

AOC

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Habermas, Lot's wife, and Gaza – on “Hamishi Farah. Facing the pain of others”
By Éric Loret

At the Frac Lorraine, Australian artist Hamishi Farah explores our relationship to images of suffering. Between censored portraits and mineral landscapes of the Dead Sea, he deploys a conceptual pictorial approach that creates a dialogue between the symbolism of Christian martyrdom and the political dead ends faced by our democracies in the face of Gaza.

Three exhibitions are on display at the 49 Nord 6 Est Frac Lorraine until February 2026. One is part of a program linked to the Grand Est region. This season, Elise Grenois , born in 1992 and a graduate of the Haute École d'Art du Rhin, is installing a minimalist, shimmering paraffin sculpture: the material melts, and she reuses it for other works. Impermanence becomes cyclical.

Two other rooms are dedicated to Takako Saito , a Japanese Fluxus artist born in 1929 who sadly passed away two weeks before the opening of "Tout se joue" (Everything is at Stake), an exhibition showcasing her variations on chess and dioramas. Saito was the subject of a monographic exhibition at the CAPC in Bordeaux in 2019. Among other works, the instructions for *Silent Music* (2012) are featured here, inscribed on containers holding dandelion seeds: "Make them fly in the air and catch them." The visitor has the (non) choice between activating the artwork and destroying it: a contradictory double injunction, conceptual art with a single, duplicitous edge.

When we move on to the third artist, Hamishi Farah , an Australian born in 1991 and based in Berlin, we find ourselves with a different kind of conceptual approach. He also presents a few artifacts (two oil paintings in the first room, six large mixed-media drawings in the second), but his work rests on a submerged iceberg: the artist's discourse and intentions. Without these, the artifacts cannot function, and his focus is on this point: Israel is perceived by Germany as a kind of obligatory "happy ending" to the atrocities perpetrated against the Jews. Consequently, the fate of the Palestinian people, or anything that threatens this narrative of redemption, is perceived as an "existential threat to Germany's understanding of itself."

“Before the Pain of Others,” a title borrowed from Susan Sontag, opens like a calm trap: two isolated color portraits on a vast wall and, on the adjacent one, three altarpieces and a 15th-century bust of Christ, on loan from the nearby La Cour d'Or museum. This is on the first floor of the Frac, in a room filmed continuously since 2004 by a camera, the images of which are broadcast live and archived to inform Dora Garcia’s work, *Forever* . The two portraits presented by Farah are those of the philosopher Jürgen Habermas, a leading figure in the study of public space, and Joe Chialo , head of cultural affairs for the Berlin mayor’s office from 2023 to 2025. But without a lengthy explanation, little can be gleaned from this information.

At first glance, then, one sees nothing, or only fire. For precisely, beneath the cold light of the gallery walls, a dispute is unfolding—that of the gaze, of power, and of the witness. Sontag's testamentary essay , **Before the Pain of Others** (2003), questions the impulse to see and the power of war images. It interrogates the capacity of our gaze to transform visual shock into ethical mobilization, to move beyond easy empathy and confront the archaic seduction of violence. Through references to Virginia Woolf 's **Three Guineas** (1938) and the history of conflicts, Sontag observes that images weaken as much as they awaken, that they are as capable of producing indifference as genuine revolt. Farah, for his part, takes up this question within the field of painting: what to do with images of pain when every image is already suspected of being instrumentalized?

If altarpieces are placed here alongside Farah's two canvases, it is because, by depicting the martyrdoms of Saint Agatha or Crispin and Crispinian, they remind us, through their quiet cruelty, how Western art has shaped a regime of the visible where suffering becomes a virtue, where blood sanctifies. Farah questions this model in light of our time, where the image of torture (exhibited or censored) remains one of the most powerful media tools of symbolic domination. This shift of pain, from the Christian model to a tool of political legitimization, is one of the major themes of the exhibition: the transformation of suffering, initially constitutive for a persecuted minority, into a stabilizing mechanism of a hegemonic order where certain bodies become eligible for elimination.

As for the two paintings, the portraits of Habermas and Chialo (which are also labeled "untitled"), their meaning can only be understood if one knows that Chialo, in charge of multiculturalism and social cohesion, was the man who sought to enshrine in the regulations of Berlin institutions the IHRA's definition of antisemitism, which equates any criticism of the State of Israel with a form of racial hatred and effectively prohibits any reference to the genocide in Gaza. Hamishi Farah indirectly paid the price: at the Transmediale in Berlin this spring, his portrait of Joe Chialo was rejected, deemed "too negative or too close to an overwhelming

negativity to be contained in the public sphere," according to an article in ARTNews . Farah made this episode the starting point for the Frac Lorraine exhibition: how to transform censorship into the very material of the artwork?

If Jürgen Habermas is juxtaposed with Joe Chialo, it is because his theory of communicative action, according to Farah, is another version of the German contradictions: Habermas proposes a "non-violent force of argumentative discourse," but also an ethics of discussion based on decentering, mutual recognition, and solidarity rather than mere pity.¹ In the context of the exhibition, his theories appear to be in tension: if the public sphere is undermined by censorship and paralysis, how can discussion take place? Farah shows here, through negative examples, that collective suffering is not remedied solely through communication, but requires the recognition of the vulnerability and contradictions that permeate our societies.

As with Sontag, the challenge is no longer to show but to question the framework of the visible: why are some sufferings demonstrable, and others not? Why are some bodies entitled to be represented as victims, and others only as threats? It is here that the medieval altarpieces of the Cour d'Or take on their full meaning. Farah does not present them as reliques but as operators of meaning, iconographic matrices. In his reading, martyrdom is not a spiritual event: it is a device for creating meaning, an instrument for governing emotions. The tortured body, which once served as a sign of resistance, now becomes an emblem of moral order. This transformation interests Farah because, according to him, it structures political modernity: testimony is no longer an act of truth, but a ritual of fidelity to a dominant narrative.

In the second room, six paintings depict two salt formations on the shores of the Dead Sea, viewed from different angles. These are two natural pillars, one in Jordan and the other in Israel, traditionally identified as "Lot's wife." The artist presents them in portrait format, vertically, almost life-size, lending these mineral masses a human presence. It is a subtle yet decisive reversal: the landscape becomes a face, the rock becomes a witness.

Lot's wife, as we recall, was turned into a pillar of salt for disobeying the angel: she had turned around to see the destruction of Sodom. In Farah's work, she is no longer the curious sinner, but the punished witness. The one who wanted to see, and whom that very gaze condemned. The artist makes this figure a metaphor for our contemporary condition: the impossibility of turning our eyes away from catastrophe, but also the resulting paralysis. To be petrified, literally, by the gaze directed at suffering. The paintings in the series "*Lot's Wife*" reject all dramatization. No bodies, no explosions: only the white silence of salt, which condenses the shock of confronting the unrepresentable. In this in-between space, between horror and the sublime, Farah makes painting a space of impossibility: not to escape reality, but to bear witness to our inability to contain it.

This series must, of course, be read in light of Gaza and the debates it has crystallized in Europe. Farah speaks of a "genocidal assault" and of how the "response to this response"—that is, the Western justification—deconstructs the frameworks of thought inherited from the 20th century. The moral language of liberal democracy, born from the ruins of 1945, collapses under its own contradictions. Her canvases, in this sense, are less representations than symptoms. The pictorial matter—thick, matte, almost suffocated—seems to reject the brilliance of the spectacle. One thinks of Gerhard Richter, of his post-Auschwitz grays, but here color returns like a repressed pulse. The iconoclasm is not total: Farah still believes in painting, but as a damaged language, one that can only express the ruin of its own conventions.

The word "witness" recurs throughout the artist's discourse. For him, to bear witness is to accept standing precisely where meaning collapses. The witness is not the one who knows, but the one who persists in seeing, even when the gaze no longer provides knowledge. This is perhaps the true connection with Sontag: an ethics of the powerless gaze, not to revel in it, but to bear its burden. In his paintings, the witness no longer has a fixed face. He is simultaneously the one who looks and the one who is looked at. Farah speaks of "subjective neutrality": an effort to withdraw from the painting, to let the subject exist without interpretation. This distance is not indifference: it is an attempt at descriptive universality, in an almost phenomenological sense. Painting becomes a device of attention, a way of being with ("before") the subject rather than dominating it.

Another key word in the exhibition is "astonishment." Not simply an emotion, but a perceptual state. Faced with images of pain, Sontag writes, "the horrific invites us to the posture of the spectator or the coward, incapable of looking." Farah takes up this tension: astonishment is no longer the failure of representation, but the very condition of the political. In a world saturated with images, no longer being able to react is perhaps already a form of resistance to the economy of reaction. Her paintings do not seek to mobilize, but to suspend. This suspension, however, is not mute. It speaks of an imposed silence: that of censorship, of moral conformism, of the fear of speaking out. In the German context, where any criticism of Israel is immediately suspected of antisemitism, the artist sees a logic of martyrdom replayed: the punishment of the witness. Lot's wife, once again, becomes the artist's double: frozen not for having transgressed, but for having seen too far.

¹ See among others Mathieu Berger, "Towards a theory of communicational suffering. Raising awareness of Habermas" , *Cahiers de recherche sociologique* , 2017.

The dialogue with medieval sculptures perhaps opens up another field: that of the survival of sacred forms. Aby Warburg would have spoken of *Nachleben* : the persistence of the gestures of the Christian body in the modern visual imagination. Farah does not seek to satirize these figures, but rather to imbue them with negativity. *Ostentatio Vulnerum* (2021), his painting depicting Christ displaying his wounds, encapsulates this strategy: to reclaim the symbols of faith in order to extract their darker aspects, those that link beauty to pain, ecstasy to torment. The painter embraces the "erotic" potential of suffering, but only to better reveal its ambivalence: what is seductive in pain is less compassion than the promise of a regained purity.

Farah is not seeking to console. He is attempting to grapple with what it still means to "see the pain of others" in the age of democratic censorship and media-driven wars. His work does not demand compassion, but rather a responsibility: that of the viewer who, knowing that every image is a trap, nevertheless chooses to look. Perhaps, then, "Before the Pain of Others" should be understood as a meditation on the survival of images. Not their physical persistence, but their ethical survival: what they compel us to do or not to do. By reclaiming the dead language of the sacred and inserting into it the living language of politics, Farah reminds us that every representation is a field of forces. What we see, and what we refuse to see, always reveals something about us.