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School of Graduate Studies

This is to certify that the Graduate Project Exhibition or Film Project prepared

By: Amy Yaldo

Entitled: *Impossible Sites*

Held at: Zoom

and submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

Master of Fine Arts (Studio Arts – Intermedia)

complies with the regulations of the University and meet the accepted standards with respect to originality and quality.

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IMPOSSIBLE SITES
AYAM YALDO, MFA THESIS, 2021



Installation view - gallery mock-up "Impossible Sites" 2021

THESIS EXHIBITION: *Impossible Sites* is a multimedia installation consisting of ceramic earthenware sculptures, a mound of soil, a painted wooden measuring ruler, molds of golden dates, orange essential oil scent and a single-channel video projection with voice-over audio, 13 minutes, 03 secs video loop, 2021.

DESCRIPTION: The objects in the installation are extensions to the video projection, whose imagery ranges from photographs of historical sites to representations of ancient Mesopotamian figures in reliefs, layered with footage from the Gulf War (1991). The ceramic sculptures resemble ancient utilitarian ewer and bowls unearthed in soil, while some lay strewn across the floor of the installation, resembling an active archeological site. The sculptures offer an immersive entry for viewers into the narrative of the video. In the video, my character is that of a wanderer and excavator, a witness seen interacting with historical objects through strikingly frozen sites and reliefs. This work is made up of a collection of fragmented vignettes, echoing archaeological mounds that consist of fractured vessels and abundant debris.

I left my homeland when I was thirteen at a volatile time of war and sanctions and moved to the US with my immediate family. I am now living in Canada away from my family in the United States, as well as my extended community and family in Iraq. In the absence of extended relatives, home and belonging became my quest for existential meaning where I began to create personal methodologies to unearth my heritage. Beyond the travel and interaction with physical objects, I harness the Internet as my portal into both the past and present. Like a digital archeologist, I excavate images – turning them into artifacts – and reimagine their histories.



Video still from “Impossible Sites” 2021

Through the use of digital reconstruction, *Impossible Sites* asks how does the digital - 3D renderings of replicas and images found online of artifacts, figures, and sites offer a new means of access? How might interaction between the physical and digital become embodied and expressed?

Within *Impossible Sites* are numerous historical sites that have been rendered inaccessible for me due to warfare and instability in the region, as well as artifacts that disappeared, have been displaced and dispersed in museums all around the world or auctioned on the Dark Web. The green screen chroma key in *Impossible Sites* is my ‘magic carpet’. As a magic carpet would, it transports me to sites and allows me to circumvent all obstacles. The green screen becomes a trope that enables my body to access *impossible* sites that are otherwise geographically and temporally separated. The green screen is my attempt to reconstruct collective memories and my desire to restore what has been destroyed. The broken and excavated pottery serves as analogies between vessels and bodies, as containers holding fragmented narratives of displaced people whose homes and livelihoods have been destroyed through years of war.

In the book *Mesopotamia*, author Jean-Claude Margueron, professor of Archeology at the University of Bordeaux, discusses how the first flush of discoveries in the Near East were “subsequent false identifications and over-hasty explanations that had to be corrected by later archeologists” (40). In early excavations, applied methods and careful examination of chronological classification had not yet been acquired. Excavators were primarily interested in seeking objects to bring back to Europe for display in museums

for the excited public to view, thus in 1847 establishing the opening of the Assyrian room in the Louvre (40).

In an effort to correct the rampant looting done by European and American museums, institutions have begun partial re-patriation. However, in recent decades, a succession of wars and instability in Iraq has disrupted this process. Most dramatically affecting this process was the Iran-Iraq war from 1980-88, followed by Saddam Hussein's invasion of Kuwait in 1990 - which led to the first Gulf War and US sanctions. This was then followed by the second invasion in 2003.

Where were the US military guards during the lootings of the National Museum of Iraq in 2003? A simple Google image search today shows the army at the gates of the museum with the tank driver's optics and main gun pointed towards the lens of the camera that captured the photos. Days earlier, the museum was raided and ransacked by looters as the US army advanced to Baghdad through the second invasion of Iraq following the collapse of the Iraqi president, Saddam Hussein. In an article discussing Iraq's archeological treasures at the beginning of the second US invasion, Samuel points to 15,000 antiquities being pillaged and ransacked from the museum, "while ignoring pleas to secure the building, some 7,000 looted items have been returned, but about 8,000 are still out there" (Theatlantic.com). With the ongoing US invasion, and the lack of stability in the region, Iraq saw the rise of violent, new, organized and extremist groups such as ISIL. In 2015, we watched the obliteration of history on our screens when ISIL released videos showing them demolishing historical sites such as the ancient city of Palmyra in Syria, numerous Christian and Islamic temples and ancient Mesopotamian artifacts in the Mosul Museum in Iraq with sledgehammers and explosives. The stolen antiquities could be bought online on auction websites as Samuel points out:

On the website Live Auctioneers, you can find a stone bull for \$50, a clay cylinder seal for \$150, a terracotta fragment bearing a god on a chariot for \$225, and a large terracotta female idol for \$400. On another auction site, Trocadero, a lion-shaped stone amulet is on offer for \$250. (Samuel)

Aside from the abominable acts of destruction broadcasted on the news, ISIL began laundering artifacts in order to finance their activities. In Katie Paul's essay, "Ancient Artifact vs. Digital Artifacts: New Tools for Unmasking the Sale of Illicit Antiques on the Dark Web," she discusses the trafficking of antiquities with the monetary use of cryptocurrencies in Dark Web transactions, thus leaving no paper trails and making it difficult for governments to identify and track the sellers and buyers of illegal operations (2). Paul goes on to discuss the circulation of these antiques from the Middle East through Turkey, making their way into Europe, with highly priced articles held in free ports for years (6). In an essay in the book *Duty Free Art: Art in the Age of Planetary Civil War*, Steyerl refers to the circulation of artworks inside tax-free zones to "secret museums of the Internet era, hidden in storage spaces without being seen or detected by sovereign nations" (81).



Babylonians gazed at the stars in order to understand their surroundings
 They saw the constellations as the works of the gods
 They turned sky watching into a codified system of astrology

I was born on the day Saddam Hussein invaded Kuwait
 My name was used to describe the dark days of the war

Ayam translates to days
 I always carried the weight of my name

The invasion ignited the Gulf War
 Operation Desert Storm

Where my first memories were formed
 When I had dreams about the end of the world

We called the enemy fighter jets: 'Shabah'
 They appeared out of thin air
 Undetected
 Only within short ranges

حـبـش
 Translation: Ghost

They were not the friendly ghost
 Who appeared in cartoons I watched as a child



Still from artist book "The Archeology of the Self: The Impermanence of Heritage and the Allure of the Archive" 2019-20.

*I had a recurring dream as a child
 I climbed a wardrobe
 level after level
 in search of material*

آثار

The Arabic word (آثار) to describe material is "Athar". The English translation of Athar is monuments, remnants, traces, implications. The process of making this project is linked to the recurring childhood dream I had and the word "athar", where I gather the remnants and traces of the past.

During the summer of 2019 I conducted a research trip to The Morgan Library and Museum in New York City, which holds an extensive collection of 1,157 ancient Mesopotamian cylinder seals and cuneiform tablets, bas reliefs and statues dating from the end of the fourth millennium to the fourth century B.C. The library carries the name of John Pierpont Morgan, the famous American financier of the largest bank in the United States, JPMorgan Chase Bank. Morgan collected "nearly three thousand

cuneiform tablets that are now in the Yale Babylonian Collection, which he founded in 1911” (Themorgan.org).

The peak of my trip was a face-to-face encounter with a bronze figurine of king Ur-Nammu, founder of the Third Sumerian Dynasty of Ur (2112-2095 B.C.). I met the king. He became a recurring figure in my research who is often depicted in two fragments, standing alongside a cuneiform tablet containing one of the oldest Sumerian law codes surviving today, currently housed in the Istanbul Archeology Museum. Moreover, his figure is often displayed holding a basket on his head, carrying building materials — assuming the stance of a builder by typifying himself alongside the laborers of the city. His pose felt familiar, or at least offered an accessible entryway to a figure whose gesture was not written in a language I did not understand nor translated by scholars. It reminded me of growing up in Baghdad, Iraq during the 1990s and seeing women street vendors carrying baskets atop their heads, gliding to and fro on street pavements selling all sorts of goods they’ve made on a daily basis. It was a recurring sight. The basket I carry throughout the video became symbolic of the research materials that hold together this project, that is elements embedded with cultural memory.

In a collection of essays on the topic of contemporary art from the Middle East, Shaheen Merali proposes that we examine our understanding of the visual arts from the region by tying it to forms of the “spectre or djinn” in Arabic (‘genie’ in the West). He posits the archive as a “post-event — the return of the original in a different guise, in some cases as a masquerade, a false show or pretence” (89-90), where memory and subjectivity play a specific role in re-accessing what was once real but now remain internal. Merali asserts that the nature of the archives, although instated with a sense of objectivity, to a large extent remains in the subjective intent of the researcher. While conducting my research at the Morgan Library, I experienced Shaheen’s ruminations. I regarded the archives as forms of djinns or entities living in the periphery, locked inside dimly lit shelves in air-controlled environments, lying in the shadows between reality and fiction. Similar to the spectre, they appeared, disappeared, and revealed information about a certain circumstance in history. Consequently, I carve out elements in my work which I intentionally leave open and unanswered, setting up a space for an encounter to the ruins and their ghosts from the past to reveal their stories in order to embed newer correlations.

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*In one of the episodic dreams, upon climbing the drawers
I found a singing doll, Sabah, in an unopened package.
Loosely based on a famous Lebanese Pop singer from 1960s and 70s.
Her nickname is ‘Shahrourat-el Wadi’ which translates to ‘Songbird of the Valley’
I felt a strange inclination towards her
As I narrate and record voice-over of my project
I wanted to hear her voice so badly
How does she sing?
What does she sing about?*

*I wonder if she came with a pre-recorded classic Arabic songs
About missing a lover that is far away from her country
A love that's faded or unrequited
Nostalgic for her hometown
A pre-war land not yet destroyed
When streets lingered with the scent of jasmine and gardenias
or
Does she sing about defeating the enemy?
Waiting at the boarder as they neared the territory
Fighting for her land
I thought of using Sabah as a stand-in for my current project
Sabah represents the archives whose voices remains in unopened boxes*

Still from artist book "The Archeology of the Self: The Impermanence of Heritage and the Allure of the Archive" 2019-20

In the Fall of 2019, I took a Manifestos seminar where I made an artist book and performed a live reading of, entitled: *The Archeology of the Self: The Impermanence of Heritage and the Allure of the Archive*. The artist book became the blueprint for my current work as it encompassed my processes and methodology by bridging together all the elements of my practice into a single component. The title was a significant way for me to unpack the research as it contained questions and reflections regarding the self in relation to larger contexts, such as collective memories, personal history, place, identity and enchantment. At that point of my investigation, I had not yet embarked on utilising the green screen as a means of transport, but rather used my physical, present body to interact with projected images of archeological sites and artifacts within live performance. In tandem with the performances, I produced earthenware ceramic sculptures such as bowls, ewers and jugs in similar clay material with low firings that were used in ancient Mesopotamian utilitarian objects as a way to access and to reconnect through similar hand building processes.



Still from artist book *"The Archeology of the Self: The Impermanence of Heritage and the Allure of the Archive"* 2019-20

In the Summer of 2020, I read Agatha Christie's novel, *Murder in Mesopotamia*, first published in 1936. In real life, she was married to archeologist Max Mallowan, whom she met during her second visit at the digging sites in Ur in 1930. Although Christie is famous as a writer of detective mysteries, the novel provides details regarding what the diggings were like, plus or minus a murder. In real life, she had assisted with the cleaning up of the objects they found in various digging sites in Southern Iraq. In her autobiography, Christie claims that she was "devoted to the objects of craftsmanship and art that turned out of the soil [...] and the fascination with the work of human hands" (part XI, chap. IV). I read *Murder in Mesopotamia* during a July heat wave in Montréal so that I could physically, though only partially, connect to the heat of Southern Iraq. In the novel, the wife of the archeologist who was conducting the diggings was beginning to experience manic episodes where she started to see and hear things (Christie 48). The discoveries from the digging sites were stored in the 'antika' room at the expedition house, where some of the objects seemed to 'come to life'. The artifacts were filled with mud, buried under earth for millennia. The mystery novel brings me back to Shaheen's point regarding the archive or, in this case, artifacts as dormant entities. They reside in the periphery of abandoned ancient sites where objects, once dug up and awakened, begin to roam as disembodied spirits, coming to life as post-events and setting out new interpretations and manifestations.

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