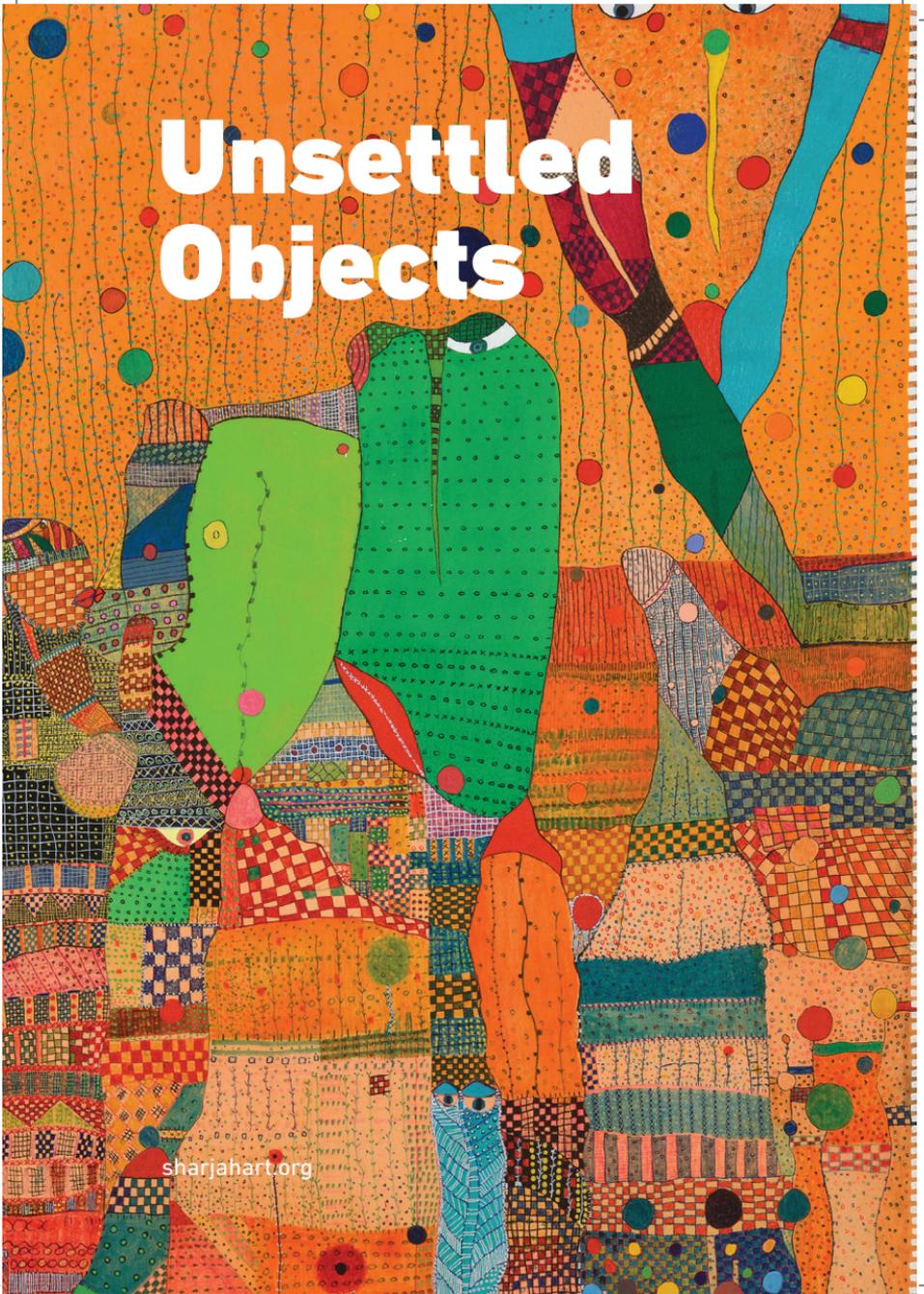


Unsettled Objects

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Unsettled Objects: Retreat, Repair, Recalibrate

-
Omar Kholeif



All my anxiety is separation anxiety.

-Jericho Brown

We are sitting in the beginning of our lives now...

-Sapphire

The past year has witnessed collective society in a state of never-ending 'wintering'.¹ This habitual act is described by the author Katherine May as moments in time when individuals find it necessary to 'retreat...repair...to [re-calibrate] the ebb and flow of life.'² The context behind this current state, which is usually 'seasonal', has been brought on by the onset of the global COVID-19 pandemic, which necessitates self-isolation. A secluded existence may be government-imposed or individually sanctioned; the result, however, is that the collective experience as we have known has mutated into new formal spaces. Zoom screens and

Zoom fatigue have become part of common parlance. Web 2.0, i.e. social media platforms, to which many people are seemingly intravenously connected, have offered unique forms of expression. The global coalition surrounding the Black Lives Matters movement formed during this time is a key case in point.

Wintering, even for those who live in the Arctic Circle is not intended to be a year-round experience of gestation. It is a *period* that bookends moments of complex work and leisure; a space to delve into critical thoughts with the expectation that they will emerge into embodied communal space. The social inequity that the pandemic has made visible reveals that for many, life has become a perpetual ‘winter of discontent’³, creating insular bubbles of fragmented and frustrated community. The exhibition *Unsettled Objects* emerges from an assemblage of influences, in which this current social context plays a role. Since 2020, the public has brought into discussion a multiplicity of ‘systemic’ forms of governance, leaving them ripe for re-evaluation.⁴

The seed that sowed the tapestry of this exhibition is a work by the late conceptual artist Lothar Baumgarten titled *Unsettled Objects* (1968–9). A conversation had begun to acquire the final artist proof of the work but Baumgarten was keen to hold onto it at the time. After his death, his estate generously returned to begin the discussion about its accession into the Sharjah Art Foundation Collection. A slide carousel projector composed of 80 images taken at the ethnographically-focused Pitt Rivers Museum in Oxford, Baumgarten’s *Unsettled Objects* is a meditation on colonialism and its after-effects.

As we hear the click of the slide projector, a light beams an image, and then another, of hundreds of artefacts held in vitrines, sandwiched together, stacked in close proximity, sitting before us, seemingly hollowed of life. Baumgarten

editorialises these images with his signature penchant for irony. Words such as ‘obfuscated’; ‘lost’; ‘celebrated’; ‘composed’; ‘displayed’; and ‘imagined’ appear. *Imagination*, as articulated here, is a possibility that is thwarted. How can one animate these objects with one’s subjective faculties when its authors, its original owners, go nameless—never allowed to lay claim to their own history?

The acquisition of this work coincided with a supposedly universal debate on restitution regarding looted artefacts found in Western museums. This conversation, in many respects, echoed the larger framework in critical race theory around *making visible* histories that had been entrenched or confined in the hermetic fold of encyclopaedic museums in western Europe and the United States.⁵ To quote Cathy Park Hong, a ‘reckoning’ was occurring, a ‘wilful desire not to believe the lies that one has been told about their racial identity.’⁶ W.J.T. Mitchell highlighted this cultural schism in his book of essays, *Seeing Through Race* (2012). Here, Mitchell argues that the institutionalised ‘colour blindness’ imposed upon citizens through established forms of power such as governments and mass media do little but ‘reinforce’ the potential for racism and xenophobia.⁷

Instead, the contention is that ‘race’ and ‘ethnicity’ or rather ‘identity’ is key to the construction of social reality. Thus, *seeing* difference becomes a mechanism to tackle racism in all of its forms. In his essay, ‘The Postcolonial Constellation’ (2008), curator Okwui Enwezor sought to deconstruct the imperial connotations associated with an art world that had increasingly become ‘globalised’.⁸ One of the significant aspects of relevance here is his catalytic call to ‘re-think’ the European models of modernity whose epistemic structures have in many cases been mirrored, replicated or imported by the former colonial world. The principled request for a new pluralism looking at ‘global modernity’ has been echoed throughout the field of cultural studies. In 2019, Ariella Aïsha

Azoulay expanded the debate using her own identity as a framework to begin an exploration on hermetic imperial structures. Proposing a *Potential History*, Azoulay argues that the epistemological field of knowledge production and dissemination, from libraries, archives to museums, from editorial to publishing structures, are systematically buttressing a breed of imperial imagination that must be devolved.⁹

It is within this discourse that the exhibition *Unsettled Objects* transpires. Considering Enwezor's claim that global modernism occurred within a framework of 'epistemological violence', the exhibits seek to interrogate the practice of exhibition making by asking: What does it mean to de-colonise the imagination? Attendant to this is the query, how do we 're-think the post-colonial imagination?' of exhibition making that was predominantly constructed in reference to 'contemporary' art.¹⁰

Unsettled Objects is drawn from the Sharjah Art Foundation Collection, an initiative that adopts a divergent approach from many other institutional platforms. Distinct among public collections, the aim of the Foundation's acquisition strategy is to create a holistic grouping of works that are *situated* within the context of the Emirate of Sharjah, the UAE and the Middle East and South Asia more broadly. The majority of the initial works accessioned into this consortium were either commissioned in or for Sharjah. Others emerged from life-long collaborations with artists, or are carefully selected artworks brought into the institution's holdings to narrate a part of art's history that may otherwise remain unseen. Like all of Sharjah Art Foundation's work, the collecting programme is devised through a network of partners who share affinities to tell the story of art from a located South/South and East/East perspective.

With this mission comes a significant amount of responsibility. Collections are epistemic seats where histories are validated, protected and given the opportunity for multiple *readings* over the course of history. Very few organisations have the resources to be entirely holistic, yet our objective is to create representational holdings that open a doorway to genealogies of artistic practice whose history requires further critical debate. Inherently, we embody a manifesto of care, kinship and democracy, devised through a transcultural network of collaborators who aid the Foundation with the capacity to shine a light on both modern and contemporary art that is often rendered *unseen*.¹¹

Intimacies

The methodology for the exhibition's making emerged from both recent acquisitions as well as works accessioned in a prior decade. We begin by exploring intimacies—familiarities between characters in paintings rendered from the imagination of artists. Arguably, COVID-19 has stripped many humans of this most fundamental of human experiences, the potential to be together. It felt appropriate to de-colonise this seat of the imagination.

Lubaina Himid, whose work was first exhibited at Sharjah Biennial 14 (2019), is represented with a suite of new works produced primarily during the pandemic from her studio in Preston, UK. At the heart of this display is a painting titled, *Leave to Cool* (2020), a portrait of two figures situated in a vivid landscape composed of a bricolage of elements that invoke Himid's myriad historical references, from Kang shops filled with multicoloured fabrics to domestic objects found in museum collections. At the centre of the painting are two male bodies. The relationship between them evokes a sense of rupture, or dissolution, but also a transitory affinity. There is what Walter Benjamin professed to be, a phenomenological 'intensity' between them. Closer inspection reveals discomfort, ambivalence as to whether these genteel men

are able to share the same frame, to breathe the same air, to exist in close proximity to one another.¹² As one gentleman leans forward—solemn, sleeping, weeping?—he puts out his bejewelled hand. The other, upright, his body anchored away, inches his hand back to his, an almost proximate touch, suggesting the impossibility of togetherness. The anxiety that Himid intimates in this painting is something that might have emerged from its making during the 'lockdown'. It occupied a deeply interior space in the artist who has claimed that the painting was a 'difficult' work to complete, yet also affective, emotional and 'personal'.¹³

The interiority of this work is evidenced in the late Amal Kenawy's large mixed-media on canvas, *You Will Be Killed 2* from the mid-2000s. This canvas is part of a body of work, which includes drawings, paintings and an animated film, that see Kenawy posit herself as the depicted subject—a wounded figure amidst the trembling landscape of an Egyptian military hospital. The act of self-representation here functions as a dialogical reflection on notions of state care and considers the body as a site of illness, care and restoration. This work, acquired with the support of Darat al Funun and the Amal Kenawy Estate, is part of a commitment to secure the legacy of the artist who passed away in 2012 at 39.

Lynette Yiadom-Boakye's life-size diptych, *Lie to Me* (2019) presents us with two bodies holding space, together, but apart. The decision to pursue this specific painting related to an interest in re-constituting elements of the artist's presentation during Sharjah Biennial 12 (2015), where Yiadom-Boakye took over two spaces in the heritage house Bait Al Makrani. On view in one were intimate portraits of men, and in the other of women. The two gazes were withheld by the expanse of a courtyard situated between the narrow corridors that led to each exhibition space. In a formal sense, *Lie to Me* occupies a similar lexicon, but

on a grander scale. Conjured from the artist's imagination, the courteous male sits back, eyes shut, while the female situated in another frame, hand in pocket—neither teacherly nor maternal, neither seductress nor subjugated—narrates from a book whose subject is left for us to render for ourselves.

The multiplicities found in Huguette Caland's paintings evoke the body as an active agent of sense—a membrane unfurled into abstraction. In the early 1970s, in her native Lebanon, this was a form of artistic practice that was often demonised by local taste brokers.¹⁴ Presented here in a public exhibit for the first time in over a decade is *Maameltein* (1970), one of the earliest paintings produced by Caland. The colourful abstraction beguiles the viewer at first, seemingly withholding the polarities of mourning and liberation that the artist was experiencing at the time. Caland was the daughter of the first post-independence Lebanese president, an experience that contoured the shape of her life. After her father's death in 1964, the artist remained in Lebanon until 1970, when she left her husband and children to work in Paris. Maameltein is the name of the district in the Lebanese city of *Jounia* where her father was living before he passed away, but it also translates as 'two parts/two transactions/ two halves'. The thorny apportioned structure in Caland's painting thus becomes a clearly defined expression of division, or rather, a subtraction from the self. In the end, the artist chose to leave behind her past and to live primarily in the diaspora where she could hide in plain sight.

Yayoi Kusama's square-shaped paintings share formal kinship with Caland's ebullient representations of the disembodied form. In *Splendour of Life That Lasts Till It Burns Out* (2009), veiled lines subsume a canvas with acrylic paint. Sandwiched between are thickets of black; these are not Kusama's signature dots, but bulbous forms that resemble viral contagion. As one peers closer, it transpires

that these lines evoke a panoply of faces tessellating in a compressed thicket. As Kusama's title suggests, the work could be interpreted as a meditation on the various stages of life: Is this a singular figure refracted? Across generations? Collapsing and falling away across space and time?

Tessellating forms also appear in Kamala Ibrahim Ishag's *People in Crystal Cubes* (1984). A clear reference to Ishag's membership as a leading figure of the Crystallist Group of artists in Sudan, the 'crystal cubes' evident in this canvas also resemble cellular prisons. Inside, disembodied heads, surrealist in nature take on the form of anthropomorphic figures, caged victims, or wounded perpetrators of an inherently disruptive regime. The bodies in Ishag's work inhabit a non-located landscape, another gesture towards disentangling the subject from the confines of a colonial site, in favour of one that the human imagination is left to situate.

Form and Formation

The brutalist geodesic structure of *The Flying Saucer* will also be home to a range of transversal artistic practices that span the gamut from what we now conceive as the 'global modern' period of art's history. Pivotal to this framework is the working life and output of Marcos Grigorian whose artistic career began in earnest upon his return to Iran after a period of study in Rome. In Iran, he built a network of kinships, not only as an artist, but also as a gallerist and popular culture figure appearing in several films as Marc Gregory. On display are a series of works that represent his inventive output in the field of land art. Here, raw earth, along with fruits such as pomegranates, become three-dimensional abstractions that also speak to the foundational notion of the square as an instrumental form in art history. Yet, here, the artist's transcultural dialogues with friends, including Alberto Burri and the influence of Kazimir Malevich, see him using abstraction as a form of resistance. It is pivotal to recall that the cultures in which these works were made, historically

oscillated between allowing figurative representation, and then quickly shifting to the censure of such iconography. Thus, the intentional use of abstraction during the liberal eras was initially criticised as speaking to a European *nouvelle vague*.

Anwar Jalal Shemza, an initial member of the influential Lahore Art Circle also represents a transcultural field of practice. Leaving Pakistan for Britain, Shemza famously took issue with the undermining of 'Islamic art' and its attendant traditions, an experience most famously gleaned from an encounter with art historian E.H. Gombrich, who argued that such artistic tendencies were either 'functional' or 'primitive'.¹⁵ Shemza retaliated to the pejorative assertions proffered by such figures, developing an individual vocabulary of palimpsest-like drawings; precise mathematically composed paintings, which sought to expand the narrative of landscape, often using the 'circle', another cornerstone of art history as a guiding principle.

The expansive use of formal materials in *Unsettled Objects* connects the viewer to Astrid Klein's *Flycatcher III* (1987-1991). A tessellation of intermingled LED lights repeat and resound in space, the hushed din of electric currents amounting to an embodied figure of resurrection. Klein, a pioneer of appropriation and feminist art who has been practicing as an artist for nearly five decades, uses the 'flycatcher', a quotidian and domestic object found in homes throughout the United Arab Emirates and beyond, to consider the potential threat that occurs when the body of the fly interacts with the artwork. Although it is unlikely that amidst these controlled walls such an encounter might occur, the potential 'threat' creates a menacing context for the examination of this towering anti-monument.¹⁶

Mohammed Kazem uses repetition as a formal motif to explore both local cultural histories within the UAE as well as the role and function of the readymade, a conceptual

art historical trope that is assumed to be absent from the 'global modern' or 'global contemporaneity'.¹⁷ The genesis for *Keys* (1995) was a series of performative conversations with keyholders and locksmiths in the UAE, who displayed on their walls a panoply of different metal locks. Instead of interrogating the unique formations of the various key sets themselves, Kazem probed them on the materials used to produce the rods that housed them. He meticulously gathered various metallic forms, pinning them to an empty canvas, and in the process confronting the visitor with the question of absence. Could this be an un-lived terrain, or a site of constant abstraction and migration?

Fable, Smoke and Ash

The storied lives and experiences of the artists featured within this exhibition have at times been viewed with a sense of distance. Many a figure here, if not marginalised, has at the very least been isolated from particular forms of critical discussion within the arts. Some of this is a consequence of systemic inequality and, on other occasions, a deeply personal consequence of social, political, or economic circumstance. The Sharjah Art Foundation Collection is privileged to house a number of drawings and notebooks by Omer Khairy, who was featured in the Foundation's 2016 exhibition that profiled the work of the Khartoum School of artists. Khairy's highly detailed drawings rendered from his imagination are accompanied by poems, quotes and citations, expanding the interiority of his prolific mind. Heartrendingly, health issues troubled the artist from his early college years, which has meant that the expanse of his prodigious output remains unclear and uncategorised.

Similarly, Mounir Canaan, a formidable artist and the generating force behind hundreds of paintings, was rarely given critical attention outside of his native Egypt in his lifetime. One can claim that his international visibility was hampered by the fact that unlike many artists who came

to form part of the 'global modern' movement, he was a self-taught artist at a time before such affiliations became fashionable in the professionalised art institutions.¹⁸ Unlike his contemporaries, he did not pursue postgraduate studies in fine art schools that bore the imprint of Western validation. Assuming multiple identities, Canaan began by studying works on display at the Museum of Modern Art in Cairo, eventually becoming a magazine illustrator and designer as well as an arts counsellor, all the while dedicating himself to his individual practice. On view here are a gathering of his works from early figuration through to his later interest in abstract expressionism and collage.

The use of collage is prevalent in Mohan Samant's artistic output. Initially a member of the Progressive Artists' Group in India, he left to travel and broaden his experience. In 1958, upon receiving a scholarship to pursue research and study in Rome, he left his country permanently, eventually settling in New York after being awarded a Rockefeller Foundation scholarship. Samant's chaotic depictions of everyday reality unfold in earthly tones and span a range of influences, from the archaeological to the calligraphic; like Canaan, he took inspiration from Egyptian cultural life; in particular, wall paintings and hieroglyphics that he first encountered in encyclopaedic museums in the United States.

Samant's surrealist idiom, evident in his later works is also characteristic in Yüksel Arslan's drawings. Like Samant, Arslan settled in the West; in Paris, where his drawings and paintings were featured in influential exhibitions of Surrealism including, *The Origins, The History and Relationships of Surrealism* organised by Galerie Charpentier in 1964. On display in *Unsettled Objects* are two exemplars of a body of more than 200 works that he called, 'Artures', which the artist has asserted are representative of his interest in philosophy and mystical thought.¹⁹

Fable and myth feature prominently in the work of William Kentridge, a draughtsman whose commitment to disentangling histories of colonialism and racism under the apartheid regime form a cornerstone of many of the artist's multi-disciplinary works. Presented in Sharjah for the first time since 2003, is *Zeno Writing* (2002), a short film that won the main prize at Sharjah Biennial 6, the first biennial under the leadership of Sharjah Art Foundation's President and Director, Hoor Al Qasimi. Originally commissioned for Documenta 11, under the directorship of Okwui Enwezor, this montage film is narrated in five parts, revealing the mood of the last years of the Austro-Hungarian Empire before the outbreak of World War I. The affinity between Al Qasimi and Enwezor's choice of artwork here speaks to the communion between the two curators who spent years in conversation around artistic influences and ideas, which resulted in numerous collaborations at the Sharjah Art Foundation, including a retrospective of Frank Bowling's paintings as well as the forthcoming Sharjah Biennial 15 (2022), for which Enwezor left the blueprint.

This example of transcultural dialogue speaks to a pattern of influences that can be found in the work of Huma Bhabha. Fusing interests in histories of African, ancient and Classicist sculpture, these influences expand and are re-composed as life-sized sculptural forms. Known for her use of found materials to articulate the formal aspects of these creations, the result is beguiling. Malformed faces such as the one featured in *Bumps in the Road* (2008), peer at us from constructed environs that appear to have emerged from a post-apocalyptic science-fiction landscape.

Tala Madani in an anterior fashion often explores the interstices of factual and fictionalised histories. Her paintings and animations offer various critiques of painting's historical associations with masculinity and race. Often deploying a critical approach, her paintings have in the past presented

appropriated critiques of 'Color Field' painters such as Morris Louis. These forms have been created alongside animated films representing garish, codified spaces occupied by men, in both Iran, where she was born, as well as in the western world. In *Unsettled Objects*, Madani explores painting as a form of cinema with *Corner Projection (Panic)* (2019), a new formal foray by the artist. On the one hand, one is witness to a projection that reveals an outline of rudimentary figures of men, who can be seen veering off of the canvas, disappearing in horror. A pointed critique, Madani's painting creates a space within the exhibition for the reclamation and disassociation of medium from the specificities of gender.

The idioms and mythologies of Sri Lanka are explored in 10 unique silver gelatin prints by the late Lionel Wendt. A pioneer of photographic practice globally and a co-founding member of the Colombo '43 Group, Wendt's legacy almost disappeared upon his untimely death in 1944. His works were reportedly found by a patron who supposedly maintained the works within a private network, leaving them out of public sight for decades.²⁰ Wendt's photographs at first may seem like representations of the everyday, but close examination reveal them to be choreographies of the colonised body, the fetishised object, which explore the relationship between situated and imagined cultural histories.

Archaeology

The archaeological impulse in art has been the subject of much debate over the course of the last 20 years.²¹ In *Unsettled Objects*, archaeology unfolds as a methodology through which to excavate memory as much as the practical techniques of practicing reconstruction and restitution. In Hrair Sarkissian's *Final Flight* (2018–2019), the artist traces the extinction of the Bald Ibis Eagle, one of the rarest birds on Earth, that had historically travelled from Palmyra through Saudi Arabia to end their journey in Ethiopia. Over the

years, desert hunters shot and captured the birds, leading to their extinction. In 2002, a small colony of seven Bald Ibis Eagles was spotted in the Syrian desert near Palmyra. Their disappearance, once again, became an inevitability. As conflict broke out in Syria in 2011, their extinction became permanent. Sarkissian presents a monument to this species. Often featured in ancient hieroglyphics, in this installation they become animate. Sarkissian traced the skulls of seven birds of this species at a zoo in Spain. Deploying 3D printing technology, he gave new life to them. Here, they live on plinths, exalted from the shadows, without having to endure the perpetual confrontation of their mortality.

In *The invisible enemy should not exist* (2007–ongoing), Michael Rakowitz fulfils a life-long commitment to resurrect every single artefact that has been looted from the National Museum of Iraq in Baghdad. Utilising the 'archives of disappearance' found at the Oriental Institute at the University of Chicago as well as sources from Interpol's website, the artist is able to develop a schematic to re-create to scale, each looted object. This eternal project is a performance of sorts, an impossible task by the artist to suture the wounds of an incongruent, wounded history; it provides a time capsule for a world that is about to disappear into fog. As part of the practice of creating these artworks, Rakowitz uses food packaging from Middle Eastern stores in the United States. Accordingly, the detritus of Puck and Kraft cheese form the skin of these restored bodies. Accompanying the installation is a soundtrack, a cover of Deep Purple's 'Smoke on the Water' performed by the Iraqi museum's former Director Dr Donnie George's cover band. The band was both a passion project and a necessary source to generate additional income for the museum's former CEO. Donnie George's biography finds new life within the aperture of Rakowitz's art.

In This House (2005) by Akram Zaatari narrates an unusual archaeological tale that occurred during the Lebanese Civil Wars. In 1985, after the withdrawal of Israeli forces from Ain el Mir, the site became a frontline for conflict. The Dagher family, who lived in the village, was evicted from their home by a resistance group who occupied their home for seven years. At the end of the war, one of the resistance fighters wrote a letter to the family to welcome them back home. He hid the letter in the empty case of a mortar and buried it in the garden behind the house. In 2002, Zaatari went to excavate the site for the letter. The resulting film is both a paean of loss as much as it fulfils an act of resuscitation. Using a combination of cinematheque techniques, including an adventurous *vérité* [French: truth] style, Zaatari ushers the viewer into the chaos of the Dagher's family's lost life, interrogating the concept of return in an era of disappearance.

Joana Hadjithomas and Khalil Joreige's *ISMYRNE* (2016) is a 60-minute film that forms the backbone of the exhibition's film programme. First presented in Sharjah during the artists' mid-career survey 'Two Suns and a Sunset' in 2016 (also realised in collaboration with Enwezor), this recent acquisition presents a conversation between Joana Hadjithomas and the iconic Etel Adnan, a poet, artist and filmmaker. The two friends, both born in Lebanon, share a tumultuous connection to a Turkish city that neither of them had been to. Conveying intimate stories, they realise that for them both Ismyrne (now Izmir) is a constructed imaginary, parlayed to them through a contentious narration of violence.

Activisms

Political violence and its aftermath are consistent themes that resound in *Unsettled Objects*. On view is a magisterial display of works by the late Abdul Hay Mosallam Zarara. His hand-made ceramic wall reliefs, which burst with ebullient colour, persistently question the notion of solidarity with the state of Palestine. Everyday scenes intermingled with

historical events and political ruptures, crafting a milieu that is left open for elucidation. Thuraya Al-Baqsamī's *The Last Shot* (1991) conveys the bruises of war in a harrowing portrayal of brutal conflict. A direct response to the first Gulf War (1990–1991) and the invasion of her home in Kuwait, her painting presents two figures who exist between life and death; peace and poverty; debt and dissolution.

The ruins of an interior conflict greet visitors upon entry to the exhibition. Here, Sarah Abu Abdullah's magnificent work *Saudi Automobile* (2011) presents the relic of a 'feminised' pink car that has been dismembered. Inside the Flying Saucer, one can bear witness to a video performance showing Abu Abdullah torching, excoriating and decimating the object before her. An ostensible act of vengeance at first, it re-emerges as a performance of frustration. At the time the work was produced, women did not have the legal right to drive in the artist's home country of Saudi Arabia. Legislation has altered this position, yet the artist's gleaming artefact sits before us as memorial in time, an elegy of a prohibitive era that is closely tethered to an extremely recent past.

The activist impulses of artists manifest in a myriad of fashions. Rasheed Araeen, along with his practice as an artist, has led critical discourses around post-colonial theory. In 1987, he founded 'Third Text', a journal of 'global art' which helped create a space for fluent examination of the Black Art Movement in Britain, alongside conversations around divergent genealogical routes to the contemporary. He also curated exhibitions, notably, *The Other Story* in 1989 organised by the Hayward Gallery, which sought to bring into public visibility the works of numerous artists, from Lubaina Himid to Frank Bowling, whose influence, according to Araeen, had been withheld from public museums and galleries in Britain. In *How Could One Paint a Self Portrait* (1978–9), the audience is literally able to witness the internal struggle of a creative practitioner, wrestling to enter his

identity into a discriminatory public sphere. The graffiti that sits smeared across his face, boasts perturbing violent slang. The language adopted here is indicative of the cultural landscape during Thatcherite Britain, a divisive era whose tentacular hooks pervade the public consciousness to this day.

Saule Suleimenova's plastic painted artworks present the lives of displaced children, communal gatherings and immigrant life in Kazakhstan. Borrowing images from the internet, public archives and books, her works combust with cheerful colour despite the often-sombre tone of her subjects. The act of collage here further complicates these pictures. As the artist asserts, the makeshift scenes that she produces function as sites of reclamation and restitution, bringing a sense of memory, communion and revelry to the people represented in the work.²²

Bruno Pacheco begins his paintings by drawing inspiration from an encyclopaedic atlas of images that he culls, gathers and organises from the internet, current affairs magazines and art journals, among numerous other sources. *Mountain Flag* (2014–15), a large canvas which the artist took nearly a year to complete, was first exhibited at the São Paulo Biennale. The painting begins a series of experiments with the colour red, exploring its history as a tonal pursuit to emblematised both intimacy and violence; conflict and dissolution. Here, he presents a form of quiet activism that unfurls through his abstracted flag formations: could they be suggestive of bodies, moulded together, waiting to be saved, atop a mountain? In between life and death? Or rather, are we in a conflict zone, and the banners before us a catalytic call for retreat and reprieve?

Dawoud Bey is a photographer known for his large-scale portraits, primarily of adolescent youth in the United States. Often presented in black and white, his photographs are considered markers of a society unseen within the American

subconscious. The images presented here, from 1983, form part of a collaboration with the elusive artist David Hammons. The work documents a period when Hammons performed his notorious 'Blizzard Snow Ball Sale' during one of the country's most vengeful winters in recorded history. Hammons stood on a street corner, selling snowballs.²³ The performative act of 'selling' the ephemeral 'object' with no value brings us full circle. What is an 'unsettled object' and how does it situate itself within the world? If the intention of art is to disrupt the hegemonic forces that govern preordained narratives, then both Hammons and Bey have crafted the perfect solution; let the commodity go. To decolonise the imagination, one must forego the value of authorised histories in favour of a fluid, continually gestating sphere that is open to new forms of authorship, certain forms of erasure, and the unfolding of sediments that are in urgent need of examination.

Postscript: Alone, Awake and Asleep

An exhibition is a living thing, a sort of an organism. The 'intensities' experienced within its walls between visitors and objects create phenomenological experiences.²⁴ The collation of these engagements bear the potential to engender different forms of meaning between the situated subject and the object. In turn, the creolisation of experiences from multiple points of anchoring bear with them the potential for new epistemic forms to emerge.²⁵ As the exhibition checklist came into form, I was introduced to a work by the artist Prem Sahib titled *Liquid Gold* (2019/2021). Using light, the most intangible of sources as his 'object' source, Sahib will consume the glass façade of the spherical Flying Saucer at night. The choice of colour, gold, the artist intimates, speaks to the historical notion, not only of currency, but equally of sustained value, 'the safety net' that gold represents.²⁶ It is equally an embodied colour scheme, one tethered to the body's biological makeup as well as to the aspirational lifestyles of those who wish to collect and bejewel their lives.

Thus, Sahib's *Liquid Gold* in contrast to the anesthetised objects found in Baumgarten's representation of the Pitt Rivers Museum, shall never be alone. Sahib sustains them with light even after the doors are shuttered; these unsettled objects are imbued with an irrevocable commitment to the living, and with that gesture, begins our first act of 'unlearning imperialism'—let the objects speak.

- 1 Katherine May, *Wintering: The Power of Rest and Retreat in Difficult Times* (London and New York: Rider, 2020), 3-11.
- 2 Ibid.
- 3 Winter of Discontent is a term often used in common parlance to invoke a historical moment that occurred during 1978–1979 in Great Britain. During this time, the country bore witness to large-scale strikes by private, and later public sector trade unions, who were insisting on pay increases greater than what the then-Prime Minister James Callaghan of the Labour Party government had allowed for the Trades Union Congress (TUC). The term was frequently used in relation to the Arab uprisings, which began in December 2010.
- 4 By systemic forms, I am referring to structural uses of abusive power by institutions, including those who inherently justify social inequality in the field of art history, cultural history and critical theory more broadly.
- 5 Divya Praful Tolia-Kelly, *Landscape, Race and Memory: Material Ecologies of Citizenship* (London: Routledge, 2016).
- 6 Cathy Park Hong, *Minor Feelings: An Asian American Reckoning* (London: Profile Books, 2020).
- 7 William John Thomas Mitchell, *Seeing Through Race* (Cambridge, MA and London: Harvard University Press, 2012).
- 8 Okwui Enwezor, 'The Postcolonial Constellation: Contemporary Art in a State of Permanent Transition' in T. Smith, O. Enwezor and N. Condee (eds), *Antinomies of Art and Culture* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2008).
- 9 Ariella Aïsha Azoulay, *Potential History: Unlearning Imperialism* (London and New York: Verso, 2019), 58-63; 286-295.
- 10 Okwui Enwezor, 'The Postcolonial Constellation: Contemporary Art in a State of Permanent Transition' in T. Smith, O. Enwezor and N. Condee (eds), *Antinomies of Art and Culture* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2008).
- 11 Some of these issues are discussed in Sonja Mejcher-Atassi and John Pedro Schwartz's book, *Archives, Museums and Collecting Practices in the Modern Arab World* (London: Routledge, 2016).
- 12 Walter Benjamin, *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction/Reproducibility* (London: Penguin, 1935/2008).
- 13 From a conversation with the artist Lubaina Himid on 25 November 2020.
- 14 N. V. Maltzahn, 'Introduction' in N. V. Maltzahn & M. Bellan (eds.), *The Art Salon in the Arab Region: Politics of Taste Making* (Beirut: Orient-Institut Beirut (Max Weber Stiftung), 2018) 18-23.
- 15 Sheila S. Blair and Jonathan M. Bloom, 'The Mirage of Islamic Art: Reflections on the Study of an Unwieldy Field.' *The Art Bulletin* 85, no. 1 (2003): 152-84. Accessed 18 February 2021. Also see: E.H. Gombrich, *The Preference for the Primitive* (London and New York: Phaidon, 2002/2004).
- 16 From a conversation with the artist on 15 April 2020.
- 17 Geeta Kapur has been at the forefront of these debates. See Geeta Kapur, *When Was Modernism: When was Modernism* (New York: Columbia University Press (Tulika Books), 2000/2020).
- 18 There have been numerous exhibitions that have profiled the work of 'outsider' or 'self-taught' artists over the course of the last 20 years. A key conduit to this debate is the Museum of Everything project, which stages pop-up exhibitions of 'outsider art'. The 55th Venice Biennale was also notable for its inclusion of a considerable number of outsider artists in the 'international exhibition'.
- 19 Beatrix Ruf, *Yüksel Arslan: Artures* (Berlin and Stuttgart: Hatje Cantz Verlag, 2012).
- 20 This information was gleaned from conversations with staff at the Lionel Wendt Art Centre in Colombo in December 2019 and with various artist representatives.
- 21 Dieter Roelstraete, *The Way of the Shovel: On the Archaeological Imaginary in Art* (Chicago and London: Chicago University Press, 2014).
- 22 Based on conversations with the artist's representative.
- 23 Bruce Hainley, 'The Snowball Effect' (*Artforum*, Summer 2018).
- 24 David Benjamin Johnson, 'Pictorial Athleticism and Intensity in Francis Bacon' (2016). *Deleuze and Guatarri Studies*. 10 (2): 186-205.
- 25 Édouard Glissant, *Poetics of Relation* (trans. Betsy Wing) (Ann Arbor, Michigan: University of Michigan Press, 1990/1997).
- 26 From a conversation with the artist on 2 February 2020.