

## Violence and the Sacred

The idea for this project took shape in 2016. Expelled from a Middle East beset by war, taking with them the barest minimum, a human wave set out, crossing mountains and deserts in search of a safe haven. Many faced violence en route: theft, rape, even death. Then more than ever I thought about the meaning of being expelled from one's home, of flight, of loss. About humanity's bitter experience of being driven out.

That year, German society was extremely polarized. Some considered helping refugees to be their duty as human beings; others thought it would be better to close the borders and keep peace and quiet for themselves. Although the second group was much smaller in number, the sound of the cry they raised was far greater: 'close the borders and send them back!' When I was a child I was always astonished whenever I heard the story of creation and of the expulsion of humanity from paradise. Was God not described as the Compassionate and the Merciful? Why then could He not tolerate the 'will to knowledge' of His creation? Why was He then overcome by avenging anger, expelling humanity from its birthplace and imposing endless conditions on its return? This has since become a custom, repeated over and over again. Tyrants draw lines of us and them, of self and other, between people, declaring licit whatever was illicit, and for those on the other side of the line, ordaining expulsion and loss.

In 2016 my studio was in Anna and Bernhard Blume's complex, and I was working part-time as Anna Blume's assistant. Collaborating created a deep friendship between us, so that most of our time was taken up with conversation. Anna talked about her childhood, the Second World War and the coming to power of fascism; I talked about my childhood, the revolution and the war, and the upheavals and the dictatorship that ruled in Iran. We were joined by another artist friend, Ali Baghban, who had more or less recently arrived in Cologne, and whose experience was similar, of a society whose entire mechanism was based on the distinction between us and them, self and other.

I shared my initial idea with both of them, the three of us from three generations and two continents, yet with experiences that resembled each other very closely. For this reason, both of them agreed to participate without the slightest hesitation. We began work on the idea and how to execute it. Anna's studio was most appropriate for this on account of its great size and space. In early 2017, work was completed on the *mihrab* (prayer niche), one of the elements of the set. Ali Baghban had more or

less finished the initial designs for the sculptures, and we worked for two or three months on the selection and testing of appropriate media. We also had to take into account a limited budget and the problems of storage and moving. Years of experience in architecture and in particular restoration had taught me th

at I shouldn't fear the design stage and that I would find a way to execute it. Thus in the end we designed lightweight yet solid frames with cement coverings for robust two meter sculptures, built a model, and it all worked out.

At the time I was about to emigrate to the US; Ali finished the work off, while Anna was the soul of the project. When, after three years of work, the first poster had been put up for the 2019 exhibition, we stood alongside one another to take a photograph, and for the first time I felt that I had found an appropriate language in which to express what it meant to be expelled, to be driven out.