



SPRING 2017

Wafaa Bilal: 168:01



Wafaa Bilal, *168:08* (detail), 2016, installation. Photo: Don Hall.

WAFAA BILAL: 168:01

MAY 5 TO JUNE 25, 2017

CURATED BY SRIMOYEE MITRA

ORGANIZED AND CIRCULATED BY THE ART GALLERY OF WINDSOR

EXHIBITION TEXT BY SRIMOYEE MITRA, CURATOR

Inspired by the *Bayt al-Hikma*, or House of Wisdom, Iraqi-born artist Wafaa Bilal's exhibition *168:01* stages a conceptual and interactive library. The *Bayt al-Hikma* was a major academic center during the Islamic Golden Age where Muslim, Jewish, and Christian scholars studied the humanities and science. By the 9th century, the House of Wisdom had grown into the largest library in the world. In 1258, the library was destroyed by the Mongol Siege of Baghdad along with the House of Wisdom. According to one account, the library was thrown into the Tigris River to create a bridge of books for the Mongol army to cross over. As a result, the thousands of pages bled ink into the river for seven days – or 168 hours – after which the books were drained of their knowledge. Today, the *Bayt al-Hikma* represents one of the most recognizable examples of cultural destruction from wartime. However, for Bilal, the *Bayt al-Hikma* also represents a new beginning through a process of rebuilding.

In the words of Bilal, "Over and over again, Iraqis build while foreign invaders destroy their infrastructure (whether that be cultural or physical), and, as a sign of hope, they rebuild." As a stand-in for the library in *168:01*, Bilal has designed a 40-foot-long white bookcase filled with blank white books. Metaphorically, the white books symbolize the priceless cultural heritage destroyed at Bayt al-Hikma as well as the libraries, archives and museums whose systematic decimation by occupying forces continues to ravage his homeland. Throughout the duration of the exhibition, the white books will slowly be replaced with visitor donations from a wish list compiled by The College of Fine Arts at the University of Baghdad, whose library was looted and destroyed in 2003.¹ At the end of the exhibition, each venue is to send the collected donated books to the artist's studio in New York. The artist will be responsible for sending the book shipments to the University of Baghdad. In the spirit of



Wafaa Bilal, *168:08* installation view. Photo: Don Hall.



Small white label with illegible text.





Wafaa Bilal, *The Ashes Series: Market*, 2003-2013, archival inkjet photograph. Photo courtesy of Driscoll Babcock, New York, New York and the artist.

restoring culture, this book exchange symbolizes the ways in which everyone can work to eradicate violence inflicted on cultural spaces – spaces that are meant to preserve and store knowledge for future generations.

Likened to evidence of destruction in the exhibition, Bilal also presents a powerful collection of photographs entitled *The Ashes Series* (2003-2013), a body of work in which viewers can immerse themselves into war-torn landscapes in the Middle East. In an effort to foster empathy and humanize the effects of violence in Western visual culture, Bilal references models of photo-journalism in his constructed images of destruction caused by the Iraq War. Resulting from a long process of building miniatures that recall their referent spaces, the photographs showcase the scattered 21 grams of human ashes that eerily decorate destruction. Representing the people who have suffered in Iraq, the large-scale colored photographs translate the layered tensions between destruction, despair, intimacy, and rebirth.

ARTIST BIOGRAPHY

Iraqi-born artist Wafaa Bilal, an Associate Arts Professor at New York University's Tisch School of the Arts, is known internationally for his on-line performative and interactive works provoking dialogue about international politics and internal dynamics. Bilal's work, *Canto III* premiered in a solo booth at the New York Armory Show in 2015 and went on to be shown in the 2015 Venice Biennale. He holds a BFA from the University of New Mexico and an MFA from the School of the Art Institute of Chicago. His work can be found in the permanent collections of the Los Angeles County Museum of Art, Los Angeles, CA; Museum of Contemporary Photography, Chicago, IL; MATHAF: Arab Museum of Modern Art, Doha, Qatar; amongst others.

¹ Al-Shawi, Nasser A.M. "Burning Libraries in Baghdad the Unexpected Destruction of Cultural Heritage after the War of 2003." Working paper. Annual Conference of Nordiska Konservator Forbundet Sverige, n.d. Accessed 2015 <www.academia.edu/5073941/Burning_Libraries_in_Baghdad_the_Unexpected_Destruction_of_Cultural_Heritage>.



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COVER IMAGE

Wafaa Bilal, *The Ashes Series: Chandelier* (detail), 2003-2013, archival inkjet print. Photo courtesy of Driscoll Babcock, New York, New York and the artist.



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