side shows the drawing – a soldier, a parrot, a burning house, a deer, a refugee camp, a flying dove – the other is a monochrome colour-sprayed surface. The title of the installation, *Very volcanic over this green feather*, is the English translation of a poem that Halilaj wrote in Kukës; it embodies the contrast of the situation lived by the artist as a kid, but assumes as well a universal sense: good and bad exist together, outside and inside us. Developed from a concept created by Anne Barlow and Giles Jackson of Tate St Ives, *Very volcanic over this green feather* is renewed at the

International Red Cross and Red Crescent Museum in Geneva in the chapter (*Unfinished Histories*). At Tate St Ives, 94 sculptures were shown, while in Geneva 53 are visible. However, this isn't the only difference between the two venues. First, in Cornwall the works were installed regardless of the two faces of the objects, meaning that one would enter the room and see the sad and violent elements together with those that are light and happy. This made for a most dense agglomeration of sculptures and gave to the whole a more intense rhythm: the viewer would be immediately confronted with this complex, contradictory universe. In Geneva, the good and the bad sides coexist in the same space but aren't visible together: when we enter the exhibition's gallery, we face a bright and light universe: birds, animals and plants seem to float between colourful clouds. However, the more we venture in the 500 sq room, the more we discover that behind the monochrome, abstract shapes hide another reality: people fleeing, a tank, flames and soldiers. When we reach the end of the space and we turn back to the installation, the fantastic, childish and happy universe has disappeared, leaving us with a sombre image of war and violence. The slow pace chosen for entering the space in Geneva allowed for a gentle, seductive invitation to the artist's world, only to be hit by the surprise of discovering the back side of it.

The second difference in the adaptation of this project for the MICR is that the contemporary sculptures are put in dialogue with a TV-screen and a small photography on the wall. The photography shows a blond kid, sitting next to an older man with dark hair: Petrit Halilaj with Giacomo Poli, holding up two of the original drawings. On the screen, two videos run on a loop: the first is a 3-minute documentary aired in spring 1999. It was realised by the journalist Saam Kapadia for the Swedish television and focused on Kukës refugee camp. We can see the young Petrit sitting in front of the tent where he lived, coloured felt-tip pencils in one hand, papers in the other; around him, other kids, women, old men, all watching him in silence, observing him depicting horrible scenes of burned houses and people killed by the Serbian army, as well as magic landscapes of Kosovo before the war, and what he loves the most: parrots. He is commenting his work and the scenes he testified to with a maturity – in his tone, his look, his posture - slightly uncanny for a 13-year old. The second excerpt is an extract of the footage realised by the Albanian national television about UN Secretary General Kofi Annan's official visit to Kukës.

Kofi Annan's team went to Kukës before the official visit, in order to prepare the logistics connected to such a mediated event. When they arrived in the camp, quite quickly they got the rumour about the talented Kosovar refugee kid capable to draw so well. They found Halilaj and asked him to do a drawing for the Secretary General: a drawing that illustrate the war, and which Kofi Annan could bring as a message to the United Nations. The young Petrit was euphoric: finally, a way to bring the account of what was happening in his hometown to international attention! At last, a possibility to have an impact on the war! He then went with his mother looking for a bigger support for his work because a A4-paper wasn't enough for that duty. Drawing materials aren't easy to find in a refugee camp; despite everything, they managed to find a large cardboard on which Halilaj drew a scene titled 'What is happening to the children of Kosovo?' and where one could see, among tanks and explosions, a little boy holding up his fists over his face. He could be crying, but he also could be preparing for fighting back. On the visit's eve, while finalising what he later will be calling, jokingly, 'his first artistic commission', Halilaj is very excited. However, his grandfather Osman, seeing the kid so enthusiastic about participating in the event, abruptly told him: 'Do you really think that your drawing will stop the war?'. These words act as a shock of the young Petrit, who suddenly is brought back to reality: his father is missing for weeks, and nobody knows if he is dead or alive; his family has lost everything; they are in a refugee camp and they don't know where they would go and how they could live. His grandfather made him realise that

the UN official visit was a theatre, a spectacle orchestrated for the international press in which he and his drawing played a small, unimportant part. The next day, in front of hundreds of cameras, Halilaj held up high the coloured cardboard in front of Kofi Annan but refused to give it to him. The object is currently in Albania, and the small kid at its centre has been scanned and printed on felt, becoming the central piece of *Very volcanic over this green feather*. In Geneva, it is the only sculpture that is printed on both sides, hence inhabiting simultaneously both universes, the playful and colourful, as well as the dark, violent one. It is also the only piece that almost touches the ground with its lower part, balancing between the universe of childhood fantasies and that of war's nightmare.

The presence of the photo and video documentation acts as an anchor for the suspended sculptures of the installation. Suddenly, *Very volcanic over this green feather* isn't just an ensemble of beautiful, majestic pieces: thanks to the historical material, visitors can realise how small is the original size of the drawings, as well as perceive how much the change of the scale switches the physical relation to the exhibited objects. A peacock that is just a tiny detail in a drawing of a landscape in the hands of the young Petrit, materialises itself in the exhibition's space as a sculpture of almost two meters width. The Swedish documentary and the news footage by the Albanian television enable a dialogue between the contemporary artwork and the past context in which its primary source was originated. Its appearance in the exhibition produces an oscillatory movement between spaces and time, letting the visitors bouncing back and forth between Kukës in 1999 and Geneva in 2023.

As a matter of fact, drawings of children who witnessed violence have been and can still be used as additional proof during legal procedures. In 2007, the organisation Waging Peace sent 500 drawings to the International Criminal Court in The Hague: they were made by Sudanese children in a refugee camp in Chad, and they were included as contextual evidence for the Darfur war crimes trial. In the history of criminal justice, this has happened before: in 1961, the drawings of Yahuda Bacon, a Theresienstadt and Auschwitz survivor, were used as forensic evidence during the trial of Adolf Eichmann in Israel and in Frankfurt during the hearing on Auschwitz personnel. Petrit Halilaj's drawings from Kukës, in their accurate attention to horrific details and poignant desire for peace, have that same great strength, which gets amplified when relating with the historical material. This discontinuity between times mirrors the discontinuity in the exhibition space; the suspended cut-out elements, which are mimetic and figurative, play with the void around them and make it crack, as the Lacanian Real would permeate the invisible warp and weft of the scene.

The extraction of details from the original drawings and their conversion into abstract forms hanging from the ceiling is a long, meticulous procedure. Halilaj carefully studies the space where the installation will be presented, selects the details, which are at first miniatures printed on paper glued on sticks, and then places them on a maquette. He moves these figurines around, manipulates them, imagines how they will visually speak - to each other, and to the viewer. The peacock with the soldier, the burning house with the flying dove. The space of the room translates in the three dimensions the white, two-dimensional space of the A4-paper; that paper which, as a kid, Halilaj used as a container for all those stories of violence, war, dreams and hopes. The room becomes the new container, and this time the artist is consciously in charge of its order and organisation: by reclaiming his agency over the narrative of the dramatic situation that he experienced, Halilaj transforms the gallery in its mental landscape and reverses the power relations in the account of trauma. What was once the result of an almost therapeutic gesture is

digested in a deeper form of healing. When affected by Post Traumatic Stress Disorder, or PTSD, one can never really recover: we can only learn how to live better with the memories of the traumatic events. For PTSD survivors, reclaiming their own narrative over the lived experiences is an important step in the process of healing. The trauma of the war and of the displacement is part of Halilaj past and in *Very volcanic over this green feather* the artist has the courage to go back to that past, while assuming the vulnerability of sharing it with an audience. It is an act of resilience, self-care, and love.

In the space, when we face the monumental installation, we can feel very small – are we reminded of the fact of being a kid in the middle of events bigger than us? However, the pieces are also soft, colourful, and inviting. The threads that suspend them are well visible and remind us of elements from a theatre scenery – another formal reference to the spectacle of the mediatisation of global conflicts. Looking carefully at the pieces, one could notice that some of them are composed by multiple parts of felt sewed together. Here, as well, the thread here has been left visible; they might be scars, or a reference to the very action behind every process for the construction of personal identity: putting together bits and parts – of stories, memories, hopes. On some elements, one could notice that real feathers of various birds have been added to the sculptures. Halilaj has collected them in Kosovo today, but also in Geneva: birds migrate and have multiple homes; they are as well symbols of peace and freedom. By placing the feathers in the installation, the artist once again connects different places and different times and gives voice to the (unfinished) history of Kosovar people, as well as to his own and to those of all who shared similar experiences. Ultimately, the message that Halilaj sends is a call for hopes and colourful dreams for the future.

This is how, and why, the exhibition relates to the humanitarian action and contributes to enriching the dialogue between contemporary art and socially engaged practices. (*Unfinished Histories*) – *Very volcanic over this green feather* explores the limits between reality and imagination. It's a show about resilience, acceptance, and sharing. If there is a future for a humanitarian action that is not an act of colonisation, but an act of care and empowerment, this is from where we should start: by learning from a project like this one to allow a multiplicity of voices to tell their stories and to be heard.

Image credit:

Installation detail, Petrit Halilaj (*Unfinished Histories*) © Mennour Archives, 2023 ABOUT THE SHOW

(*Unfinished Histories*) - *Very volcanic over this green feather*

Solo show of Petrit Halilaj (*Kostrc, 1986)

Musée international de la Croix-Rouge et du Croissant-Rouge, Geneva

25.05 – 17.09.2023

Curated by Elisa Rusca upon an original concept developed by Anne Barlow and Giles Jackson, Tate St Ives, 2021.

Petrit Halilaj is represented by ChertLüdde, Berlin, Mennour, Paris, and kurimanzutto, Mexico City / New York.

AUTHOR'S BIO

Art historian, curator, and writer, Elisa Rusca is Director of Collections and Exhibitions at the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Museum, Geneva (CH). She joined AICA Switzerland in 2010, since 2014 she has been part of the AICA International Board, and between 2015 and 2022 was Chair of the Digital Strategies Committee. In 2021, she won the Prix spécial du Jury du Prix AICA France pour la critique d'art. Ph.D. candidate in Visual Cultures at Goldsmiths, University of London, she is editor and a regular contributor for the printed and online Italian pages of Kunstbulletin, the leading swiss magazine dedicated to contemporary art. She collaborated on the publication of the New Dictionary of Photography (Thames&Hudson, 2015) under the direction of Nathalie Herschdorfer, and her texts about art theory have been published with Textuel, Goethe Institut Verlag, and Mimesis, among others. As an independent curator and researcher, since 2014 she has been active in various cultural, nonprofit institutions and events in Europe, and she has given lectures in Europe, Brazil, South Korea, and Taiwan. In 2017, she curated the participation of Iranian photographer Reza Khatir in 'Personal Structures – open borders' at Palazzo Mora, a collateral event during the 57 Venice Art Biennale. Her book Oblivio (Broken Dimanche Press, 2014) is a collection of writings and artworks spanning from science to poetry, from sociology to media theory, and wishes to expand the analysis and discussion of the many aspects related to fading memory and contemporary art.