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.

THE UPPER SIDE OF THE SKY

An essay by Vince Rozario

The Upper Side of the Sky
Jawa El Khash
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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.
Modernity, ruin, and war are the trinimarii of this book. The 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 Northern Territory—consumed by flames—along with centuried of heritage in Iraq and Syria, most notably the Greco-Roman and Semitic ruins of Palmyra. Economic crises led to rubble, while heritage designation sites getting funds for preservation. Entire geographies of culture, community, being, and belonging have been flattened. This destruction of the cultural landscape accelerates the generation of ruins at an unprecedented scale. Constantly encountering these ruins through media has induced a collective cognitive hypothermy. 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. Crucially rechanneling these digital strategies for preserving and activating memory, Jaya El Khach creates VR simulation, The Upper Side of the Sky: Extracting open-source data from the FEN Palmyra and Artifex archives, El Khach maps a psychogeographic simulation of Palmyra rendered in Unity, Houdini, and 3Ds Max. Sculpting buildings and artefacts relative to her personal memory, assembling botanical motifs referring to the ecology of the Fertile Crescent, The Upper Side of the Sky constitutes a simulation exploring the ethics of reconstruction and the possibility for new worlds to be imagined and embodied amidst ruins.

El Khach’s digital ecosystem consists of a greenhouse, courtyard, and a chyrsalid chamber. These buildings are an exquisite corpse, a surrealist conceit assembled from various Palmyrene landmarks including the Arch of Triumph, a reimagining of the ancient 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 tullework, creating tessellated botanical patterns. Under the variegated, layered skin which comprises the greenhouse, El Khassh houses flora including varieties of date palms, Aleppo pepper (now a global commodity), and, by extension, apples which come from a portion of Syria’s pre-war export economy. These plants make reference to the archives of the artist’s grandfather, Dr. Mohamed N. El-Khash, an Agricultural Research in the Dry Areas, or 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 catalogues, the affiliated International Center for Agricultural Research in the Dry Areas, or Icrada, 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. Loss, articulated in this simulation, is not merely the destruction of architectural heritage, but also the careful 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 through the known, 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 fluctuating visualizations that respond to the text’s own seismic vibration. The surrealist interplay of organic and inorganic in this immersive simulation attempts to agitate anthropocene 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 epistemological shockwaves upon Syria is one is a machinery of power that displaces us all. Beyond binary readings of self and other, Occident and Orient, El Khassh 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 this simulation is that The Upper Side of the Sky encounters a specific and peculiar pleasure at this immersive scale and the erasure of the complex reality of these lost monuments. This can be situated in a longer tradition of visual and spatial pleasure which is traced to the advent of Classical Modernity in the 18th century. Industrialization in this period accelerated the creation 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 dreams of ruins luminated, signifying the longing for imagery of decay, suffused with melancholia and desire. As Manto’s notoriously racist and imperialist Macaulay was a notorious racist and imperialist who designed Britain’s cultural-colonial policies in India. By the feel-good narrative of these reconstructions, the ruins of London: after their future destruction, 1870s, Gustave Doré depicted a fictitious (and highly inaccurately) ‘New Zealand’ visiting the ruins of London after their future destruction, inspired by a story by Thomas Babbage-Ton Macaulay. The central figure in these drawings looks less like a Moari man and more like a European aristocrat surveying the ruins of Palmyra on their grand tour. Looking at, encountering, and living amongst ruins is always a political project. As Thomas Macaulay’s descendant Rose Macaulay reflected in The Ruins of Palmyra, “rather than a romanticized recreation of what is lost, this simulation makes its structure legible through the numerous errors, delays, and production of ruins, in the form of lithographs, depicting the ruins of London after their future destruction, a reflexive understanding of an unpredictable reality. Drawing from collective memory and personal archives, the viewer leaves the exhibition with a series of strategies to exist in the world beyond anthropocentric, colonial, and extractive systems.

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