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Wafaa Bilal uses exhibit at Art Gallery of Windsor to resurrect burned Baghdad library: Accompanying installation is The Ashes Series, a group of photographs that evoke eerie scenes of destruction

The Canadian Press



Artist Wafaa Bilal says more than 70,000 books were destroyed when the University of Baghdad's College of Fine Arts library was torched by looters in 2003. (Artpace.com)

In the long history of cultural destruction caused by war in Iraq, the Art Gallery of Windsor, Ont., is the unlikely setting for a project of renewal.

Iraqi-born artist Wafaa Bilal hopes to restock a library that was set on fire during the 2003 U.S.-led invasion of his homeland. His plan is surprisingly indirect: he's created book-like objects filled with blank white pages and will exchange them for real books that the library needs.

To make this work he's counting on help from visitors to his new exhibition, opening Jan. 30.

Wafaa Bilal: 168:01 will feature a 12-metre-long shelf of Bilal's meticulously designed empty books — about 1,000 altogether.

During the 10-week exhibition, these will gradually be replaced with art textbooks purchased with funds raised in a Kickstarter campaign. The new books will subsequently be shipped to the University of Baghdad's College of Fine Arts.

More than 70,000 books were destroyed when the college's library was torched by looters, says Bilal, 49, an associate professor at New York University's Tisch School of the Arts.

"To this day, its students have few books to study from," he says in a video promoting the campaign.

The empty books symbolize the devastation of Iraqi culture in wars both recent and distant, says Srimoyee Mitra, curator of contemporary art at the gallery, which commissioned the exhibition.

The show's title refers to a legendary event during the Mongol siege of Baghdad in 1258 when books from a celebrated library, the House of Wisdom, were dumped into a river, their ink bleeding out over the course of a week — 168 hours — to leave the pages white. The title also signifies the very first second afterward: the moment for renewal.

Students and faculty at the Baghdad college have given Bilal their wish-list of titles. His task, he has said, was to create "a system of exchange" to resurrect their library: as books are donated, the donors will each receive one of the blank books to take away.

Accompanying his installation is "The Ashes Series," a group of photographs of dioramas Bilal created that evoke eerie scenes of destruction in war-ravaged Iraq.

Mitra expects the exhibition to have special resonance in Windsor and across the border in Dearborn, Mich., cities with large Middle Eastern communities. The Arab American National Museum in Dearborn is promoting the show, she said.

Meanwhile, the response to the Kickstarter campaign has been "incredible," she said.

"We set out with a very modest target of \$9,000," Mitra said late last week. As of early Monday, pledges had surpassed \$42,000.

With war in the Middle East ongoing and Canada in the midst of absorbing refugees from Syria, she said the exhibition "shines a light on the civilian spirit for survival."

"I find it quite inspiring," she added. "We wouldn't be able to do this if people did not contribute."

Bilal's project illustrates "the fact that, in general, people care. That is a very instinctual thing that I think we share with one another, and often that's something that can be forgotten."

Wafaa Bilal: 168:01 will run until April 10.