

Foreword by

HRH The Prince Charles

former Prince of Wales

Hannah Rose

Thomas

Tears *of* Gold

Portraits of Yazidi, Rohingya,
and Nigerian Women





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Thomas

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and Nigerian Women

Plough

This is a preview. Get the entire book here.

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“Since my escape I have learned how often women are victimised by war, from Rwanda to Bosnia, from Syria to Myanmar. Yazidi women now belong to a vast network of survivors of rape and enslavement. Rather than emphasising our victimhood, that connection to other women empowers us to take back our lives and to fight for our community’s future. Like those brave women, Yazidi survivors are much more than victims.”

Nadia Murad Basee Taha
Nobel Peace Prize Laureate, 2018

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Foreword



I first saw Hannah's striking portraits at her Degree Show in the summer of 2018. She had just successfully completed the two-year master's programme at my School of Traditional Arts in East London. I was immediately struck by the power and dignity of the women's faces. In fact, I was so impressed I chose three of her portraits of Yazidi women (who escaped ISIS captivity) to include in my exhibition *Prince & Patron* held at Buckingham Palace in 2018.

Hannah's portraits also include Rohingya women who fled violence in Myanmar and Nigerian women who survived Boko Haram and intercommunal violence. Hannah had the privilege of meeting these women when she was organising trauma-healing art projects for survivors of religious persecution and forced displacement. These projects took place in Iraqi Kurdistan, Bangladeshi refugee camps, and in northern Nigeria.

One of Hannah's aims is to capture not only the courage and stoicism of the women who have suffered so much, but also the nobility, dignity, and extraordinary compassion that many of them manage to retain, despite their traumatic experiences. Her use of traditional painting techniques along with gold leaf (learned at my School of Traditional Arts), together with her spiritual outlook and intention, elevates the portraits to almost the status of icons – transforming the particular into the archetype and the individual mother into the Universal Mother, thereby speaking to every woman.

I very much hope that this beautiful book, *Tears of Gold*, will help enable the Yazidi, Rohingya, and Nigerian women's voices to be heard, as well as to highlight the issue of the persecution of religious and ethnic minorities in general. All too often, their stories of suffering remain unseen and unheard – but Hannah Thomas is doing tremendous work in bringing their stories out into the open. May her powerful paintings spread the word and, God willing, have a positive impact in relieving the suffering of some of the most vulnerable and marginalised communities around the world.

HRH The Prince Charles
former Prince of Wales

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Preface



Human emotions are a cipher – sometimes so contradictory that to read them effectively can become a lifelong exercise, and only when we know someone long enough are we able (perhaps) to discern their more complex feelings with some degree of confidence. But what if there is no voice or sound from that person, and a meeting is only momentary? In such cases, we would hope the individual is at least close-up; we could then pick out the smallest alterations in their facial features. And what if the individual is not there at all – and we are staring at an image of them, courtesy of an artist or a photographer? The challenge to forming a reasonable estimate of that human's state of mind becomes daunting indeed. There is no motion to the thread-like creases of the skin, no faint rotation of the neck, no slight pause after eye contact has been broken off to help us understand what the observed human actually feels. And only the most talented photographers and artists would be able to draw out real emotion or mood from such a fixed image.

Fortunately, one such artist is Hannah Rose Thomas, a remarkable painter and storyteller. Her book *Tears of Gold* is not simply an exposé of her artistic skill; it is much more than that – it is her deposition, her witness statement to the suffering of fellow beings. Containing the portraits of thirty-three survivors of extreme violence (sexual and gender-based violence in the case of many), the book centres on their individual stories and, by extension, the horrific atrocities experienced by their communities.

These survivors have experienced violence which can be divided into two forms: the vicious assaults on their own person, and the violence perpetrated against their loved ones.

Interestingly, the survivors who have been attacked directly will seldom reveal their suffering openly when strangers are about. Rarely, for example, will you see displays of uncontrollable sobbing. There may well be tears – after all, their pain is immense – but those tears are often unaccompanied by other expressions of emotion. There is so much control and a natural humility, the effect is simply startling. It is not what the observer commonly expects – and Hannah captures the authority within each survivor perfectly and beautifully.

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I once heard the late Elie Wiesel tell an audience that a beginning is never as hard as beginning again: how to begin again, where to begin again, and with what? To assemble one's reason after it was exploded by acts that would normally defy it requires a sense of gathering, an equanimity, a new peace, a new strength. And that is what we see in Hannah's portraits. Her use of golden halos, for example, is not a depiction of sexual violence itself as much as a reflection of individual acts of resurrection. The portraits of the survivors gracing the pages of this book therefore represent a beginning again, of a human who was almost, but not quite, destroyed. A human who has lost, and is finding again, not everything, but something – something important to her.

The second form of suffering, the witnessing of violence meted out against loved ones, or not knowing what has happened to your young children after they were torn away from you, is significantly more acute. When it comes to enforced disappearances, it is one's own imagination which torches the mind, laying a form of permanent siege to it. Enduring the enforced disappearance of a loved one is perhaps the cruellest and most painful form of human suffering. Here, I found Hannah's portrait of Fahima deeply moving. Her head bowed slightly, her eyes almost closed, ending a downward movement of the face, and her spirit almost crushed – all so profoundly touching. You want to hold her hand and then hug her. The tears would assuredly not be hers alone.

These women have all survived the actions of men. If by way of our empathy and love they can step forward, toward some form of personal reassembly, we have completed half our task. Our anger and refusal to accept their injury or loss without consequence to their perpetrators are two other emotions we must gather and then sharpen. It is simply not good enough for us to feel the pain of the survivor and remain silent, or speak in generalities (or euphemistically) for fear we might offend someone. In the ASEAN summit meeting held in November 2017, soon after the attacks on the Rohingya, none of the assembled heads of state and government had the courage to even utter the word "Rohingya" in public – what a disgrace! Each of them should be made to have one of Hannah's portraits hanging on their office wall or standing on a table at home.



This reminds me how easy it is for us to duck that which makes us feel uncomfortable. Not shown in this book – but I commend Hannah to consider them – are the last few survivors of sexual slavery from the Second World War, the so-called comfort women. They are elderly now and their faces, while carrying the sweetness common to anyone in their early nineties, also speak to their exhaustion. One of them, Kim Bok-dong, wrote to me two years before she died, when I was still the UN Human Rights chief, noting that even if she was too tired and too old to travel, she would continue to campaign from her home in Seoul for the sake of other survivors, asking only that I “remained concerned” about them.

We should all remain concerned – this beautiful book, the artist, her portraits, and, most importantly of all, the survivors will not permit us to easily forget that.

Prince Zeid Ra’ad Al Hussein

UN High Commissioner for Human Rights (2014–18)



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The Art of Attention

An Introduction

“I see the eyes but not the tears
This is my affliction.”
—T. S. Eliot¹



The French philosopher Simone Weil writes that the “capacity to give one’s attention to a sufferer is a very rare and difficult thing; it is almost a miracle.” Indeed, she says, “it *is* a miracle” for this is what restores the sufferer’s humanity.²

Can the creative arts create a space to pay attention to the unspeakable suffering of another? Can this help restore her?

The attention Weil is speaking of is far from pity. It is a way of looking at and listening to another, a way of giving that person recognition. Attention requires an openness or receptivity, a willingness to encounter the reality of another’s suffering.

The book you hold in your hands gathers my portraits of Yazidi women who escaped ISIS captivity, Rohingya women who fled violence in Myanmar, and Nigerian women who survived Boko Haram and Fulani violence. Meeting these courageous women while convening art workshops in Iraqi Kurdistan, Bangladeshi refugee camps, and northern Nigeria was a privilege. A final chapter includes some of my more recent portraits of Afghan, Ukrainian, Uyghur, and Palestinian survivors of violence.

My hope was for the art projects to help create a safe place for the women to share their stories. Telling their stories enables individuals to process traumatic memories and gradually begin to heal and to reclaim their voice and dignity.³ John Paul Lederach, a pioneer of “conflict transformation,” writes that “healing is ultimately about restoration of voice, both for individuals and communities.”⁴ In Iraqi Kurdistan and northern Nigeria I taught the women to paint their self-portraits as a way to share their stories with the rest



of the world. Some of the women chose to paint themselves with tears of gold, inspiring the title of this book.

Key texts on healing from trauma suggest two pivotal prerequisites: the creation of a *safe space* for the *sharing of stories*.⁵ However, what of an experience of violence that is *unspeakable*? How do individuals communicate experiences that are overwhelming, unbearable, and beyond words?⁶ Can the arts help give voice to that which eludes verbal communication or comprehension?

As women from religious minorities, the women I sat with had suffered persecution and forced displacement, and many had been subjected to sexual violence. Due to the stigma surrounding such violence, they face shame and isolation within their communities. All too often their stories remain unseen and unheard.

Primo Levi describes the “unlistened-to story” as the enduring burden of the survivor: “Why is the pain of every day translated so constantly into our dreams, in the ever-repeated scene of the unlistened-to story?”⁷

These women were, and are, survivors. Their lives cannot be reduced to a single violent experience. Through my portrait paintings I hope to convey the person

behind the trauma, in her extraordinary resilience, resistance, and dignity. I am honoured to have been able to exhibit these paintings in places of influence in the Global North, alongside the women’s self-portraits, to enable their voices to be heard and to advocate on their behalf. The art projects, the advocacy exhibitions, and this book are all underpinned by the same common thread of intention: *the restoration of these women’s voices*.

“Often when I shut my eyes, faces appear before me. What is remarkable about them is their definition. Each face has the sharpness of an engraving.” —John Berger

The philosopher Emmanuel Levinas speaks of encountering the face of another person as an encounter with the “Infinite,” which therefore implies infinite responsibility for the other.⁸ Each face is a vision, a glimpse, of the divine. In the face of the other we encounter something which transcends our ability to fully know. Levinas’s stance towards the other has enriched my approach to portrait painting.

Can a portrait painting help us to behold the Infinite in the face of the other? Levinas



observes that “in the eyes that look at me” there shines “the whole of humanity.”⁹ When I truly encounter another person, in that meeting of eyes I will also see the humanity of this person regardless of what she has been through.¹⁰ To see humanity in the other; to see the other’s humanity. What does this require of me? And what do we *refuse* to see? What do we shut our eyes to? How much truth can we bear to face?

Mother Teresa spoke of “seeking the face of God in everything, everyone, everywhere, all the time . . . especially in the distressing disguise of the poor.”¹¹ How different our world would be if we treated each individual as a reflection of the image of God and of equal value in God’s eyes. We would be obliged to treat each other on the highest ethical grounds – to approach one another in reverence and respect.

The Irish poet John O’Donohue describes our need to rediscover the “art of reverence.”¹² Reverence, for O’Donohue, is defined as “a dignified attention of body showing that the sacred is already here” and “the key that unlocks the treasure of encounter.”¹³

As a portrait painter, I hope to convey the sacred value of each individual regardless of race, religion, or gender. This is especially important in light of the genocidal

violence these Yazidi, Rohingya, and Nigerian women have endured. The use of gold leaf in my portraits of displaced women and survivors of conflict-related sexual violence is symbolic of this sacredness regardless of what they have suffered. Gold has traditionally been a symbol of the divine because it does not change or tarnish with age.

The gold-leaf technique is intentionally reminiscent of icon paintings. The purpose of an icon is to facilitate prayer and contemplation; through gazing at sacred art, the eternal can be revealed. The symbolism in an icon imparts spiritual truths wordlessly.¹⁴

My paintings, like Renaissance paintings of the *Mater Dolorosa*, Mother of Sorrows, seek to emotionally engage the viewer and inspire compassion. Like these Yazidi, Rohingya, and Nigerian women, Mary knew what it means to be forced to flee – and to have her heart pierced with grief at the loss of her child.¹⁵

The portraits are also meditations on the universal human experience of suffering, grief, and loss. In these pictures we glimpse these women’s unspeakable grief. But they are also a reminder that we all face grief, sorrow, and loss at different times in life, revealing our fundamental interconnectedness.¹⁶



Often tears would fall while I was painting, as I contemplated all that these women had endured and their ongoing suffering. The pain at times felt overwhelming, but the process of painting their portraits was a form of prayer, as it is in iconography. The paintings are in many ways visual psalms: outpourings of lament for the broken realities of the world around us.

Weil writes that “attention, taken to its highest degree, is the same thing as prayer. It presupposes faith and love.”¹⁷ Attending to another through listening to her story or painting her portrait is an expression of this prayer-like attention.

Thus the moment of creation for these portraits is paradoxically a moment of *decreation*,¹⁸ of being undone by the pain of another.¹⁹ It is to allow oneself to be wholly vulnerable and open to the other.

Harper Lee wrote these beautiful words, imprinted on my memory as a thirteen-year-old: “You never really understand a person until you consider things from his point of view . . . until you climb into his skin and walk around in it.”²⁰

What does it mean to put yourself in another person’s skin, to feel what they feel? How can you possibly begin to comprehend

how it feels to be forced to flee your home and the unimaginable horrors of war, violence, and violation?

Through these portraits I sought to convey the individual and collective grief these women experienced, knowing that this grief would continue far beyond my short time with them. At the same time, I was tapping into hidden places of grief and trauma in my own heart.

In recent years I have been on my own journey through post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) and the acute depression that followed a traumatic experience. Painting has been an important part of my recovery. This was one of the key motivations behind the art projects: although I am not trained as an art therapist, I know from my own experience the therapeutic benefits of art.

I also am aware I could only empathise in part. “Empathy” is a Greek derivative of the German word *Empfindung*, meaning a “feeling into” or a “projection of the self into the object.”²¹ I cannot begin to compare my inner struggle to my subjects’, or my trauma to theirs. All the same, my experience compelled me to try to connect, to do my best to capture their response to unspeakable suffering – whether disassociation, defiance, despair, hope, anger, or grief.



During the art project in northern Nigeria, with survivors of rape at the hands of Boko Haram and Fulani militants, I hesitantly shared my experience of sexual assault for the first time. Their tender responses, even though my pain was by no means comparable with theirs, was profoundly healing.

The women later reflected that my vulnerability helped them to feel understood. They realised, for the first time, that they were not to blame and need not be ashamed. This helped to create a safe space for them to begin to share their experiences. The conspiracy of silence that so often prevails within communities of collective trauma, especially surrounding the stigma of sexual violence, was broken.

Sharing our stories enables us to connect, even across cultural and linguistic barriers, and reminds us that we have more in common than divides us. As Desmond Tutu explains, “It is our shared humanity, our shared losses, and our shared grief that ultimately allow us to reconnect again with the world around us. We are harmed together and we heal together.”²²

These human bonds are grounded in an awareness of our own vulnerability. Weil writes that “vulnerability is the mark of existence.”²³ As Elisa Aaltola observes,

“Vulnerability is both conceptually and practically entwined with suffering, for what partly makes us vulnerable is our capacity to suffer.”²⁴

I have learned from my encounter with these courageous women that a heart posture of openness, open to the giving and receiving of love, is how we heal. It is how we move from being focused on our own struggles to “widening the circle of compassion.”²⁵

Compassion is often born from experience, for our experiences of pain can help us understand, albeit only in part, the pain of another. We learn from our own struggles how to *attend* to the suffering of others, even that which is *unspeakable*.

Weil writes, “Whoever does not know just how far necessity and a fickle fortune hold the human soul under their domination cannot treat as his equals, nor love as himself, those whom chance has separated from him by an abyss.”²⁶ Without this awareness of our common vulnerability there will always be an impassible abyss between us and those who suffer. They will remain as unrecognisable to us as we are to them. My art projects and paintings are an attempt to bridge this abyss.

As Cameroonian philosopher Achille Mbembe affirms, “The self is made at the



point of encounter with an Other. There is no self that is limited to itself. The Other is our origin by definition. What makes us human is our capacity to share our condition – including our wounds and injuries – with others.”²⁷

We have perhaps become inured to the perpetual barrage of images and news of faraway suffering in the media. Susan Sontag asserts that “newer technology provides a nonstop feed: as many images of disaster and horror as we can make time to look at.”²⁸ How much “desensitising horror” can we take in? Overwhelmed with images intended to shock and arouse indignation, “we are losing our capacity to react. Compassion, stretched to its limits, is going numb.” Therefore, Sontag insists, we must “recover our senses” and “learn to *see* more, to *hear* more, to *feel* more.”²⁹ This is where art can help.

However, Sontag also reminds us of the danger of “the issues of exploitation of sentiment (pity, compassion, indignation).”³⁰ Indeed, she declares it “exploitative to look at harrowing photographs of other people’s pain in an art gallery.”³¹ There is a danger of perpetuating injustice, what Julie Salverson calls “an aesthetics of injury”³² and Hannah Arendt the “spectacle of suffering,”³³ whereby “pain is commercialised”³⁴ and

viewed at a distance, merely voyeurism; “looking out at some exoticised and deliberately tragic other.”³⁵ For Sontag, such images have the power to “anesthetise” and thereby normalise indignity and suffering.³⁶

Salverson maintains that we need to understand the potential of the arts either “to educate, to envision, to relieve pain” or simply “to reinscribe stories of victimisation.” For “when artists eagerly ‘give voice’ to an imagined other, we allow neither the other nor ourselves to approach the encounter.”³⁷ To be sure, a work of art can “pierce us” and give us a better understanding of the reality of others.³⁸ Nonetheless, as bell hooks reminds us, the arts are “not inherently healing, liberatory, or revolutionary.”³⁹ To navigate these ethical dangers, artists working in conflict settings must be willing to be honest and critique our underlying motivations, biases, and challenges. A lack of reflexivity can lead artists to be complicit in perpetuating negative tropes and further “othering,” disempowering, and silencing those they claim to represent.

Is it possible, then, for artists to ethically bear witness to suffering, to cross the distance between sufferer and onlooker which can turn the former into a mere voyeuristic spectacle?⁴⁰ Surely, despite the pitfalls, art can help us to understand and



empathise with the experience of another. Pope Francis reminds us: “Sometimes, when you think globally, you can be paralyzed: there are so many places of apparently ceaseless conflict, there’s so much suffering and need. I find it helps to focus on concrete situations: you see faces looking for life and love in the reality of each person, of each people.”⁴¹

Here Weil’s philosophy of attention can provide a solid foundation for artistic practices rooted in dignity, respect, and love that pay attention to the neglected histories and unique challenges of communities on the margins.⁴² According to UNESCO, this requires “listening deeply, engaging people in constructing meaning out of their experiences, and amplifying local voices.”⁴³ “What is indispensable for this task,” Weil asserts, “is a passionate interest in human beings, whoever they may be, and in their minds and souls; the ability to place oneself in their position and to recognise by signs thoughts which go unexpressed.”⁴⁴

There is potential for this creative *attention*, founded upon affirming the inherent dignity and value of each and every life, to bring healing and hope.⁴⁵ Weil writes, “The love of our neighbour in all its fullness simply means being able to say to him: ‘What are you going through?’ . . . It is enough, but it is indispensable, to know

how to look at him in a certain way. This way of looking is first of all attentive.”⁴⁶ To ask someone this question and allow her time to respond and actually hear her answer is not easy, and may take a lifetime to master. Yet for Weil, this is foundational to ethical responsibility.⁴⁷

My life has been enriched by the women whose stories and portraits are collected in this book, above and beyond anything I have been able to give. Their resilience, courage, and kindness – even in the face of cruel violence and displacement – are nothing short of a miracle. I hope that these paintings are but a small reminder of our shared humanity.

Violent conflicts continue to tear humanity apart, and brutality against women in war zones is escalating, according to some reports.⁴⁸ Every day, more horrors are reported, and their scale is often staggering. Political divisions and economic and social disparities are widening. The threat of climate change is looming, and the most disadvantaged and displaced communities are paying the price.

Now more than ever, we must keep the borders of our hearts open to those who are different from us. The word “attention” comes from the Latin *ad tendere*, which



means to reach towards. Only by reaching out in love and understanding can we overcome the agendas of violence and polarisation that seek to divide us.

The root of so much conflict and division is our inability to see and acknowledge the full humanity of another. How can we build a “culture of encounter,” as Pope Francis has proposed, “in which we meet as people with a shared dignity” and glimpse the possibility of life beyond division and conflict?⁴⁹ The arts have the potential to create space for the openness and compassion necessary for empathy and understanding. French art curator Nicolas Bourriaud describes the role of art as representing a “social interstice” and a “state of encounter.” Art is engaged in the wider world and is the result of a reciprocal, relational process of exchange.⁵⁰

Portrait painting emerges from that place of encounter, a sacred space dedicated to getting to know the other. The relationship between painter and sitter is the most integral part of the process. The attention and care with which an artist approaches the encounter affects the capacity of the portrait to touch the viewer. As Rabbi Jonathan Sacks writes, echoing Levinas, this requires a commitment “to see in the

human other a trace of the divine Other . . . to see the divine presence in the face of the stranger.”⁵¹ Author Esther Lightcap Meek avows: “Works of art that are encounters repeatedly become encounters for the viewers.”⁵²

We need to be open to having our idea of the other, and of ourselves, transformed through this encounter. It is demanding and risky, but potentially beautiful. Civil rights leader Howard Thurman encourages us to “take the initiative in seeking ways by which you can have the experience of a common sharing of mutual worth and value. It may be hazardous, but you must do it.”⁵³ Opening ourselves to each other leads to enrichment, enabling us to become more fully present and to recognise our life as a gift for others.

I am grateful to these women for giving me permission to paint their portraits, to honour their stories and share them as best as I can.



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Portraits of Yazidi Women

Who Escaped ISIS Captivity

Tempera and 24-karat gold leaf on panel



On August 3, 2014, the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS, known as Daesh in Arabic) attacked the Yazidi community in Sinjar, Iraq. Thousands of Yazidis were killed or abducted, and tens of thousands were forced to flee. A UN human rights commission found that “within days of the attack, reports emerged of ISIS committing almost unimaginable atrocities against the Yazidi community: of men being killed or forced to convert; of women and girls, some as young as nine, sold at market and held in sexual slavery by ISIS fighters; and of boys ripped from their families and forced into ISIS training camps.”¹ (The Yazidi adhere to an ancient religion distinct from Christianity and Islam; ISIS’s genocidal campaign targeted Christians and other religious minorities as well.) According to a 2022 UN Security Council report, nearly a decade later 200,000 Yazidis continued to live displaced in camps only hours away from their homeland, 2,800 Yazidi women and children remained in captivity, and Yazidi women were still being sold online.²

In August 2017 I travelled to Iraqi Kurdistan with clinical psychologist Dr. Sarah Whittaker-Howe for an art project with a group of Yazidi women who had escaped Daesh captivity. It was the third anniversary of the genocide and the fall of Sinjar, an event so traumatic for the Yazidis that several of the women had marked the date in tattoos.

You may recall the headlines in 2014 when the plight of the Yazidis became global news, with thousands stranded on Mount Sinjar, having fled ISIS. Those unable to flee were taken captive. One of the Yazidi women who took part in the art project, Hadiya, had been sold to twelve different men during her captivity. Hadiya and I



Waso

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Waso (15)

*Listen, you will act
like you're crazy
so you can survive.*

Waso cries uncontrollably while recounting the day her mother asked her to act as if she were mentally ill to escape from ISIS captivity. She explains that at that time ISIS was releasing girls and women deemed undesirable, who therefore would not sell.

She smiles often, expressing thankfulness that she escaped, but underneath is profound pain caused by the separation from her mother and her knowledge that her father and brothers have likely been killed.



Self-portrait by Waso



Portraits of Rohingya Women

Refugees from Myanmar

Oil on panel



In August 2017 more than 650,000 Rohingya Muslims fled violence and persecution in Rakhine State in Myanmar. At the peak of the attacks, in one day alone a hundred thousand Rohingya crossed the river into Bangladesh.¹ An estimated one million Rohingya found provisional shelter near the southeastern Bangladeshi coastal city of Cox's Bazar. This settlement, Kutupalong, remains the largest refugee camp in the world.² The United Nations has described the violent military crackdown as a “textbook example of ethnic cleansing.”³ Most of the people who escaped were severely traumatised after witnessing unspeakable atrocities: entire villages razed to the ground, families separated and killed, women and girls brutally gang-raped.

The Rohingya are widely considered one of the most persecuted minority groups in the world.⁴ Denied citizenship by the Myanmar government and deprived of refugee status in Bangladesh, the Rohingya are stateless. The 250,000 to 400,000 Rohingya remaining in Rakhine State face “an ongoing genocide.”⁵ The UN Secretary-General reported that after the military coup in Myanmar in February 2021, “the number of people in need of humanitarian assistance and protection grew from 1 to 14.4 million, and half of the country’s population is now below the poverty line.”⁶

I travelled to refugee camps in Bangladesh in April 2018, six months after the mass exodus, through the support of the NGO BRAC. When I arrived in Cox's Bazar, I was overwhelmed by the scale of the crisis. The refugee camps are vast; tens of thousands of temporary bamboo shelters stretched as far as I could see, shimmering in the heat.

I spent the mornings painting with Rohingya children in one of the child-friendly spaces run by BRAC. The children all wanted to paint colourful flowers, trees, and memories of their homes in Myanmar.



Lalu

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Lalu (45)

*I look much older than my age
because of the sorrow and suffering
I have seen.*

The Myanmar military captured Lulu's family, forcing them into a house to be burned. While the army was rounding up more people in the village, the family escaped. However, one of her nephews was killed when his clothes caught on fire, and one of her grandchildren was shot by the military as they fled.

The remaining family arrived at the Bangladesh border and crossed the river by boat. The military pursued them and the boat sank, killing another of Lulu's grandchildren. Lulu's husband was saved from drowning but became dangerously unwell – he died soon after they arrived at the refugee camp.

Lulu feels unspeakable grief for the loss of her loved ones and has been unable to move on, her mental and physical health increasingly frail.



Portraits of Nigerian Women

Survivors of Boko Haram and Fulani Violence

Tempera and 24-karat gold leaf on panel



Since the beginning of the Boko Haram insurgency in northeast Nigeria in 2009, millions have been forced from their homes. Boko Haram abducted thousands of women, holding them captive and subjecting them to sexual violence and forced marriage. After the kidnapping of 276 schoolgirls in Chibok in April 2014, the hashtag #bringbackourgirls went viral, retweeted by celebrities and politicians from Kim Kardashian to Michelle Obama.

Since then, the security situation in northern Nigeria has been further exacerbated by escalating conflict between predominantly Muslim and nomadic Fulani herdsmen and Christian farmers. Fulani militants have used sexual violence to target women as a way to devastate communities. A report released by the UK government in 2020 describes the targeting of Christian communities in Nigeria as an “unfolding genocide.”¹

In September 2018 I spent a week in northern Nigeria, leading an art project facilitated by Open Doors as part of a trauma healing programme with Christian women who were survivors of sexual violence either at the hands of Fulani militants or Boko Haram. As with my other projects, the aim was to create a safe space for the women to share their stories and begin to process their pain.

Like the Yazidi women in Iraqi Kurdistan, many opted to add glistening tears of gold to their self-portraits. For the finishing touch the women sewed vibrant local Nigerian fabric onto their paintings – with a lot of singing and laughter, which was beautiful to see! The women were so proud of the self-portraits they had created.



Charity

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Charity

I can recount three different times that I was beaten by my husband because I came back with a child.

Charity was kidnapped by Boko Haram when she was out walking with her husband. Her husband managed to escape, but Charity failed to get away. She was held captive by Boko Haram for three years and was forced to “marry” a militant and convert to Islam. Charity was raped and subsequently gave birth to a baby girl named Rahila.

The Nigerian military rescued Charity; she was reunited with her husband in a camp for internally displaced people. Her pain was magnified when her husband beat her and rejected her baby. In the camp she faces abuse, rejection, and isolation. Access to food and water is a daily struggle.



Self-portrait by Charity



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Portraits from Other Conflicts

Afghan, Ukrainian, Uyghur, and Palestinian Women

“Attention is the rarest and purest form of generosity.
It is given to very few minds to notice that things and
beings exist.” —Simone Weil¹



During the Covid pandemic, my ability to travel to facilitate art workshops was restricted, so this final chapter is somewhat fragmentary, a collection of portraits of women I've had the privilege of meeting, either in person or virtually, in recent years. These women are survivors of the re-education camps in Xinjiang, China, and of conflicts in Afghanistan, Ukraine, and the Gaza Strip.

There are, of course, many crises not represented here: the plight of women's rights activists in Iran, conflicts in the Democratic Republic of Congo and Ethiopia where sexual violence has been a tactic of war,² the rise of extremism in Yemen and Sudan, and drought and famine in the Sahel, to name but a few.

UN Secretary-General António Guterres has noted that despite "evidence that gender equality offers a path to sustainable peace and conflict prevention, we are moving in the opposite direction. Today, the world is experiencing a reversal of generational gains in women's rights while violent conflicts, military expenditures, military coups, displacements, and hunger continue to increase."³

Such a degree of violence would not be possible, it seems, if it were not an intrinsic part of the warp and weft of our societies.⁴ There is one thing many of these conflict-affected societies have in common: men hold power while women are denied legal protection, rights, and freedoms.⁵ One of the best predictors of a nation's peace and security is not, as one might expect, wealth, religion, or political representation but the way women are treated *within* that nation.⁶ Indeed, an increase in opportunities for women aligns with a reduced risk of armed conflict, attributed to "the pacifying impact of gender equality."⁷ Not surprisingly, building a society in which women are safe and their voices are equally valued is a vital prerequisite for peace.⁸



Zainab
tempera, oil, and 24-karat gold leaf on panel, 2022

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Zainab (22)

The passing of days and the sun rising each morning troubles me. I am still hoping to open my eyes, as I used to, to my mother's smile and affection. I am still longing for one hug from Hana. I used to stay up late with Ahmed, who would ease away the worries and pain of life with his infectious laugh. His laughter still echoes in my ears, so much so that I sometimes turn around to see if he is really there. Wherever I look, I cannot help but remember one of them.⁵¹

On May 16, 2021, Zainab al-Qolaq lost twenty-two members of her family – including her mother, Amal, her only sister, Hana, and two brothers – when an Israeli air strike hit her home in Gaza. Zainab was trapped under the rubble for twelve hours.

In the year following the airstrike, Zainab devoted herself to processing her grief through her art. Her exhibition in Gaza was entitled: *“I’m 22, I lost 22 people.”* Her powerful paintings depict her pain and trauma, which cannot be communicated in words. Zainab says that she used the universal language of art to convey her voice and feelings, for others to understand the grief she carries each and every day. She writes, “They may have removed the rubble above me, but who will remove the scattered rubble from my heart?”



Tursunay
oil and tempera on panel, 2022

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Tursunay (44)

Their goal is to completely destroy us – physically and psychologically. They want to take away our dignity, our humanity, and our ability to feel joy. I will bear the scars of what they did to me for the rest of my life.

Tursunay Ziyawudun spent nine months imprisoned in an internment camp in the Uyghur region of northwest China (formally known as Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region). She describes multiple episodes of torture, public humiliation, and brutal sexual violence including gang rape at the hands of camp guards. She remembers how the women she was imprisoned with were traumatised by their experiences, some screaming, some sobbing, and others silently rocking back and forth after returning from the “black rooms” where the assaults were carried out.

Since the Communist Revolution in 1949, the Chinese government has increasingly stripped away the freedom of Uyghur Muslims, systematically suppressing their language, religion, and culture, and destroying mosques and other religious sites. Since 2018 there have been reports of an oppressive system of high-tech mass surveillance, slave labour, mass incarceration, forced organ-harvesting, and Uyghur women being sterilised or forced to terminate pregnancies.⁵²

Tursunay was able to flee to the United States. From there she speaks out for the women she knows are still suffering in her homeland. In her portrait she wears a beautiful traditional Atlas silk scarf.

