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Artist Wafaa Bilal uses blank books to rebuild Baghdad's war-torn library

By Khushbu Shah, CNN



Blank books to rebuild Baghdad library 02:23

(CNN)At its height, the college of fine arts library at the University of Baghdad housed more than 70,000 books. From floor to ceiling, the topics ranged from the history of art, modern forms of art, and oral history.

Students from around the country came to study at the sprawling university campus in the Iraqi capital and study in the massive library.

Then came the US-led Iraq invasion in 2003.

And when the shells stopped dropping, the books that had not been looted were left as ash. The entire library was destroyed as the rubble settled.

Now, one lone artist is trying to restock those books.

White books for Baghdad

Moving from the holy city of Najaf to the capital, Wafaa Bilal, an Iraqi-American artist, spent his university years at the library tucked away on a campus by the Tigris River.

Twenty-five years later, the memory of fine arts library has stayed with Bilal.

The library has since been rebuilt, but very few books stand on the shelves.



13 photos: Books for Baghdad: How empty books are reviving Baghdad's university

Bilal's latest project shifts focus from the ashes of destruction to rebuilding a future.

Since his time on the campus, he'd like to help rebuild the library through art.

As an artist, he wavered between an installation piece, a performance piece and the opportunity to use art to provide a tangible result.

Bilal has set up a forty foot long all white bookshelf filled with a thousand blank, white books in Windsor, Ontario the last week of January as an exhibition, entitled "168:01," to raise awareness on redevelopment.

He wants it to be an interactive art project, as well.



Bilal (right) as a student at the University of Baghdad

"First, books get made as blank white books. Then, the second stage is people donating real books and receiving white books. Later on the entire library will be shipped to Baghdad," Bilal explains.

A coordinating Kickstarter campaign. He gives a blank, white book to anyone who donates \$25. With the money, he will buy books to restock the College of Fine Arts library and ship them to Baghdad once the exhibition ends in March.

So far, he has managed to raise more than \$55,000 dollars. Bilal aims to restock the library with the entire 70,000 books the library once held.

Life in Baghdad

In the bustling city, students spent their free time strolling through parks, going through the markets and enjoying tea at busy restaurants.



Bilal hopes to restock the library with 70,000 books.

Though he was studying Geology, he spent the majority of his time reading art books and making art. He was an artist but because of his family's political opposition to Saddam Hussein's regime, he was forbidden to study it.

Then the first Gulf War broke out.

In danger -- his family also opposed Hussein -- he fled to Kuwait before ending up in a refugee camp in Saudi Arabia. Two years after his departure from Iraq, he made it to the US.

Back to Iraqi culture

Even though he is now a New York resident, Bilal's work reflects upon his Iraqi background.

The title of the exhibition 168:01 refers to an oral story told to him as a child growing up in Iraq about the Mongolian invasion.

168 refers to the hours books bled their ink into water after conquering Mongolians threw books into the Tigris to create a bridge to cross over. The books bled blue ink, the legend says, until they turned white.

And the one second is "where I am hopeful to usher in a new era of reconstruction in the library in Baghdad," Bilal adds.