

## About the Artist

Jawa El Khash (b. 1995, Damascus) is a multidisciplinary artist that uses virtual reality, holography and painting to investigate nature, architecture, and immigrant refugee culture. By collecting and rendering digital materials, El Khash constructs and reimagines realms for lost cultural relics, oral traditions, and concepts. Recent exhibitions include "The Upper Side of The Sky" at Crutch CAC (2019), Digital Deserts at Kit & Ace (2018), and "Liminal Forms" at the OCAD University Graduate Gallery (2018).

## About the Author

Vince Rozario is an independent curator, critic, writer, arts administrator, and community organizer focusing on issues of decolonizing the canon, multiple modernities, queer diasporas, and transnational futures. Their writing deals with issues around community accountability, representation, and equity in the Canadian contemporary art sphere. Their work aims to explore modes of art production and circulation that circumvent traditional modes of exhibition and dissemination.

# Inter/Access

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The Upper Side of the Sky  
Jawa El Khash

Opening Reception  
Wednesday, January 15, 2020  
7-9PM

Through digital world-building, Jawa El Khash considers the interrelation of political and geographic displacement, archiving, and botany. In this exhibition, the artist presents her virtual reality work *The Upper Side of the Sky*, an immersive environment that resurrects ancient ruins and plant life lost to civil war in Palmyra, Syria. Using *Unity*, *Houdini*, and *3Ds Max*, El Khash explores the tensions between digital technologies' capacity to destroy and preserve life. Positioning this VR environment and associated research materials as an archive, El Khash's digitally reimagined Palmyra is designed to aid cultural-historical memory of this place for future generations.

# THE UPPER SIDE OF THE SKY

*An essay by Vince Rozario*

The Upper Side of the Sky  
Jawa El Khash  
January 15 - February 15, 2020



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Modernity, ruin, and war are the trinitarian refrain of this age of unprecedented material and ecological destruction. Mediated experiences connect us to the loss of vast swathes of the planet and its history—the Amazon Rainforest and Australian Hinterland consumed by flames—along with centuries of heritage in Iraq and Syria, most notably the Greco-Roman and Semitic ruins of Palmyra. Economic crises of recent decades and the reactionary politics they precipitate have accelerated the generation of ruins at an unprecedented scale. Constantly encountering this destruction through media has induced a collective cognitive hypertrophy. As we struggle to remember what is lost, we encounter our own memories in a state of decay, carrying embodied ruins within us.

Our fascination with ruins is inseparable from the project of modernity itself. With millions of cameras, satellite data, and other probative technologies at our disposal, we attempt to rescue treasures from the cumulative wreckage. Critically reclaiming these digital strategies for preserving and activating memory, Jawa El Khash creates a VR simulation, *The Upper Side of the Sky*. Extracting open-source data from the #NEWPALMYRA and Artifaq archives, El Khash maps a psychogeographic simulation of Palmyra rendered in Unity, Houdini, and 3Ds Max. Scaling buildings and artefacts relative to her personal memory, and interweaving botanical motifs referring to the ecology of the Fertile Crescent, *The Upper Side of the Sky* contends with the melancholia of loss while probing the ethics of reconstruction and the possibility for new worlds to be imagined and embodied amidst ruins.

El Khash’s digital ecosystem consists of a greenhouse, courtyard, and a chrysalis chamber. These buildings are an exquisite corpse, a surrealist conceit assembled from various

Palmyrene landmarks including the Arch of Triumph, the Roman Theatre, and the Temple of Bel. The artist animates the inert, brutalist surfaces of the renderings with botanical motifs. Palimpsests of botanical drawings hang between the arches of the chrysalis chamber, while the surfaces of the greenhouse are embellished with renderings of Damascus tilework, creating tessellated foliate patterns. Under the vast arcade that comprises the greenhouse, El Khash houses flora including varieties of date palms, Aleppo pepper (now a global commodity), cotton, and apples which comprised a large portion of Syria’s pre-war export economy.<sup>1</sup> These plantings make reference to the archives of the artist’s grandfather, Dr. Mohamed N. El-Khash. A researcher and Plant Pathologist, Dr. El-Khash was also the erstwhile Director of the Arab Centre for the Study of Arid Zones and Dry Lands. The seed bank at the affiliated International Center for Agricultural Research in the Dry Areas, or Icarda, in Aleppo has been abandoned in the civil war, putting an agricultural archive of over 155,000 varieties of the plants in the Fertile Crescent at risk.<sup>2</sup> Loss, articulated in this simulation, is not merely the destruction of architectural heritage, but also the carefully calibrated ecology of the Fertile Crescent, along with priceless knowledge and modes of existence carefully preserved by generations of Syrians.

Exploring the potential for plants to activate a dormant consciousness that sees all life as interconnected, El Khash draws on Peter Tompkins and Christopher Bird’s experiments in *The Secret Lives of Plants*. Though often dismissed as pseudo-science, Tompkins and Bird’s experiments involved creative approaches like connecting polygraphs to plants to measure their emotive responses. Referencing these experiments, a series of floating polygraphs tower over the viewer in

the Roman Theatre, overlaid with fluttering membranes that respond to some unknown seismic vibration. The surrealist interplay of organic and inorganic in this immersive simulation attempts to agitate anthropocentric ways of being in the world. The destruction of ancient buildings is but one layer of the scope of loss experienced in the crucible of the Syrian Civil War. The psychological, ecological, and epistemic violence wreaked upon Syria is one node of a machinery of power that displaces us all. Beyond binary readings of self and other, Occident and Orient, El Khash taps into the regenerative potential of overlooked systems of knowledge to animate new connections with the world—past, present, and future.

The solitary viewer immersed in the simulation that is *The Upper Side of the Sky* encounters a specific and peculiar pleasure at the immense scale and incomprehensible complexity of these lost monuments. This can be situated in a longer tradition of viewing and scopic pleasure which is traced to the advent of Classical Modernity in the 18th century. Industrialization in this period accelerated the destruction of built and natural environments, while archaeological exploration (often in tandem with colonial expansion) unearthed Greco-Roman ruins at Pompeii and Herculaneum, sparking a public fixation with ruins and antiquity. Simultaneously, the term “ruin lust”,<sup>3</sup> was coined to signify the longing for images of decay, suffused with melancholia and desire. As industrializing European nations began to identify with modernity, they also needed to generate its epistemic foil: the ruin. Images of these ruins, in the form of lithographs, became a popular genre in this period. A notable example is Robert Wood’s 1753 album *The Ruins of Palmyra*.<sup>4</sup> These images both spurred a European fascination with the history of the region, while generating the

idea of a fictitious Orient trapped in the past.

Further iterations of this genre turned toward ever more fantastical and imaginary depictions of ruins. These imaginary sequences of decay also embodied a deeply embedded anxiety that the violence of colonialism inflicted on people in distant lands would one day revisit the Europe. In the 1870s, Gustave Doré depicted a fictitious (and heavily inaccurate) ‘New Zealander’ visiting the ruins of London after their future destruction,<sup>5</sup> inspired by a story by Thomas Babington Macaulay.<sup>6</sup> The central figure in this drawing looks less like a Maori man and more like a European aristocrat surveying the ruins of Palmyra on their grand tour.<sup>7</sup> Looking at, consuming, and imagining ruins is thus also always a political project. As Thomas Macaulay’s descendant Rose Macaulay reflected in the aftermath of World War II, a ruin is a thing in and of history. They are a device through which we engage with and refashion the past and, by extension, are an avenue through which we might fashion the future.<sup>8</sup>

The incomplete, forever mutable lost world of the ruin captured within memory is directly at odds with the methodological strictures of cultural conservation and reconstruction. As international governments and capital interests move toward rebuilding Palmyra, they map their own political agendas onto the project of reclamation. Rather than a techno-utopian fantasy, *The Upper Side of the Sky* probes complex questions surrounding the ethics of rebuilding heritage, and the systems of power which determine cultural value, and subsume it within exercises in soft power. The benevolent saviourism of Western technocracy, contrasted with the barbarity of the Orient, is encapsulated by British Prime Minister Boris Johnson’s remarks at the unveiling of a 3D model of the Palmyrene Triumphal Arch in

London:

*This is an arch of triumph and in many ways a triumph of technology and determination. We’re here in a spirit of defiance, defiance of the barbarians who destroyed the original as they have destroyed so many other relics in Syria and the Middle East.*<sup>9</sup>

But it was not just Palmyra that was destroyed. Entire cities like the nearby Homs have been reduced to rubble, with only designated heritage sites getting funding for preservation. Entire geographies of culture, community, being, and belonging have been flattened in the crucible of war. The complicity of Western governments in the continuing violence inflicted on Syria is often obscured by the feel-good narrative of these reconstruction projects, as artists like Morehshin Allahyari have explored in their practices.<sup>10</sup>

*The Upper Side of the Sky*, however, resists the linear trajectory of colonial history, existing in a temporally indeterminate space. The disunity of architectural space within the simulation creates an infinitude of departure points into multiple histories and parallel timelines. Movement within the simulation is also bound by the structures of language, formulated as a command via controller to the program that teleports you from one Cartesian point to another. Rather than a romanticized recreation of what is lost, this simulation makes its structure legible through the numerous errors, delays, and singularities registered in the interface. These lapses mirror how heritage itself is embodied: it is carried through memories and sensory data stored in our brains, always transmitted with a degree of corruption.

El Khash thus suggests a multiplicity of histories and futures through a proactively critical engagement with emerging technologies, engaging strategies of cautious interpretation and hybridity. Answering the destruc-

tion of the present moment, El Khash orchestrates chaos in simulation in order to engender a reflexive understanding of an unpredictable reality. Drawing from collective memory and personal archives, she leaves the viewer with a series of strategies to exist in the world beyond anthropocentric, colonial, and extractive systems.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> OECD data.

<sup>2</sup> Sengupta, Somini. “How a Seed Bank, Almost Lost in Syria’s War, Could Help Feed a Warming Planet”, *The New York Times*, October 13, 2017.

<sup>3</sup> Ruinenlust in the original German.

<sup>4</sup> Robert Wood, *The Ruins of Palmyra*, 1753, Book, Royal Collection Trust.

<sup>5</sup> University of Otago Library Special Collections. *The New Zealander, Unpacking Ruins: Architecture from Antiquity*. (Otago, New Zealand, 2002).

<sup>6</sup> Macaulay was a notorious racist and imperialist who designed Britain’s cultural-colonial policies in India.

<sup>7</sup> University of Otago Library Special Collections. *The New Zealander*.

<sup>8</sup> Brian Dillon, “Ruin Lust: Our Love Affair with Decaying Buildings,” *The Guardian*, February 17, 2012, sec. Art and design.

<sup>9</sup> Press Association, “British Archaeologists Should Rebuild Palmyra, Says Boris Johnson,” *The Guardian*, March 27, 2016, sec. World news.

<sup>10</sup> Morehshin Allahyari, “Physical Tactics for Digital Colonialism,” *Medium*, September 26, 2019.