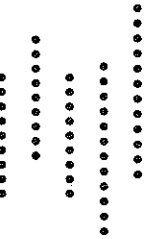


**ABRAAJ CAPITAL ART PRIZE 2012**

**EDITED BY NAT MULLER**



Laura U. Marks

## IMAGINAL MATERIALS

In recent years, many artists in the Arab and Muslim world have dealt with the fact that their regions' history is not well (or indecisively, or incommensurably) documented. As a result, their works have often been marked by effacement, absence, and the efforts of memory to wring history from personal documents. They have faced dead ends of documentation, producing often very slight works that are barely perceptible. For example, Joana Hadjithomas and Khalil Joreige's *Wonder Beirut* series (1998–2010), based on burnt photographs and cans of film developed decades later – or not at all – addresses the impossibility of conclusively documenting the Lebanese Civil War. Such works reject the idea that history is continuous, coherent and accessible, an ideology that still endures in some Western countries and informs popular art. It is characteristic of these artists' historiographies to resort to personal memory, and, when memory fails, to nothingness.

I propose that this nothingness is not empty: it is full of unactualized potential. As Abu 'Ali al-Husayn Ibn Sînâ (980–1037) of Bukhara claimed in his radical reworking of Aristotle, Being is infinitely and inexhaustibly full, with a fullness whose expression is not predetermined by categories. Ibn Sînâ's discoveries were taken up (though usually unacknowledged) by Western philosophers, in con-

ceptual moves that attributed ever greater creativity to the act of expression, of drawing out something from – seemingly – nothing. As one of Ibn Sînâ's unwitting inheritors, Alfred North Whitehead, proposed, chaos is not nothingness but the sum of all possibles.<sup>1</sup>

It seems to me that recently art has begun to shift from seeing nothingness as empty to seeing it as full. Artists are starting to treat history's unavailability not as absence but as presence. So, without claiming a deterministic historical development, it seems we can trace a change in the way artists have dealt with history in recent years as a movement of ever-richer expressions: from document to narrative to fact-fiction to fabulation to fabulated object. The last is what we find in Nat Muller's exhibition *Spectral Imprints*. First, there is art that uses the document, the indisputable evidence that an event has occurred: artworks based on artifacts and archives. Then, if documents cannot be found, there is narrative, a more loosely linked causal chain of past events that often relies on interviews and personal memories: this is minor history, history told from non-dominant points of view. Then, when memory fails or just isn't adequate to the dimensions of historical events, or when documents and narratives cannot account for the present situation, artists combine fact and fiction, sometimes blurring the two.

This fact-fiction fission releases great creative energy, even if at first it feels like paralysis. Gilles Deleuze wrote (in describing some European postwar cinema) that in accidents, states of surprise, and dream states, our judgment is sometimes suspended and

1. Alfred North Whitehead, paraphrased in Gilles Deleuze, *Le Pli: Leibniz et le Baroque* (Paris: Minuit, 1988), 104.

we lose the power to act. In that brief moment, our perception calls up not clear and useful recollections that would tell us how to act in the present moment but “floating childhood memories,” fantasies, feelings of *déjà vu*.<sup>2</sup> He brings in Henri Bergson’s theory of dreams, in which they are not fictions but ultrasensitive connectors: “The dreamer is not at all closed to the sensations of the external and internal world. However, he no longer relates them to specific recollection-images, but to fluid, malleable sheets of past.” Dreaming, then, pulls together broad fields of events from the slightest of perceptions.

When dreaming becomes collective, the creative force of fabulation kicks in; when documents and memory fail to testify to the past, fabulation invents it. Fabulation is not propaganda: it is the storytelling that actualizes a people’s immanent powers.<sup>3</sup> It has become an essential tool in the practice of artists from the Arab and Muslim world and elsewhere.

The works in this exhibition take the act of fabulation a step further by solidifying its results in quite material objects. A document abstracted and rematerialized releases powers of imagination that the “raw” document could not. We can see this in earlier works by artists in the exhibition: for example, Taysir Batniji’s *Pixels* drawings, despite their low resolution in a 30x30 grid, can be recognized as images of blindfolded men. The low resolution, which suggests that the drawings are based on small images in news photos or video footage of

men awaiting interrogation, dehumanizes them even further. But Batniji has carefully shaded each pixel with feathery strokes: they seem to caress and protect the anonymous heads while holding our attention to them. Similarly, Wael Shawky’s video *Larvae Channel* (2009) uses Rotoscope to turn a film of an elderly Palestinian couple talking about their troubles into a pastel animation. In a way, the animation technique shelters the couple from prying eyes, but its formality also plays up their awkward gestures and muttered words, creating a document much more painful to witness, and thus more demanding of a creative ethical response, than a conventional documentary would be.

In this exhibition, Batniji treats a casual document made precious in retrospect: the wedding photographs of his brother, who was killed two years later. Batniji fabulates from these photographs in a very delicate manner: he enlarges and scans the negatives of the photographs, which reduces them to lines and high-contrast areas, and then etches these lines into thick paper. The resulting work appears invisible unless strong light reveals the impressions on the paper. Batniji has transformed it from a visual to a tactile object. Looking at this work, you do not see the people in the image so much as feel them. You feel the creases in their clothes on your own body, you feel the creases around their smiling mouths on your own face. Embodying the event in this way draws you close to it in a way that looking at the picture would not and allows you to feel the death of the artist’s brother in the withdrawal of the image.

2. Gilles Deleuze, *Cinema 2: The Time-Image*, trans. Hugh Tomlinson and Barbara Habberjam (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota, 1989), 56.

3. *Ibid.*, 123.



Raed Yassin's vases depict Lebanese Civil War battles in impossibly dense, informative detail, based on drawings commissioned by the artist. You can pick out the tall downtown buildings used by snipers – Murr Tower, the Holiday Inn, the Phoenicia – make out the different militia's armbands, see the luggage of the fleeing refugees, and more. All this is packed into a single image, in the style of a Persian miniature – more detail than would ever have been available to vision in actual photographs or films of the battles. Transferred from unique drawing to a mass-producible object made by porcelain masters and painters in China, the vases look ready-made, as though a factory in China were responding to enormous consumer demand for Civil War documentary vases.

Another surprising materialization occurs when Joana Hadjithomas and Khalil Joreige take seriously the scam e-mail messages that most people delete without a thought. They treat these electronic missives as anonymized but urgent alarm cries from countries, particularly African ones, whose poverty and corruption signal problems of injustice on a global scale. While others seek to expose and humiliate perpetrators of Internet fraud,<sup>4</sup> Hadjithomas and Joreige dignify them with fiction. They have gathered stories (whose truthfulness or lack thereof is not really the point) from the senders and hired actors to enact them.

For *A Clean Glimpse of History*, Wael Shawky has built a marionette theater that expands a manu-

script painting by Jean Fouquet from the *Grandes Chroniques de France* (1455–1460), depicting Pope Urban II preaching the necessity of invading Jerusalem to a council of monks and nobles at Clermont-Ferrand in 1095. This sermon launched the First Crusade against Muslims in Palestine, cloaking imperialist goals as sacred Christian duty. Shawky expands the tiny painting into three dimensions, giving it a grotesque physicality. The peep-show format of the theater further de-monumentalizes the historic event at the same time that it makes it inescapably present to us.

In a poetically Marxist exercise in de-reification, Risham Syed materializes the trade routes of the imperial cotton economy in detailed maps of the major cotton-producing countries Turkey, Pakistan, Sri Lanka, and Bangladesh, which are transferred to fabric and richly embroidered using the techniques of each region. These embroidery techniques are themselves mobile, for embroidery circulates in the luxury trade, and even the floral patterns of the background textiles, while appearing Western, result from Europe's thorough absorption of Islamic aesthetics centuries ago.<sup>5</sup> Thus do Syed's beautiful quilts materialize and mobilize history.

These objects give undeniable physical presence to something fugitive and difficult to represent, in a materialized fabulation. They are not documents: they are physical expressions of an imagined (not fictional) past. They crystallize the imagined past in objects, just as one can extrude hitherto impossible forms from algorithms using a 3D printer. Each

4. The website 419 Eater, founded by "Mike Berry," baits African Internet fraudsters to get them go to great lengths to reveal themselves. For example, in 2006 the site responded to the scammer John Boko of Abidjan, promising him \$25,000 if he would produce and mail to Berry detailed wooden reproductions of computer keyboards and other objects, which Boko did, finally to learn that his correspondent was also a scam artist. The correspondence and sculptures are exhibited at [http://www.419eater.com/html/john\\_boko.htm](http://www.419eater.com/html/john_boko.htm).

5. See Chapter Four, "The Haptic Transfer and the Travels of the Abstract Line, Part II," in my book *Enfoldment and Infinity: An Islamic Genealogy of New Media Art* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2010).

artwork borrows the forms of its materiality from a deep historical vocabulary of plastic form: the Chinese-style clouds and flames on Yassin's vases, the long-preserved embroidery traditions on Syed's quilts, the painting that Shawky materializes, the sharp etchings in Batniji's invisible drawings, the documentary-style lighting Hadjithomas and Joreige employ. Bringing them into conversation with the history of artistic styles, the artists give their works abundant company, connecting them to makers and beholders of artworks across centuries and in many cultures. In each case, the layers that build up on the original event make it not less real but more real.

Is there an idea that it is not responsible for art to imagine the past in such a way? That it is a misrepresentation? In its reception, art from the Middle East tends to get trapped in language, swirls of political and ideological discourse that capture the artwork to serve purposes of (national, "Arab," "Islamic," "Middle Eastern," etc.) representation. Questions of the right to speak; the right to represent of artists, curators, exhibitors, and writers; the justice, truth, and sometimes "balance" with which artists take up even slightly political subjects: they swirl around the artwork until we cannot see it at all. For example, criticism of the 20th annual Youth Salon sponsored by the Egyptian Ministry of Culture, of which Wael Shawky was one of the curators, evinced a suspicion of artworks and mediums perceived as Western or

global-biennial-style and hence out of place in an institution that ought to represent the nation. But Omnia El Shakry, discussing this exhibition, argues that artistic autonomy in Egypt need not imply that artists are rejecting national concerns and buying into Western neoliberal individualism.<sup>6</sup>

Moreover, questions of truthful representation imply a binary relationship between an artwork and a historical event that preceded it and that it represents. The image is always judged to be inferior to the event it depicts, for it leaves out nuances, it sees the event from a particular angle ("bias"), etc., etc. This suspicion of images is the legacy of Plato, as in the allegory of the cave, where chained prisoners mistake shadows for the real world. It shows up all through the history of Western thought, and again in Byzantine iconoclasm, Islamic aniconism (particularly in Sunni traditions), and the 20th-century culture of media critique. The Platonic legacy grips us tightly still, in assumptions that an image is a window onto the events it represents and questions of who has the right to represent what.

It would be nice to articulate an aesthetic position that can give artworks a little breathing space so that they can contribute to an emergent politics rather than become tokens in an existing one. To be sure, all kinds of Western poststructuralist thought have offered alternatives to the dualistic critique of representation. Artists and writers within and beyond the Middle East have taken them up to turn the focus away from questions of truth, to proliferate images whose truthfulness cannot be demonstrated, to fabulate and dream.

6. Omnia El Shakry, "Artistic Sovereignty in the Shadow of Post-Socialism: Egypt's 20th Annual Youth Salon," *e-flux Journal*, 7 (June–August 2009).

But I would like to shift the question of whether or not images are truthful away from the Platonic legacy and a little further to the east. Thinkers in the eastern Islamic world (in the *ishrâqî* tradition) developed strong alternatives to Platonic dualism. Thinking beyond dualistic epistemologies that consider the relationships between matter and mind, or sensible and intelligible worlds, these thinkers included a third realm, the imaginal. The concept of the imaginal realm (*'alam al-khayal*) was developed in the thought of Shihâb al-Dîn Yahya al-Suhrawardî (1154–1191), an Iranian who worked in Aleppo (where he was assassinated for his beliefs); Muhyi al-Dîn Ibn al-'Arabî (1165–1240) of Seville, whose Sufi-inflected philosophy was taken up widely; and Mullâ Sadrâ (1571/72–1636) of Isfahan, who synthesized their thought; all of them built upon the Neoplatonist and Ismâ'îli-influenced philosophy of Ibn Sînâ. Their ideas have not been very accessible in the West, as they are less influential in Western Islamic thought, and, though relationships can be detected, they do not play a major role in the corpus of Islamic philosophy that, in translation, jump-started the European Renaissance.

Early Islamic philosophers had developed Aristotle's concept of the faculty of imagination, which allows poets to come up with figurative images, and audiences to respond to them. However, the idea of an imaginal world arose from Ibn al-'Arabî's concept that images that appear in our imagination and dreams are just as real as physical

images. The imaginal realm is an intermediate realm between the sensible and the intelligible, between physical reality and rational thought. We enter the imaginal realm when we begin from the evidence of our senses and, using *takhyîl*, the faculty of imaginative representation, imagine or intuit other realities. The concept helps us to consider the contents of the imagination as real, and as more than the products of the unconscious. In Illuminationist thought, the imaginal realm is more real than sensible (physical) reality, for it contains images illuminated by divine light but not dragged down by matter, as things in the physical world are.<sup>7</sup> Furthermore, Mullâ Sadrâ argued, intellectual abstraction has *less* reality than imaginal images: abstraction (*amr i'tibârî*) blocks the path of contemplation.<sup>8</sup>

The concept of the imaginal realm is radically pro-image. Mullâ Sadrâ argued that no image can comprehend the divine "act of being" (*al-haqâ'iq al-wujûdât*). But this incomprehension does not obviate images; it multiplies them, in the metaphors people employ to try to describe the act of being.<sup>9</sup> Images in the imaginal realm are real but not physical. But art can begin in the imaginal and give physical form to images discovered there.<sup>10</sup>

I propose that the concept of the imaginal realm releases artists from the pressure to "represent." It creates a healthy environment for image-making, and for images that are not commanded to represent the truth: hence, it is a productive concept for thinking about contemporary art. Working with these ideas

7. Oliver Leaman, *An Introduction to Classical Islamic Philosophy*, second edition (Cambridge University Press, 2002), 202–203; and Deborah L. Black, "Aesthetics in Islamic Philosophy"; John Cooper, "Mulla Sadra (Sadr al-Din Muhammad al-Shirazi)"; and Neal Robinson, "Ibn al-'Arabi, Muhyi al-Din," in E. Craig (ed.), *Routledge Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (London: Routledge, 1998).

8. Christan Jambet, *The Act of Being: The Philosophy of Revelation in Mullâ Sadrâ* (New York: Zone, 2006), 113.

9. *Ibid.*, 87.

10. I thank the artist-scholars Azadeh Emadi, a doctoral student at Auckland University of Technology, and Juan Sepulveda Martinez, an MFA candidate at Simon Fraser University in Vancouver, for working through some of these concepts with me.

requires a bit of conceptual gymnastics from anti-transcendental folks, and they challenge some religious beliefs. But I think it is worth it for the pro-image, pro-imagination discourse they engender.

The concept of the imaginal realm helps us develop ways to unfold the unthinkable, what has been put outside of language – as Mohammed Arkoun proposes in his adaptation of the imaginal to contemporary Arab political thought.<sup>11</sup> An imaginal historiography takes dreams seriously and gives sensuous form to imaginings of how history may or might have occurred. Imaginal materials, like the artworks in this exhibition, are physical expressions that give reality to imaginary events – where imaginary means not fictional, but more true than existing representations.

The invisible, tactile drawing invites us to witness with our bodies the reality of Batniji's deceased brother on his wedding day and imagine him alive. Syed's quilts give a sensuous instantiation to histories of mercantile routes, cotton laborers, and rebellions that are abstract to many people. Yassin's imaginal materialization permits the satisfying fantasy that collectors in Lebanon and around the world might be ordering vases from China to teach their friends and children about the Lebanese Civil War. The actors in Hadjithomas and Joreige's work give bodily presence to individuals caught in the eddies of the global economy. In turn, these works allow, and perhaps even require, us viewers to participate with our bodies, thoughts, and imaginations in the events they bring into being.

11. Mohammed Arkoun, "Rethinking Islam Today," *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, 588 (July 2003): 18–39.

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