



EXHIBITION TEXTS

Petrit Halilaj

An Opera Out of Time

11 September 2025 – 31 May 2026

Petrit Halilaj (b. 1986, Kostërrc, Kosovo) imagines exhibitions as collective dreams that can lead to rebuilding and renewal. From the start of his practice, he has created theatrical works that claim space for freedom, queerness and desire, connection, intimacy and identity. Through these works, he reflects on his experiences of cultural oppression, war and exile, while nurturing a language that builds common ground.

Syrigana, Halilaj's first opera, is at the heart of his first institutional solo exhibition in Berlin. The opera premiered in Kosovo in June 2025. Halilaj staged it outdoors in the countryside of his childhood for a community still grappling with the aftermath of the Kosovo War (1998–1999) and ongoing social division.

The exhibition at Hamburger Bahnhof reimagines the opera as an installation. It forms a central chapter in a larger narrative that brings together the artist's earlier sculptures, costumes, characters and stage-like environments, many of which foreshadow *Syrigana*. These installations are populated by animals, insects and hybrid creatures. They draw on allegory, fantasy and myth to conjure worlds in which all living beings can flourish together.

Do you realise there is rainbow even if it's night?!

An ongoing series of moth sculptures open the exhibition and reappear throughout it. Flickering lightbulbs illuminate the moths' colourfully patterned and textured bodies. Halilaj has had a long fascination with these fragile, nocturnal creatures and their fatal attraction to light.

In 2016 the artist collaborated with his mother Shkurte Halilaj to create the first moth. Its wings were crafted from a *Qilim* carpet, a traditional textile found in many homes across Kosovo and the Balkans. The moth was both a sculpture and a full-body costume. Putting it on and transforming himself into a moth enabled Halilaj to develop new ways of communicating and interacting with the world around him.

RU (Aves Migrantis)

A nest-like tunnel hovers slightly above the ground. Perched on its branches are dozens of bird-like sculptures made from reproductions of Neolithic artefacts, some of which were expropriated from Kosovo and brought to Serbia before and during the Kosovo War (1998–1999). To create replicas of these artefacts, Halilaj worked from local collections, catalogue photographs and archival records, where each object appeared under inventory numbers beginning with "RU", giving the series its title. From above and below the tunnel's walls, a warm yellow light seeps outward. Two openings on the tunnel's left side act like peephole. Through one, a yellow dress is visible. The women's dress was made for the male artist by a tailor in Kosovo, where queerness has long been considered

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taboo, but is now increasingly accepted. The installation's interlaced branches form a safe, sheltered space that offers protection.

Shkrepëtima

Halilaj's theatrical work *Shkrepëtima* is presented here as an installation. *Shkrepëtima* was performed once, in 2018 in Halilaj's hometown of Runik. Many towns in Yugoslavia built so-called *Houses of Culture*, centres designed to embody socialist ideals of accessible, collective culture. Runik's *House of Culture* endured two major waves of destruction after the breakup of Yugoslavia, which began in 1991: first under the Serbian nationalist regime and their oppression of ethnic minorities including Kosovo Albanians, and later during the Kosovo War, which preceded Kosovo's declaration of independence in 2008. Bricks and tiles salvaged from the building in Runik are displayed in this installation. Runik's *House of Culture* is now being rebuilt, due in part to Halilaj's engagement, opening up space again for collective dreaming.

Shkrepëtima

Shkrepëtima (Albanian for lightning or spark) tells the story of a sleeping boy who dreams of bringing the ruins of the House of Culture back to life. Props, costumes and scenographic elements from the performance are arranged throughout the space, transforming the play into a site-specific installation. The backdrop hangs above the ground from a wooden scaffold, framed by red stage curtains. Pleated blue costumes worn by the actors are now draped on metal sculptures perched around the room like birds. The reoccurring motif of birds is used in Halilaj's work as a metaphor for freedom and escape. Some of Halilaj's sculptures incorporate feathers from different bird species, such as peacock and turkey, showing the beauty of unity across difference.

When they came here they found people (Adam and Eve)

The video in this room documents Halilaj's search for archaeological fragments in the Kosovar countryside. It begins in Runik, the artist's hometown and one of the region's earliest Neolithic settlements. Excavations in 1968 and 1983 uncovered key artefacts, including the Runik Ocarina, an 8,000-year-old musical instrument. Such artefacts carry symbolic value for national identity, both Albanian and Serbian. Many of these objects are held in museums in Belgrade, Serbia, where they remain despite ongoing efforts by Kosovo to have them returned. The video underscores the importance of oral history where material culture is scarce. It also introduces a legend of Adam and Eve coming to Kosovo to be married, which forms the basis of Halilaj's opera *Syrigana*.

Do you realise there is rainbow even if it's night?!

The first moths were created for a lecture-performance by the artist held at *Stacion – Center for Contemporary Art Prishtina* in 2016. The lecture focused on Halilaj's subversive act of removing butterfly and moth specimens from the Kosovo Natural History Museum. These specimens, like

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much of the museum's holdings, had been left to deteriorate after the institution disappeared in the early 2000s. In uncovering the neglected museum and its holdings, Halilaj embarked on a journey of self-discovery and began sharing his identity. The small bird sculpture *She, fully turning around, became terrestrial (stolen canary)* also comes from this archive. It was created with the artist Álvaro Urbano, Halilaj's life partner, and is displayed in the previous room.

Syrigana: Introduction

Syrigana is Petrit Halilaj's first opera, an epic love story told in five acts. It reimagines a local legend from Kosovo in which Adam and Eve arrive in the village of Syrigana after being expelled from paradise. Here the first humans in the Judeo-Christian-Islamic tradition are recast as a fox and a rooster. Instead of finding an empty world, they encounter people, who welcome them with a wedding. The opera expands on recurring figures from Halilaj's earlier works, including birds and flowers, weaving them into a narrative of love, desire, betrayal, exile and belonging.

Syrigana premiered on 29 June 2025 and was commissioned by the Kosovo Philharmonic. Now staged at Hamburger Bahnhof, the work becomes an opera "out of time". In Kosovo it was presented before a seated audience; in Berlin it unfolds as visitors move through the space, activating its suspended characters and elements.

Syrigana: The Garden

The story of *Syrigana* begins in a lost paradise. At the centre of the garden stand five large pear blossoms, symbols of love, which continue a series of works Halilaj has developed with his life partner, artist Álvaro Urbano. By transforming the biblical fruit of Adam and Eve from an apple into a pear, the opera is rooted in Kosovo, where pear trees flourish. The pear also becomes a queer counterpart to the apple. Overhead, two hybrid figures, Fox and Rooster, occupy a high window, watching over the preparations for their wedding. Their relationship, crossing boundaries of species and identity, embodies a love considered impossible and reflects the opera's intertwined political and poetic worlds.

Syrigana: The Wedding

The central action of the opera unfolds in the village of Syrigana. Expelled from paradise, Fox and Rooster arrive by KFOR (Kosovo Force) helicopter, the same type used by NATO during peacekeeping operations after the Kosovo War (1998—1999). Landing on a rocky plateau, they encounter a surreal world of birdlike villagers and make their way into the village. Beneath a pear tree, their love blossoms to the sound of an ocarina, until the taste of forbidden fruit casts them out once more. Yet the villagers later welcome them back, preparing a wedding to celebrate their union. A jealous Tailor, disguised as Rooster, attempts to steal Fox away, but the ruse is uncovered. Love ultimately triumphs, and Fox and Rooster marry, making Syrigana their home despite the challenges they face there.

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Syrigana: The village

The village of Syrigana is the hometown of Halilaj's mother in north-western Kosovo, close to the Serbian border. More than 3,000 years old, it has long been a site of cultural cohabitation. Before the Kosovo War (1998–1999), it resembled much of Yugoslavia – a fragile but enduring coexistence of multiethnic communities. After the breakup of Yugoslavia, which began in 1991, ethnic tensions re-emerged between the Albanian and Serbian communities, leading to violence and widespread human rights abuses. Today, an invisible border still runs through Syrigana, separating communities that continue to inhabit the same landscape. Halilaj uses allegory, fantasy, and myth to reclaim this fractured terrain as a site of cultural imagination and reinvention. Just as his earlier project *Shkrep-ëtima* revived the ruins of Runik's House of Culture, *Syrigana* transforms lived histories of exile, division and survival into a narrative that asks how love and belonging might be reimagined.

Yes but the sea is attached to the earth and it never floats around in space. The stars would turn off and what about my planet?

A large pink lake fills the centre of this room. Its banks are made of branches, soil, stones and leaves. The lake's surface gives off the smell of cheap laundry powder, from which it is made. A ghostly, larger-than-life horse stands in the centre of the lake. Draped across its muzzle is a *shoka*, a traditional belt on which the title of the work is written. The *shoka* recalls the belt worn by Halilaj's great-great-grandfather, Baba Gan, a legendary storyteller who is said to have ridden a tall, white horse. He was assassinated during the Serbian invasion of Kosovo in 1912 for his role in the Albanian resistance, as part of a wave of ethnic repression that reoccurred throughout the 20th century. The smell, colours and lifeless nature in this room present cleansing as a threat to communities, societies and the planet as a whole.

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