

"I am a stranger: a stranger twice over"

## Contemporary art meets early Islamic high culture

**Running until 20 February 2022, Ali Kaaf's installation "Ich bin Fremder. Zweifach Fremder" will be on show in front of the largest and perhaps most significant piece of Islamic art to grace any museum worldwide. In exhibiting his piece in this way, Kaaf draws it into a contemporary dialogue with the 1,300-year-old facade**

A striking installation by the German-Syrian artist Ali Kaaf has been on display in the Mshatta Hall at the [Museum of Islamic Art in Berlin](#) since 1 December 2021. Kaaf uses his intervention piece, triangular and rich in symbolism, to lend a contemporary artist's perspective to the building's changing history, before the [Mshatta Facade](#) is dismantled, restored, and displayed at the renovated Pergamon Museum in 2026.

*Where does the title of the installation "Ich bin Fremder. Zweifach Fremder" ('I am a stranger: a stranger twice over') come from and how does it relate to the installation and the Mshatta Facade?*

**Ali Kaaf:** The title comes from a poem by the philosopher and poet Abu Hayyan al-Tawhidi, who lived in Baghdad in the 10th century. From his perspective and at the time he was alive, to be a stranger meant, first and foremost, voluntarily separating oneself from society so as to achieve contemplative silence. According to the Gnostics and Islamic Sufis, it also indicated an estrangement from the self in the attempt to attain spiritual union with the world.

For me, the Mshatta Facade mirrors my own fate, migrating and arriving in a new culture, where that arrival is never complete.

*How did this partnership with the Museum of Islamic Art in Berlin come about?*

**Kaaf:** I had an involved conversation with Dr Stefan Weber, Director of the Museum of Islamic Art, when he visited my studio. We discussed the influence of Byzantine art on early Islamic art. We also discussed the Mshatta Facade, on display at the Pergamon Museum, which is an impressive example of this hybridity; the idea for my intervention gradually developed out of that. I was also working with the knowledge that the Mshatta Facade was to be dismantled in the spring of 2022 so that it could then be put on display in another room in the renovated Pergamon Museum in 2026.

*With its specific use of shapes such as cuts, holes and spaces, Kaaf's artistic intervention opens up its very own perspective on the ornamentation of the*

*Mshatta Facade: "I use perspectives on and glimpses of the monumental Mshatta Facade to build an area of tension which creates a space of ambivalence in the place in between, between facade and intervention, history and present, familiar and strange, visible and invisible."*

*What kind of place is the Pergamon Museum from your perspective? What does the Islamic Art Collection mean for you and your work?*

**Kaaf:** I've lived in Berlin for over 20 years. During that time, the Pergamon Museum has become a place that I visit regularly – not just because of the imposing and impressive objects on display, but because of its unique museum concept, the way spaces are presented within the space.

*What do you think about, and what do you feel, when you see the Mshatta Facade?*

**Kaaf:** It sparks memories from my childhood. I grew up in Damascus, but my family and I spent a lot of time in southern Syria, which is home to many ruins, as well as ancient Roman and Byzantine cities of various sizes. Looking back, I think of us playing next to those ruins as children. They were part of nature, part of life in that place. The original site of the Mshatta Facade was just 200 kilometres from where we stayed. The first time I saw it shut off in a room in the museum in Berlin, the facade seemed like it had been estranged from its surroundings.

At the same time, it's precisely this feeling that fascinates me: seeing a monumental architectural object, which once encompassed a whole space, contained within a single room.

*How do you capture different aspects in your installation – in terms of space, position and shape?*

**Ali Kaaf:** There's a second layer which touches on the principle of *pars pro toto*. As enormous as the facade seems when you enter the hall in the museum, it was once part of a much larger building in Jordan. In front of it, a kind of puzzle made up of knowledge, ideas, and questions of perception develops. I singled out the triangle as the decorative facade's essential, symbolic element and present it in front of the facade as the metaphorical 'tip of the iceberg'.

My interest in space within the space is also essential here. Through my installation, thus placed within a new context, the Mshatta Facade undergoes an extended perception of space. The triangle positioned in front of the facade becomes a doorway, connecting both past and present, early Islamic culture and Christian culture. Looking through the delicate front side of my work, a new perspective on the space emerges, inspired by the sensitive separation of inside and outside thanks to the window grates present in Islamic culture. I use the perspectives on and glimpses of the monumental Mshatta Facade to build an area of tension which creates a space of

ambivalence in between, between facade and intervention, history and present, familiar and strange, visible and invisible.

*In your view, what is the tangible relationship between your 2021 work "Ich bin Fremder. Zweifach Fremder" and the Mshatta Facade, which was built in the eighth century?*

**Ali Kaaf:** It is in their fragmented natures – the process of losing one's roots, migration and the change of cultural surroundings. My installation is an embodiment of questions associated with these themes. As an artist, I'm interested in fragments. My artwork is part of and a basis for a comprehensive artwork which takes inspiration from the facade itself, which again is part of a whole.

*How does "Ich bin Fremder. Zweifach Fremder" differ from your previous work?*

**Ali Kaaf:** One difference is the physical experience of the installation within the space, in relation to an object which already exists. There is a specific artistic connection to my sculptures and my series of photo collages titled *The Byzantine Corner* which I have worked on intensively in recent years. In these works, I try to embody the graphic layer and the photographic layer, both space and design. The radical cuts were necessary for me to create a magical space. This installation enabled me to try these elements out within a space on a new scale, one which required intensive modelling and projections in order to develop a correct concept of the space.

*Magdalena Heinrich from [ARTPRESS – Ute Weingarten](#) spoke to Ali Kaaf about his installation*

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*German-Syrian artist Ali Kaaf, born in Algeria, lives and works in Berlin. He completed studies in Visual Arts at the Lebanese Academy of Fine Arts in Beirut before studying at the University of Arts in Berlin under the mentorship of Rebecca Horn and Marwan Kassab Bachi. His work moves playfully between Arabic and European visual traditions. His work has appeared in collections worldwide via numerous exhibitions and residences. In 2020, Kaaf was awarded the stipend for the Federal Foreign Office's AArtist in Residence programme.*

### **More on this topic**

[Ali Kaaf exhibition: "Ich bin Fremder. Zweifach Fremder"](#) Art historian

[Wendy Shaw: What is art, when the primary sensory organ is the heart?](#)

[Islamic art: Iconoclasm: the counter-narrative](#)

Source URL: <https://en.qantara.de/content/i-am-a-stranger-a-stranger-twice>

The screenshot shows the Qantara.de website interface. At the top, there's a navigation bar with 'Home', 'Public', 'Society', 'Culture', 'Topic', 'Essays', and 'Photo Essays'. The main content area features a large image of a modern art installation in a museum setting. Below the image is the article title 'I am a stranger, a stranger twice over' and a sub-headline 'Contemporary art meets early Islamic high culture'. The article text discusses the installation 'Ich bin Fremder, Zweifach Fremder' by Ali Kaaf, which is a large-scale work made of puzzle pieces. The article is dated 28 February 2022. On the right side, there are social media sharing options for Facebook and Twitter, and a list of related news items.

[over-contemporary-art-meets-early-islamic-high-culture](https://en.qantara.de/content/i-am-a-stranger-a-stranger-twice-over-contemporary-art-meets-early-islamic-high-culture)

This screenshot shows the full text of the article 'I am a stranger, a stranger twice over'. The text is organized into several sections with sub-headers. The first section, 'With its specific use of shapes such as cuts, holes and spaces, Kaaf's artistic intervention opens up its very own perspective on the interpretation of the Minaret Facade', describes the artist's approach. The second section, 'What does the place in the Pergamon Museum from your perspective?', discusses the artist's connection to the museum. The third section, 'How do you capture different aspects in your installation - in terms of space, position and shape?', explains the use of puzzle pieces. The article concludes with a reflection on the artist's perspective of space and the connection between past and present.

PERAMON MUSEUM  
GOOBYE MSCHATTA  
ICH BIN FREMDER. ZWEIFACH FREMDER  
1.12.21 - 20.2.22  
ALI KAAF

How do you capture different aspects in your installation – in terms of space, position and shape?

Ali Kaaf: There is a second layer which touches on the principle of jars per jar. As anomalous as the facade seems when you enter the hall in the museum, I was one part of a much larger building in Jordan. In front of it, a kind of facade made of knowledge, ideas, and questions of perception developed. I singled out the triangle as the decisive facade element, symbolic element and present it in front of the facade on the metaphorical top of the ceiling.

Why did you choose within the space is also essential here. Through its installation, thus placed within a new context, the facade facade changes an established perception of space. The triangle positioned in front of the facade becomes a country, connecting both past and present, early Islamic culture and Christian culture. Looking through the facade from both of the work, a new perspective on the space emerges, inspired by the sensitive separation of inside and outside through the window grille present in Islamic culture. Like the perspectives on and glimpse of the monumental facade facade to build an area of tension which creates a space of coexistence between facade and intervention, history and present, familiar and strange, visible and invisible.

In your view, what is the tangible relationship between your 2021 work "Ich bin Fremder, Zweifach Fremder" and the facade facade, which was built in the 8th century?

Ali Kaaf: It is in their fragmented nature - the process of being one's roots, migration and the change of cultural surroundings. My installation is an embodiment of questions associated with these themes. As an artist, I'm interested in fragments. My artwork is part of and a basis for a conceptual artwork which takes inspiration from the facade facade, which again is part of a whole.

How does "Ich bin Fremder, Zweifach Fremder" differ from your previous work?

Ali Kaaf: One difference is the physical experience of the installation within the space, in relation to an object which already exists. There is a specific artistic connection to my sculpture and my series of photo collages titled "The Byzantine Corner" which have existed on Instagram in recent years. In those works, I try to remedy the graphic layer and the photographic layer, both space and design. The radical cuts were necessary for me to create a magical space. This installation enabled me to try these elements out within a space on a new scale, one which required intense modeling and projections in order to develop a correct concept of the space.

Magdalena Heivich from ARTPRESS — Like Wengarten spoke to Ali Kaaf about his installation

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German-Syrian artist Ali Kaaf, born in Algeria, lives and works in Berlin. He completed studies in Visual Arts at the Lebanese Academy of Fine Arts in Beirut before attending at the University of Arts in Berlin under the mentorship of Rebecca Horn and Marlene Passad Barch. His work moves playfully between Arabic and European visual traditions. His work has appeared in collections worldwide in numerous exhibitions and residencies. In 2020, Kaaf was awarded the award of the Federal Foreign Office's Artist in Residence programme.

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- Ali Kaaf exhibition: "Ich bin Fremder, Zweifach Fremder"
- Art historian Wendy Shaw: What is art, when the primary sensory organ is the heart?
- Ali Kaaf: Ich bin Fremder, Zweifach Fremder