

Posterity & Expatriation

A Conversation Between:

Jawa El Khash
&
Dana Qaddah

Transcribed & Edited by
Emma Metcalfe Hurst
& Kate Woolf

Zoom Event
November 28th, 2020

Emma Metcalfe Hurst:

Thank you for being with us here today for [Posterity & Expatriation](#), a conversation between curator Dana Qaddah and artist Jawa El Khash. This conversation accompanies Jawa's online exhibition [The Upper Side of the Sky](#), which is a virtual reality experience that resurrects lost plant life and architecture from the ancient Syrian desert city, Palmyra. Elevated in an endless ocean of fog, the resurrected monuments are given an opportunity to exist in an alternate and eternal life form, saved from destruction and human intervention. The lost monuments are irreplaceable, but their photorealistic reconstruction offers us solace in walking through the memories of the great monuments of the past. My name is Emma, and I am the project coordinator for [Recollective: Vancouver Independent Archives Week](#) and I'm currently located on the unceded territories of the Squamish, Musqueam, and Tsleil-Waututh First Nations. When thinking about a land acknowledgement in the context of this talk, I'd like to encourage you all in attendance to take a moment to learn about whose territory you're situated on, as well as the notion of online or virtual space in relation to land, occupation, and displacement – perhaps some themes that will be touched on in today's conversation. [Posterity & Expatriation](#) is presented by [Western Front](#) as part of [Recollective: Vancouver Independent Archives Week](#), which is a series of free public events that highlight artist-run-centre archives, artists working with archives, and the intersections between contemporary art practices and social movements. Dr. Laura Marks has also been invited as the respondent for this event, and her response will be available on [the Recollective website](#) in the forthcoming months. After the conversation, we'll have some time for a Q&A period. So without further ado, I will hand it off to Dana and Jawa.

Dana Qaddah:

Thank you for the great introduction, everyone for joining us here, Jawa for all your great work on this project, Allison Collins for initiating this project. Thank you Susan and everyone at [Western Front](#), Dan and Emma from grunt, who have all been very fundamental to the realization of this project. I wanted to start off by giving a few words to contextualize my interest in the project, and why I thought it was

important to bring it to a wider audience. And then I'd really like to hand it off to Jawa to share all the amazing research that she's done around this project.

I'll start off by saying that me and Jawa met each other when we were kids. We were both living as expats in Dubai, like many Syrian, Lebanese, Jordanian, and Palestinian populations living outside of their homelands. I think that really contextualizes this interest in the loss of connection to place. I was particularly interested in the way that Jawa left Dubai, came to Canada, and went to art school. I left Lebanon and came to Canada, and went to art school, and then I realized both of us are kind of talking about and exploring the same ideas of trying to reconnect to a destructed sense of place and belonging, and retelling our stories through that work. I think that using technology as a means to preserve or gain access to, or even share that kind of culture has been very foundational in filling in the gaps that have been empty for generations. This kind of research and discovery goes beyond projects like this, that have very archaeological dimensions to them. It furthers us, in the sense of feeling and exploring mediums of contemporary culture which grant us access to intercultural exchanges when we're definitely far from being able to access, even linguistically, our own personal archives and histories. Being faced with so much separation, destruction, and issues surrounding security, the idea of home being attached to a geography becomes kind of useless for people like us. And so I found the internet to be this interesting place where we can transgress those borders that didn't exist in the first place; we can even transgress the divisions that are imposed by being in a place and having a fruitful cultural exchange, as we do through its integration into art and all of these different spheres.

I think that I'll give just a very brief background on the site of Palmyra itself. I took this excerpt from a book by Mohamad Al Roumi who's a Syrian photographer. I thought it would be nice to start off this way so I'll read it for everyone here:

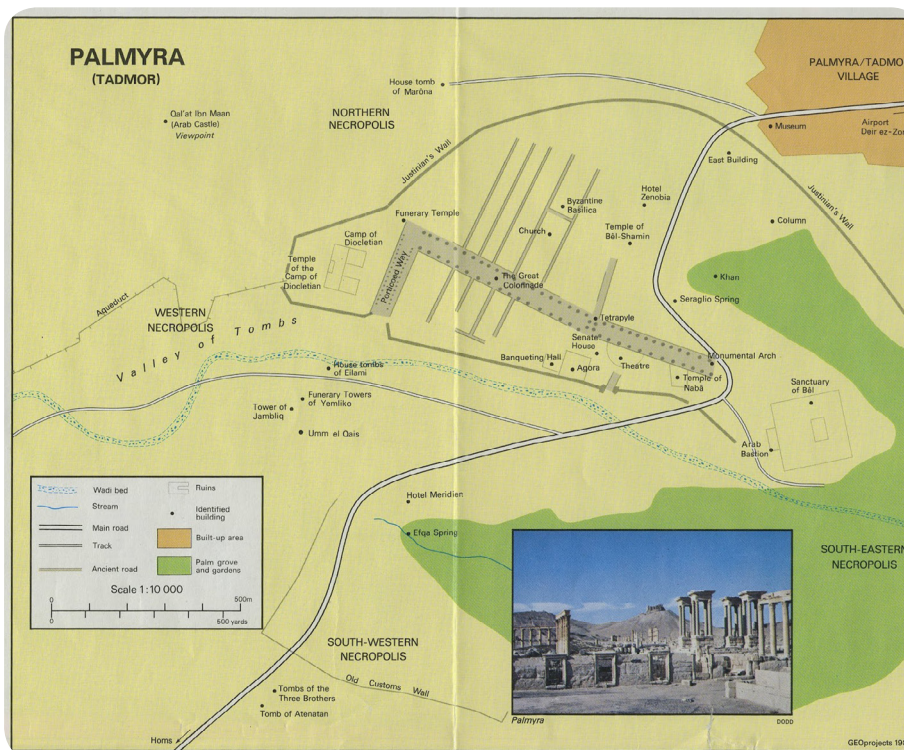
The monotony of endless distance, the thousand nuances of brown, which only an Arab can name. The absence of any sign of human life, deathly silence that is the step. And yet the first impression is deceptive. The step is not so inimical to all life after all. Here's a waterhole or a depression where dew collects at night, over there a small spring and life awakens. In the twilight animals venture out of their holes and in the same place every year stand the black goat hair tents of the nomads, they have replaced camels with tractors or trucks, but otherwise their life continues as always, marked only by birth, marriage and death.

No one not born in a tent could endure such an existence. Tribal law is supreme and everyone knows their family and tribal history without ever being written down. It takes great pride in the old Bedouin ideals. In the earlier times, they controlled the caravan routes which passed through their tribal territory on the way to enjoy the Arabian Peninsula for spices, silk and other treasures of the Orient. For at least 5000 years, the most important oasis on the caravan route through the step was Palmyra. With palm groves and glowing white temples still rise out of the endless waste like a vision.

I thought this was a beautifully written text, contextualizing the importance of Palmyra and commercial history in the region. The site itself lies equidistant from the Mediterranean Sea and the Euphrates River, and geographically this location was very important for trade from the far East to the West (via the Silk Road). I think that at this point, Palmyra itself has grown into the collective memory of Syrians as a whole – just as Baalbek has for the Lebanese – as part of their national heritage, though historically it's been through many empires. The Romans, the Greeks, the Arabs, Arameans: this history was reflected in the city's architectural style – signs of Neoclassical architecture influenced by Arab roots. And I think that its symbolism, as a site, represents the diversity of the region. The kind of pigeon-holing that happens nowadays is not very conducive to a comfortable relationship with place, especially given the conditions of contemporary politics. So I think that at this point, I'd really like for Jawa to say a few words about the site of Palmyra and her relationship to it and the realization of this project as a whole.

Jawa El Khash:

Thank you so much Dana. I'm going to start off with telling the story of how [*The Upper Side of the Sky*](#) came to life and, of course, the beginning pivotal point of this project, Palmyra. And as Dana introduced Palmyra, Palmyra is an ancient Semitic city that lies in the Syrian desert. Palmyra was one of the most important trading routes and trading stops along the Silk Road. And for those of you that don't know, the Silk Road was a network of trade routes which connected two main civilizations: the Roman civilization and the Chinese civilization. So starting in China, the Silk Road was all about merchants. And their practises were exchanging objects such as silk, spices, herbs, silver, textiles, and seeds.



[Maps of Syria Available from Ball State University Libraries.](#)

Jawa El Khash:

When I was growing up in Syria, I visited Palmyra almost every summer with my mom. And what I remember from every time I visited the place is the feeling of fascination and awe by the scale of the monuments. There is also something about being in a desert that seems so infinite, and it seems so magical and unreal, especially from the eyes of a child. Mesmerized by the scale of the monuments, I formed this very

personal connection with the place itself. Its aura of mystery really captured my imagination. And I think that looking at the place through the eyes of a child is what I wanted to encapsulate in this virtual reality project. When you're a child, scale becomes over-glorified, and everything is magnified. So I really wanted to reintroduce the viewer into Palmyra, through the eyes of a child, and through the child-like imagination that we all have inherent within ourselves.

Part of my fascination with Palmyra is the fact that it's so bizarre that a city flourished in the middle of a desert. This kind of thing doesn't really happen, and that's also what gives Palmyra its charm. It wasn't until 2008 when an archaeologist called Jørgen Christian Meyer began a four-year survey of the area around Palmyra, and through this study, he was trying to discover how these people survived in the desert for so long. It's an arid land, it's a desert, so it's almost impossible to survive in it. But then, after his discoveries, and using ground inspections and satellite images, he eventually found outlines of more than twenty farming villages within a few days walk of the city. So he discovered that Palmyra flourished because of the people that were living in it and the people that were living around it. They really formed a tight-knit community in which they relied on each other, and they relied on farmers, and the land itself, to feed themselves. So around this very dry region of Palmyra, miraculously, there were these parts of lands that were being extensively farmed. The plants that were being farmed there included olive, fig, pistachio, and barley, and these kinds of plants were also prominent in the Roman Empire at the time. When I was looking at this archeologist's work and latest discoveries, it made me think, okay, it's incredibly important for us to understand these ancient monuments, but it's also important for us to look away from these monuments and look beyond at other areas that we can study, because there's so much that we can miss. The person who discovered that the areas around Palmyra were actually farmlands was an archaeologist. I was inspired by how he branched out of his interest, and he wasn't afraid to kind of step out from his comfort zone to study other areas that his intuition led him to. He was taking the role of a plant pathologist, but he was also an archaeologist. So I'm also real-

ly interested in those relationships and the fact that scientists or artists can put on different hats and make different discoveries that are outside of their comfort zones.



Louis-François Cassas' Imagined View of the Tetrapylon in Palmyra, Syria. Published around 1799. The Getty Research Institute.



Louis-François Cassas, *Vue des Ruines de la Grande Mosquée Dgiami, El Garbie*. Date unknown.



An Etching of "Monumental Arch" from a drawing by Louis-François Cassas. The Getty Research Institute.



Louis-François Cassas, Traversing the Desert to Palmyra. The Getty Research Institute.

Jawa El Khash:

These are some of my favourite paintings of Palmyra by Louis-François Cassas (1756-1827), who is a French landscape artist, painter, sculptor, architect, and archaeologist. Romanticism has always been a point of inspiration in my practice. As we know, Romanticism rejected using reason as a foundation for all knowledge, and prioritized the sensitivity that humans have towards their environments. For the Romantics, imagination rather than reason was the most important creative faculty, and this is also something that I'm very interested in. It's great for us to look at history and to kind of recreate it, but I think we can create something unexpected if we add a twist to how we're retelling the stories. I am always going back to the feeling I had in Palmyra when I was a child, and although it's not really something I can explain, it's a feeling that I remember very vividly. That sensation is what I'm trying to convey in the virtual reality experience. So along with those ideas, I was mesmerized by how Louis-François timelessly painted Palmyra. Also, these paintings act as documents - they act as archives for how Palmyra was viewed. For example, this first painting is an imagined view of a tetra-column in Palmyra, so it's not necessarily a fact. It's not like a photograph which documents history exactly as it was - this idea speaks to anachronism. Using imagination, an artist such as Louis-François adds their own footprints in the story; uses their own vision to alter how they're telling this history.



Zenobia's Last Look on Palmyra, Herbert Gustave Schmalz, 1888.



Aurelian with Captive Queen Zenobia, 273 AD.

Jawa El Khash:

A pivotal role of my connection to Palmyra is the ancient Queen Zenobia, who is a 3rd-century rebel queen. When I was growing up in Syria, Zenobia was the only female historical figure that we were taught in school and naturally I became very inspired by just the idea of her as this ancient queen who rebelled against the Roman Empire. And of course, when I was growing up, and when I was visiting Palmyra every year, I was extremely young, so I wasn't aware of the fact that Palmyra is, in fact, a Roman city, and it's not what I can think of as Syrian. So these kinds of contradictory relationships are what I was going through when I was making this project because I have to face the fact that this part of Syria, which I was very connected to and inspired by, has been - as Dana said - controlled by various civilizations and various different empires throughout history. So at the end of the day, Palmyra isn't just the history of Syria, it's the history of the entire world.



[The Penguin Historical Atlas of Ancient Rome.](#)

Palmyra reached the peak of its power when the Palmyran King Odeanathus defeated the Persian Emperor. After Odeanathus' death, his widow, Zenobia, wasn't content with the fact that the Romans controlled Palmyra. After her husband died she claimed the throne and wanted to reclaim Palmyra from the power of the Romans, so she rebelled against them and took over the entire Roman Empire as far as Egypt. But then, shortly afterwards, the Roman Empire swept back in and we still don't know exactly how her life ended - whether she was killed by the Roman Empire, or whether she escaped - but this story of her as a rebel queen is what really heightens my fascination with Palmyra, especially as a young girl, when you don't really see a lot of female figures in Syrian politics or in Syrian history. In 2014, ISIS ravaged the city of Palmyra, destroying most of the monuments. And as we know, ISIS mostly targeted the city because the monuments in it are devoted to different gods that aren't necessarily Allah. ISIS was targeting intellectuals, technocrats, leaders, and activists in Syria and Iraq. So of course, this destruction is devastating and it was especially devastating for me as someone who grew up there, who grew up around there, and visited this place every summer. When this happened, I wasn't in Syria, and I haven't been back since. So this feeling of watching something that you were always inspired by as a kid get completely destroyed, is what drove me to create this project.

Dana Qaddah:

And that ties to this larger idea of what we're all going through, watching the inherent destruction of our homelands from afar. And in trying to find any sense of access to that place, you've gone and literally recreated that place for yourself.

Jawa El Khash:

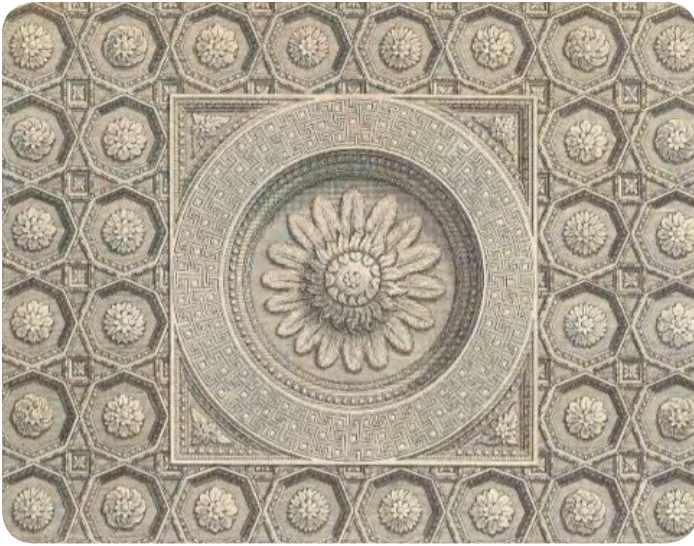
For me, creating these monuments in a digital space will never be equal to the real monuments in real life. So when I was recreating these monuments, I wanted to complicate that narrative by being very clear that I'm not doing this because I want to save these monuments, because these monuments can't be saved - even though we can 3D print them and make replicas of them. Even though we can take advantage of the power

of technology and make endless replicas. At the end of the day, they are replicas. And it's really different than touching the ancient stone itself with your hands, stones that have been there for thousands of years. The digital resurrection of these monuments will never replace the actual monuments in real life but I think it's a way for us to tell the story of them. I wanted to counter that idea of destroying knowledge/history with recreating knowledge by retelling and reimagining the history and future of these lost objects.

So naturally, after that happened, I was still getting introduced to the technology of 3D modeling and 3D printing, and I came across a very important book when we're talking about the history of Palmyra: *The Ruins of Palmyra, Otherwise Tedmor, in the Desert*, by Robert Wood, which is considered one of the most significant archaeological works of the mid-18th century.



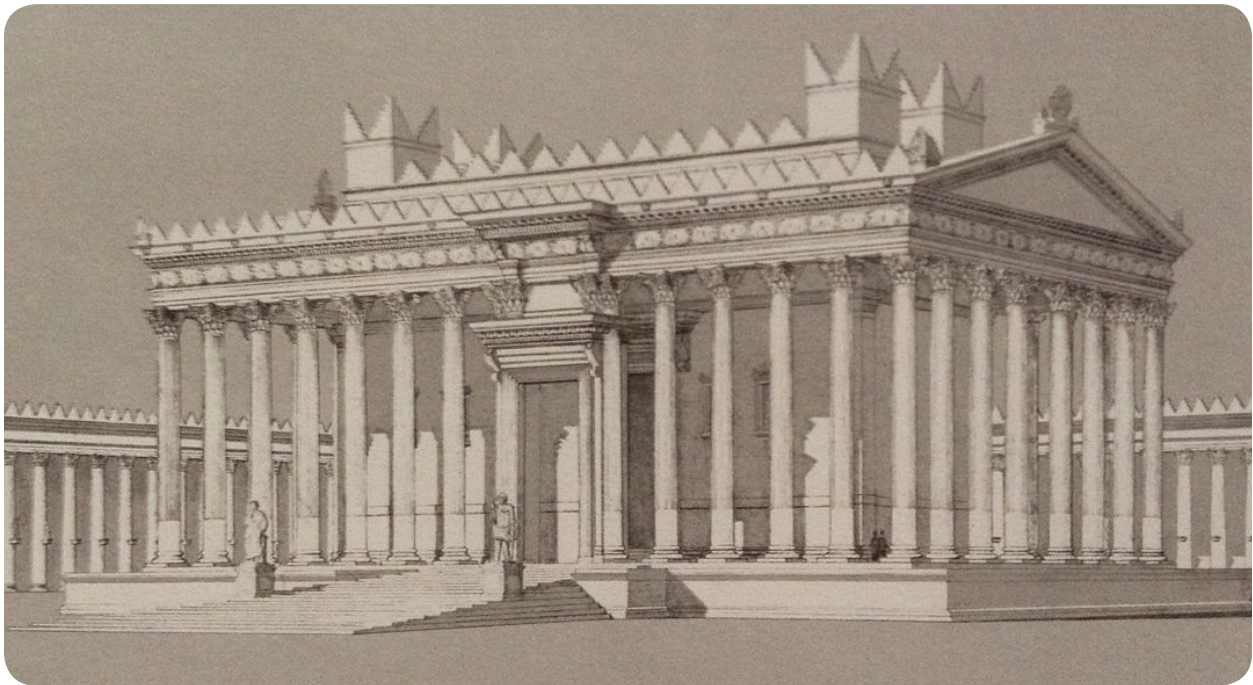
[Architectural Ornament from Palmyra Tomb, Jean-Baptiste Réville and M. A. Benoist after Louis-François Cassas. Etching. Plate mark: 18.3 x 11.8 in. \(28.5 x 45 cm\). From Voyage pittoresque de la Syrie, de la Phœnicie, de la Palestine, et de la Basse Egypte \(Paris, ca. 1799\), vol. 1, pl. 137. The Getty Research Institute, 840011.](#)



Ceiling detail from Robert Wood's The Ruins of Palmyra (1753).



Mit der Feder zeichnete Louis François Cassas 1785 den Sonnentempel. (Bild: Wallraf-Richartz-Museum & Fondation Corboud, Köln).



Suggested Reconstruction of the Temple of Bel in Palmyra, Perspective View from the South-West Corner of the Courtyard. Le Temple de Bel à Palmyre, by Henri SEYRIG, Robert AMY and Ernest WILL. 1975, pl.141.

Jawa El Khash:

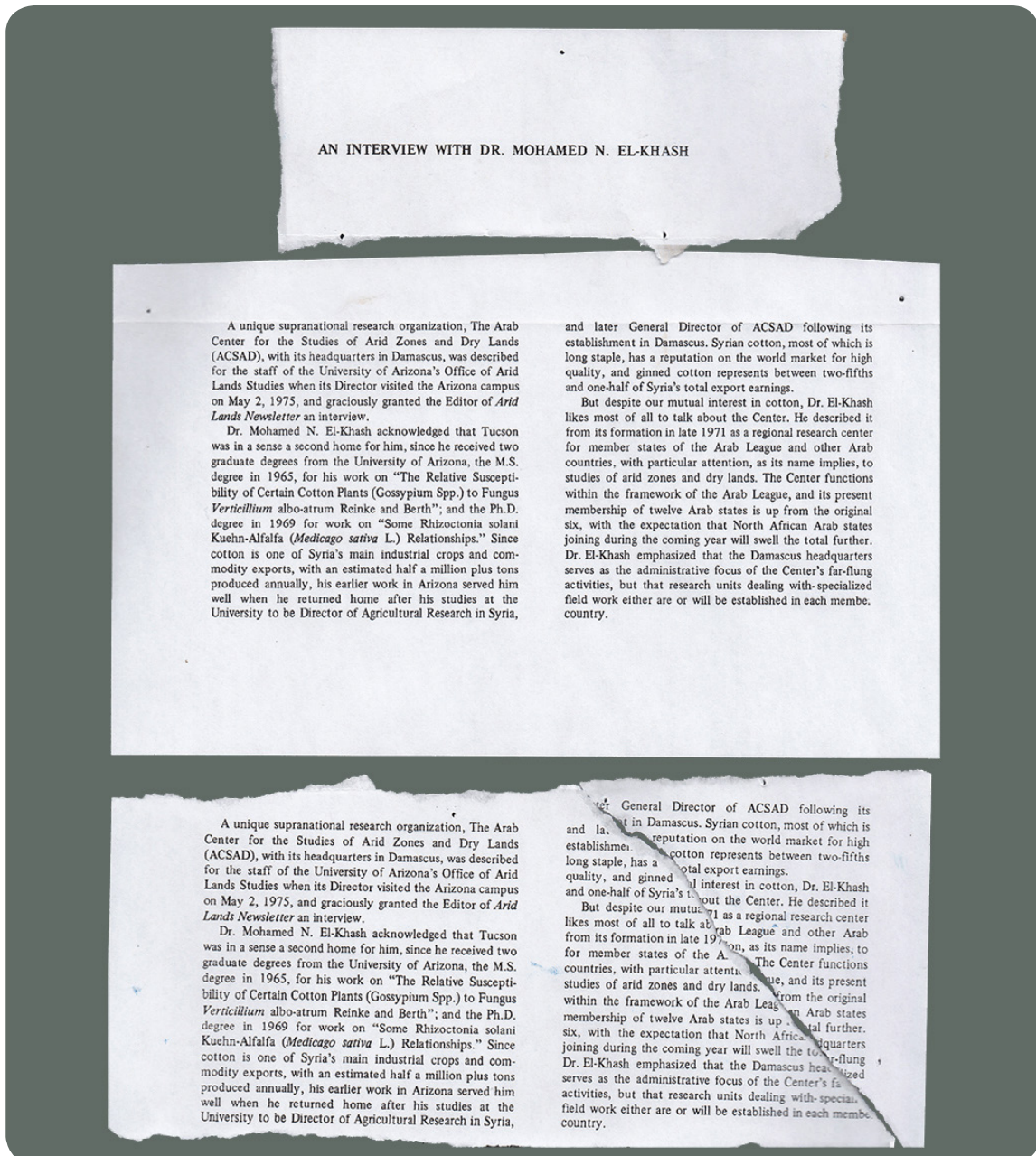
Robert Wood travelled to Palmyra and he drew every monument there in incredible detail and accuracy. Foreign travelers and archaeologists such as Wood introduced the rest of the world to Palmyra. So this was an important resource for me when I was trying to understand how these

monuments lived before in their glory days: What did they look like before? What materials did they use? What was each monument for? As I was going down that spiral hole, I was introduced to the work of Bassel Khartabil, who is a Syrian open-source developer. In his work as a computer engineer, educator, artist, musician, cultural heritage researcher, and thought leader, Bassel mulled over a more open world, impacting lives globally. Bassel worked with Creative Commons and with Google to provide for an open-source internet in Syria. In March 2012, the regime arrested Bassel. Mr. Khartabil was a distinguished computer engineer, who, through his innovations and social media, digital education, and open-source web software, is credited with opening up the internet in Syria; a country with a notorious record of online censorship. So we're talking about ISIS destroying these monuments because it threatened their stance and their ideas in Syria. But there's also another side when we're talking about the government itself, which is threatened by people like Bassel Khartabil who was advocating for open-source internet, and was teaching kids how to code. The inability of people to freely access the internet takes away the best part of the internet as a tool that can empower anyone online to access free knowledge. The fact that this idea threatened the government is also a very scary thing to think about.

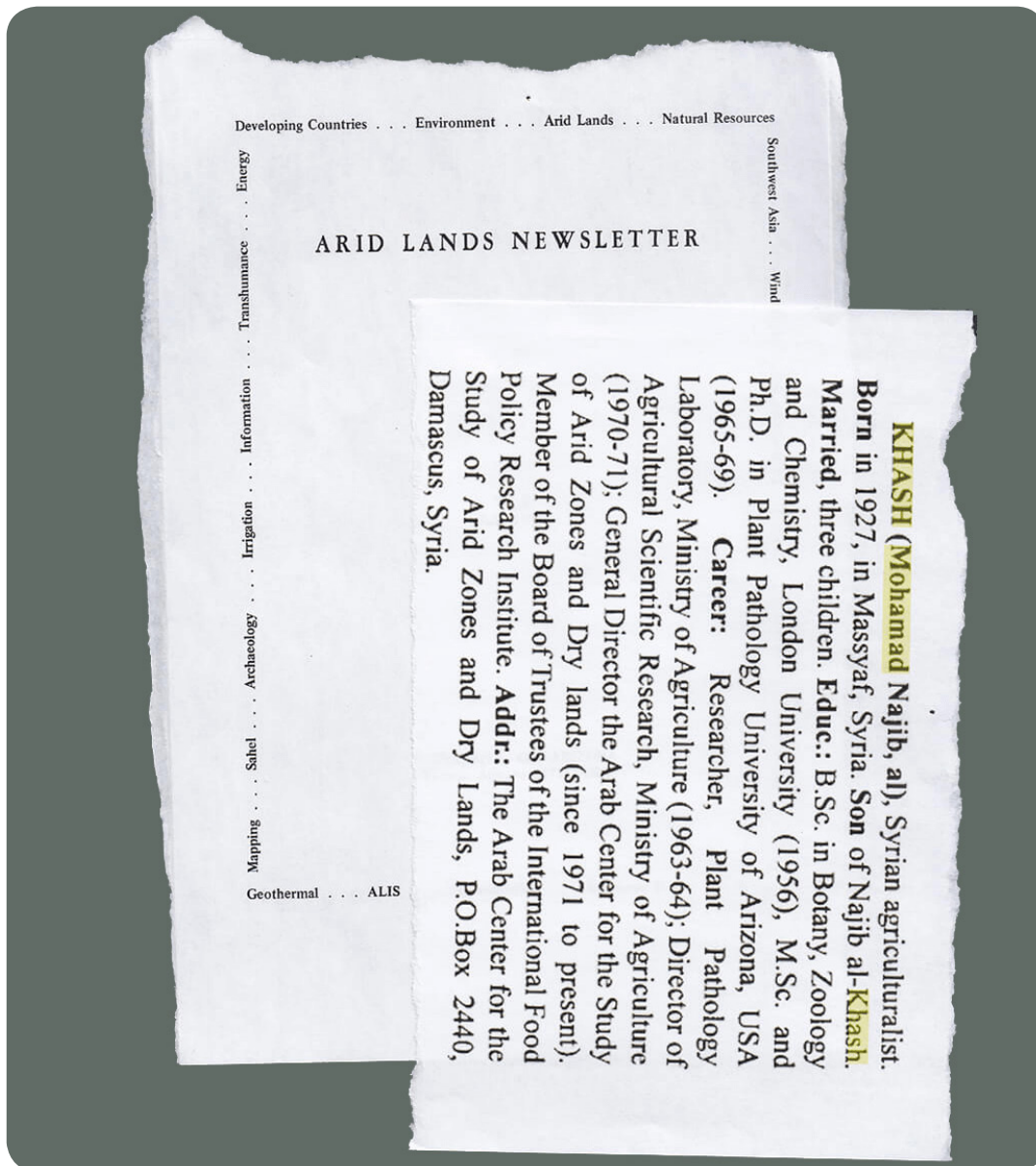


[A reconstruction of the Temple of Bel. Courtesy of the #NewPalmyra Project.](#)

The last project that Bassel created was a online database called [#NEWPALMYRA](#), which began in 2005, before the monuments were destroyed. When I was introduced to this project, I was really excited and naturally, my first approach was to use all the 3D models that I could access and to create a narrative around them. I knew that I wanted to use this database, but at that point in my process, I didn't know what it was going to look like, where it was going to live, or how the VR experience would be designed. [The Upper Side of the Sky](#) started with a four-month research process, and then four months of production. Finding [#NEWPALMYRA](#) was at the beginning of my research process.



The Upper Side of the Sky, 2019, Research Scans, Jawa El Khash.



Arid Lands Newsletter, No. 02. July 1975. The Upper Side of the Sky, 2019, Research Scans, Jawa El Khash & Mohamad El-Khash.

Jawa El Khash:

At the same time, I was getting closer to my grandfather's work. My grandfather, Dr. Mohamed El-Khash, is an agriculturalist and plant pathologist. He was the general director for the [Arab Center for the Study of Arab Zones and Dry Lands](#) in Damascus for 30 years, and he dedicated his life to studying and archiving seeds in Arab lands. His interest in plants led him to asking and discovering answers to questions such as, how do seeds grow in arid lands? How can we modify these seeds so that they can continue to live in arid lands as the region gets drier and drier? This essay was not only a personal find but it also

inspired me to delve into understanding plant life from the perspective of my grandfather. When you understand the plant life, or the agricultural history of a place, it really tells you the story of the soil, and the people who have worked through it. This found interview became an archive for me, giving me a glimpse of how my grandfather sounded 40 years ago, and the kind of relationship he had with his work. Evidently the work of my grandfather inspired me to tell the story of the seeds, spices, and agricultural life around Palmyra and Syria.



The Upper Side of the Sky, 2019, Research Scans, Jawa El Khash.

Focus on Seed Programs THE SYRIAN SEED INDUSTRY

Abdul Mohsen Said Omar, General Organization
for Seed Multiplication, P.O. Box 3837, Aleppo,
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4644901, 4650295; E-mail: gosm@mail.sy



other scientists eventually sent out what they could — including a few of the sheep — and fled, joining half the country's population in exile.

ICARDA's most vital project — a seed bank containing 155,000 varieties of the region's main crops, a sort of agricultural archive of the Fertile Crescent — faced extinction.

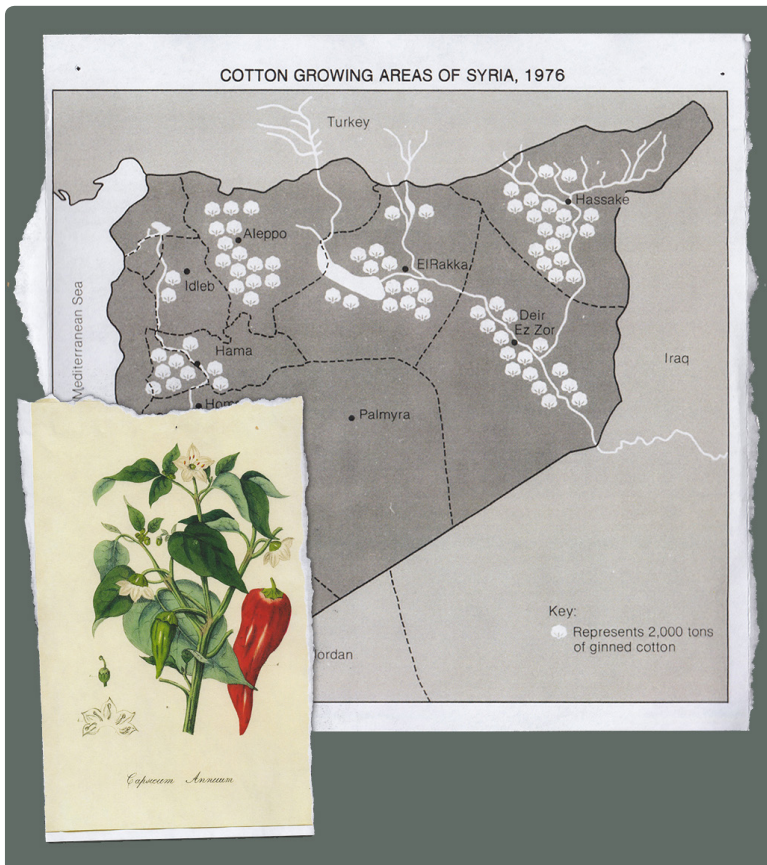
But the researchers at ICARDA had a backup copy. Beginning in 2008, long before the war, ICARDA had begun to send seed samples — "accessions" as they are called — to the Svalbard Global Seed Vault, the "doomsday vault," burrowed into the side of a mountain on a Norwegian island above the Arctic Circle. It was standard procedure, in case anything happened.

War happened. In 2015, as Aleppo disintegrated, ICARDA's scientists borrowed some of the seeds they had stored in Svalbard and began building anew. This time, they spread out, setting up one seed bank in Morocco and another just across Syria's border with Lebanon in this vast valley of cypress and grapes known as the Bekaa. "We are doing our best to re-create everything we had in Aleppo," Shehadeh said.

The Aleppo headquarters still contains the largest collection of seeds from across the region — 141,000 varieties of wheat, barley, lentils, fava and the like — though neither Shehadeh nor his colleagues know what shape it's in. They haven't been able to return.

Seed banks have always served as important repositories of biodiversity. But they're even more crucial, said Tim Benton, a food-security expert at the University of Leeds, at a time the world needs crops that can adapt to the rapid onset of climate change.

The Upper Side of the Sky, 2019, Research Scans, Jawa El Khash.



The Upper Side of the Sky, 2019, Research Scans, Jawa El Khash.

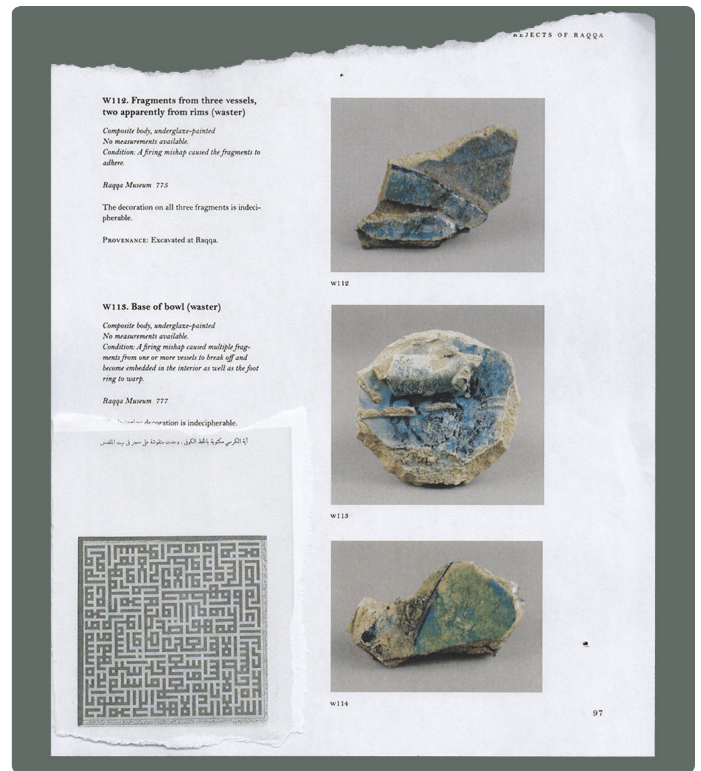
Jawa El Khash:

During this project, I had four different research, you could say, “pillars”: agriculture, architecture, philosophy, and technology. And throughout my investigation in the agriculture pillar, I was curious to see what agricultural commodities Syria exports and I was intrigued by this juxtaposition, this very technical and scientific inquiry versus the Romantic aspect of imagining Palmyra. I started to look into the agricultural data that the [OEC](#) has of Syria, looking closely into the yearly agricultural exports over its history. The highest agricultural commodity was olive oil, and then you have spice seeds, nuts, apples, and cotton. These plants represent the richness and history of the soil, and I wanted to know more about their story. As I was looking at their history, one thing that captured my attention was the scientific botanical motifs of how these plants were drawn. The illustrators were breaking down the plant, almost stripping it apart and revealing all of its components to you. During this time I also became aware of [ICARDA](#)’s seed bank in Aleppo, which contains hundreds of thousands of seed varieties native to the fertile crescent, which was destroyed during the war. These irreplaceable seeds are the region’s soul, its memory, containing almost every known seed that our ancestors cultivated. The inventory of seeds is now being recovered, in Morocco and Lebanon, thanks to [Svalbard Global Seed Vault](#), which is the world’s biggest gene bank – our ultimate back-up plan.

Conservationists from the Middle East were the first – and still are the only ones – to ask for a withdrawal of the seeds they deposited. This incredibly important archive of seeds inspired me to use technology to retell the stories of the seeds.



The Upper Side of the Sky, 2019, Research Scans, Jawa El Khash.



The Upper Side of the Sky, 2019, Research Scans, Jawa El Khash.

Jawa El Khash:

During my investigation into architecture, I was discovering Roman-Hellenistic motifs, tile and ceramic design, and how they influenced or connected to Syrian motifs. When I think of ceramic tile design in the places I've been to in Syria, I think of blue floral motifs. I started to find high-resolution images of these textures, and used the images as textures for the monuments. These textures almost became a new skin for the monuments, giving them a soulful presence. 3D models without textures look dull, and they look kind of non-human, in a sense. Doing a little bit of research on the history of motifs and patterns, I was mixing things up; I was using textures of tile design and ceramic design that came way after Palmyra. So a lot of the things in *The Upper Side of the Sky* are from an imagined point of view, like using motifs and ceramic aesthetics that were created in a different time period, playing with the past and the future and meshing them together to create an alternate view of Palmyra.

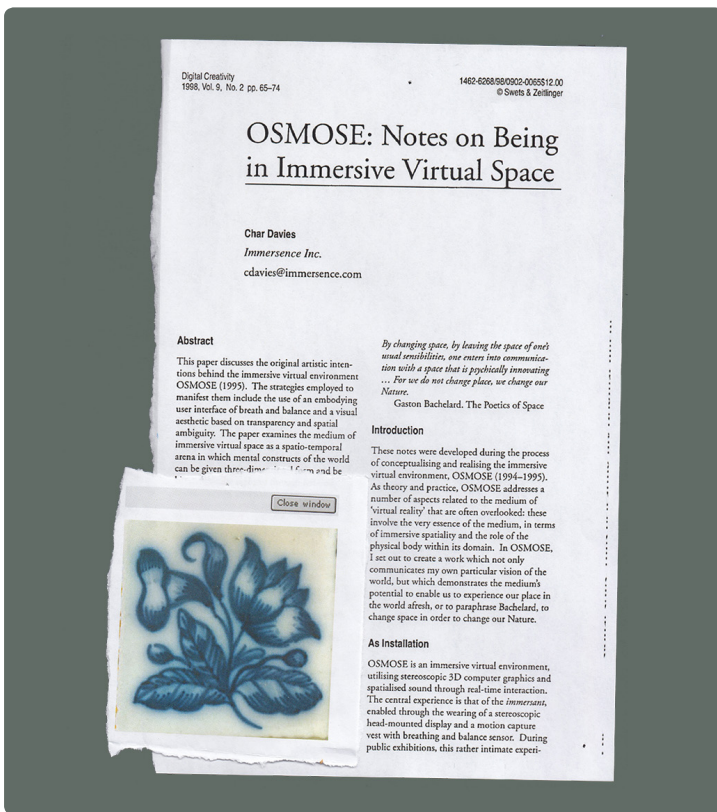
Dana Qaddah:

But that also speaks to the synthesis of information that you try to

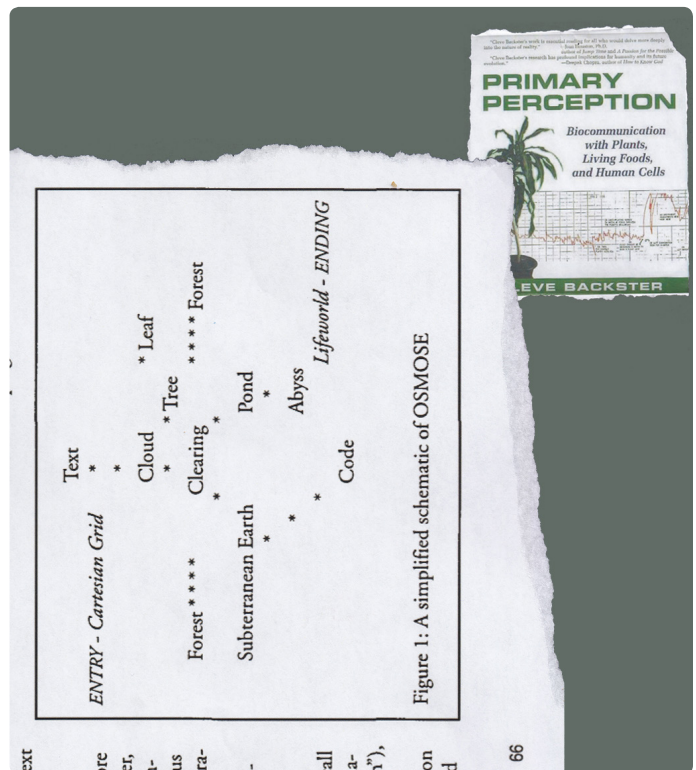
gather about yourself and how not all of it has this coherent geographical situation, but it's kind of blurry at the point that we're at now. All our history has been so remixed, right?

Jawa E1 Khash:

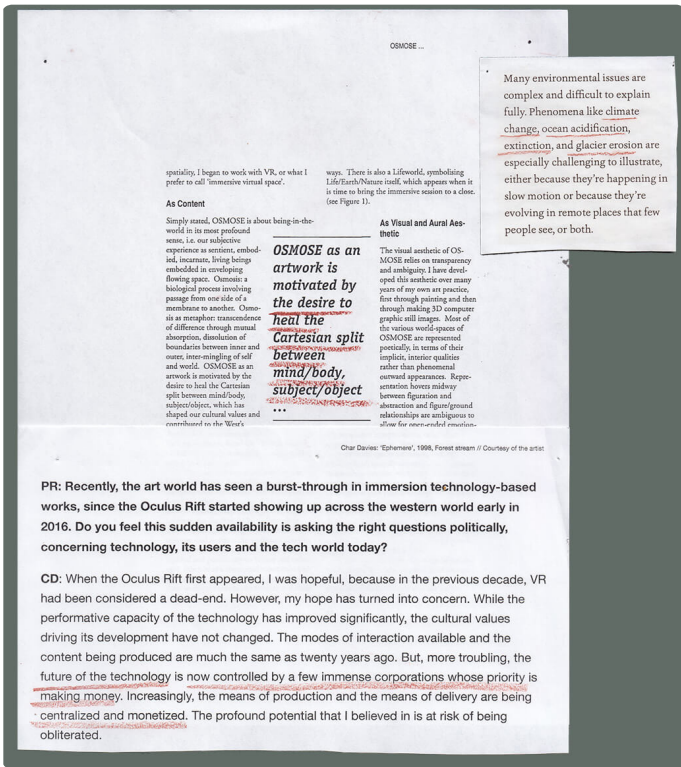
Right. Yeah, I think that's a great point and that's why I think it's really important for us, as young thinkers and young artists from the region, to retell the story of them. It doesn't have to be this extremely historical and fact-based history. On the contrary. I think if we use our imagination, we retell the experiences and these fleeting moments of emotion - awe - that our homelands have created for us.



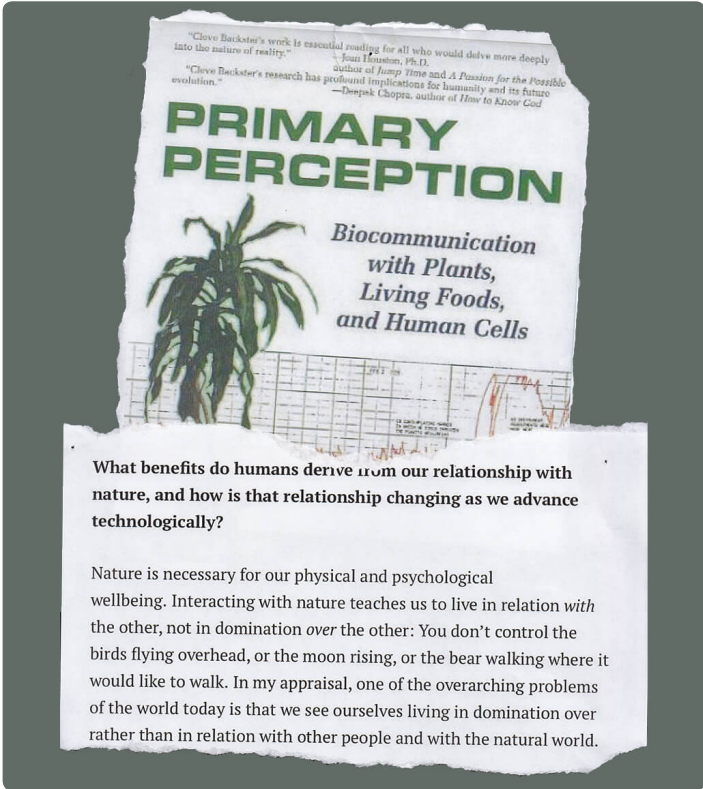
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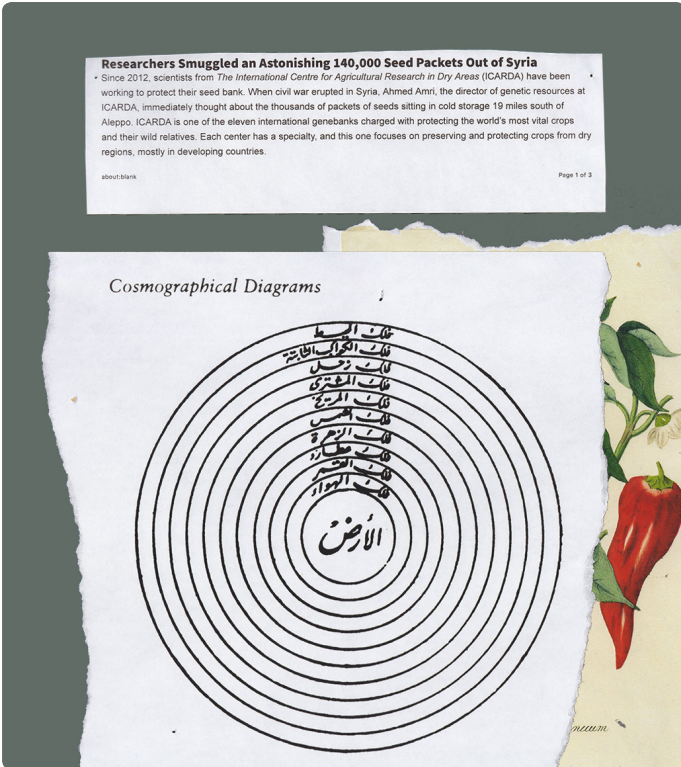
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Jawa El Khash:

The next pillar of research is Philosophy, where I was really inspired by the works of [Char Davies](#), [Claudia Hart](#), and also [Cleve Backster](#). Cleve Backster is actually the inventor of the polygraph. Interested in deception, his work led him to inventing the lie detector machine, when he was working with the CIA. Backster had this playful streak which led him to hook up the lie detector machine to plants, recording the different reactions or spikes in energy when he touches the plants or gives them good or bad thought/energy. Backster's studies concluded that plants have an untapped sense which he called primary perception. This sense could detect and respond to human thoughts and emotions. I discovered Backster's work in a book called *The Secret Life of Plants*, a 1973 controversial book by Peter Tompkins and Christopher Bird. This book plays with the thin lines between science and pseudoscience. Inspired by Backster, I became interested in this idea of using technology to understand the perspective of other species, of other plants. Thinking about this idea, I want to share a small excerpt from an interview with [Psychology professor Peter Kahn](#), when he was asked what benefits humans derive from our relationship with nature, and how that relationship is changing as we advance technologically.

Nature is necessary for physical and physiological wellbeing. Interacting with nature teaches us to live in relation with the other, not in domination of the other: You don't control the birds flying overhead, or the moon rising, or the bear walking where it would like to walk. In my appraisal, one of the overarching problems of the world today is that we see ourselves living in domination over rather than in relation with other people and with the natural world.

I liked this idea of approaching a subject without the will to dominate it, especially when we're talking about resurrecting monuments. I started to think about the ethics of that and how we don't always have to dominate the monuments, and shift them apart from their history. Another pivotal artist, who I was getting introduced to during this time, is Char Davies, who is a pioneer in virtual reality. I would recommend anyone who doesn't know her to get to know her work. She

created a monumental piece in 1995, called *Osmose*, and what was revolutionary about this piece is that instead of the player navigating through the VR world with controllers, they were navigating through this sensory device that tracked their breathing. So the way that you navigate through this world is through your breath. This incredibly poetic and romantic gesture in a VR world hasn't been repeated. I think there's this fear of virtual reality as this technology that is going to drive people away from each other, where one day in the future, we're all going to live secluded, lonely lives in VR headsets and no one's going to talk to one another. I'm inspired by Char Davies, as instead of looking at technology, or virtual reality specifically, as a means of escape, she thinks of it as a means of returning to the very things that make us human. For example, Davies references the moment a person takes the headset off: they have this high, and this high, she said, is a crucial moment in the entire experience because that high that you feel is that moment of you returning to yourself. But it's kind of paradoxical because you're returning to yourself, but you also feel extremely alone. And that loneliness of virtual reality forces you to just be with yourself, to be completely within your own thoughts. And again, instead of using technology as a vessel to escape the world, she wants to use it to help you return to what makes you human. So, this excerpt is taken from this interview from two years ago called ["Virtual Reality // Healing Practice: An Interview with Char Davies."](#)

The interviewer asked Davies: "Many would argue virtual reality might be our last hope of experiencing the divine within a depleting world, that's running low on resources at the cost of nature. Do you think that one day that we might rest ourselves inside these virtual spaces for solace rather than novelty?" And then she [Char Davies] says:

Twenty-five years ago I wrote these words about VR: If we create a model of a bird to fly around in virtual space, the most this bird can ever be is the sum of our very limited knowledge about birds. It has no otherness, no mysterious being, no autonomous life. What concerns me is that one day our culture may consider the simulated bird that obeys our command, to be enough, and perhaps even superior to the real entity. In doing so, we will be impoverishing ourselves; trading mystery for certainty, and living beings for symbols. We

might well become oblivious to the plunder going on around us as we construct the disembodied, decentralized world in man's own image.

In my interpretation of what Davies is saying, this fear of us creating these worlds is real, and it's evident, and we should be scared, but we should also be using this technology to recreate these worlds that make us go back to what it feels like to be human.

Another really interesting figure that I discovered in the philosophy pillar was [Ibn 'Arabī](#), who is considered to be one of the most important Islamic mystic philosophers. He created these cosmographical diagrams that depict the seven layers of the skies, rearranging the hierarchies of celestial objects around the earth, redistributing the power between earth and elements/planets.



The Upper Side of the Sky, 2019, Sketches, Jawa El Khash.



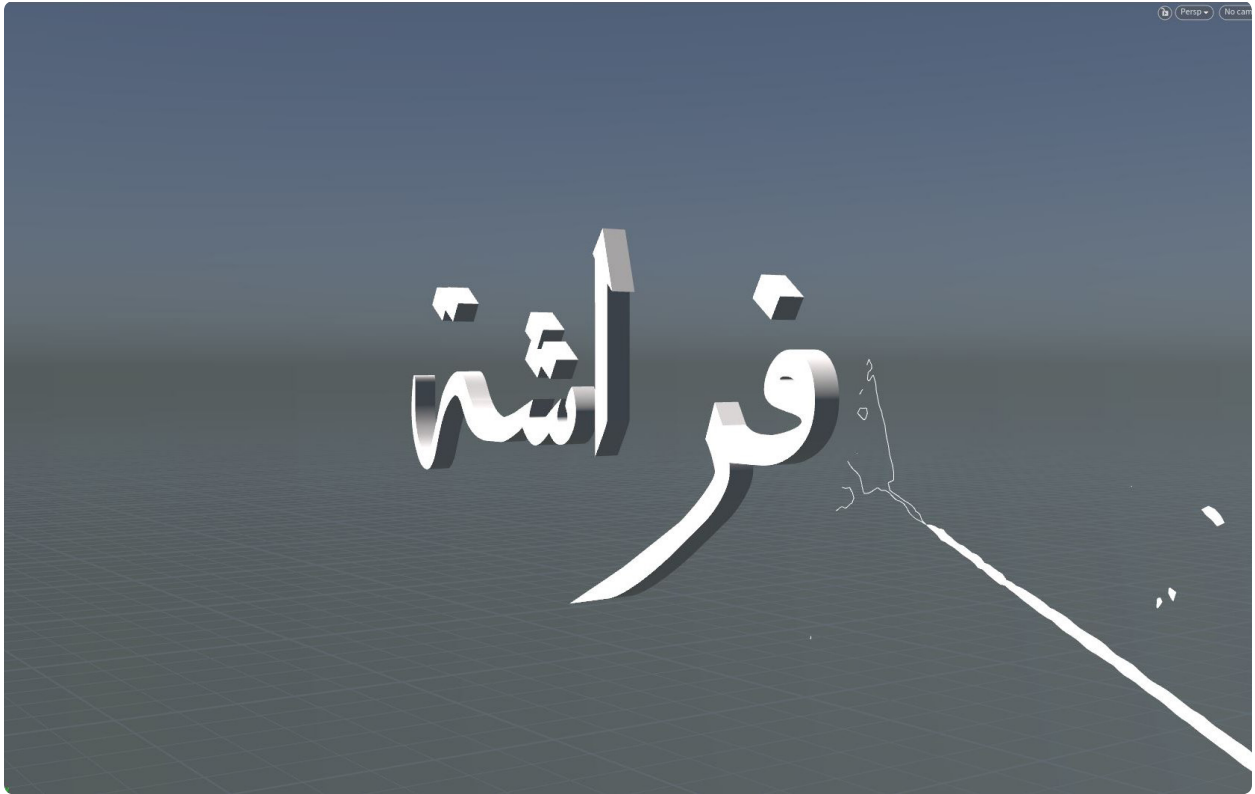
The Upper Side of the Sky, 2019, Sketches, Jawa El Khash.



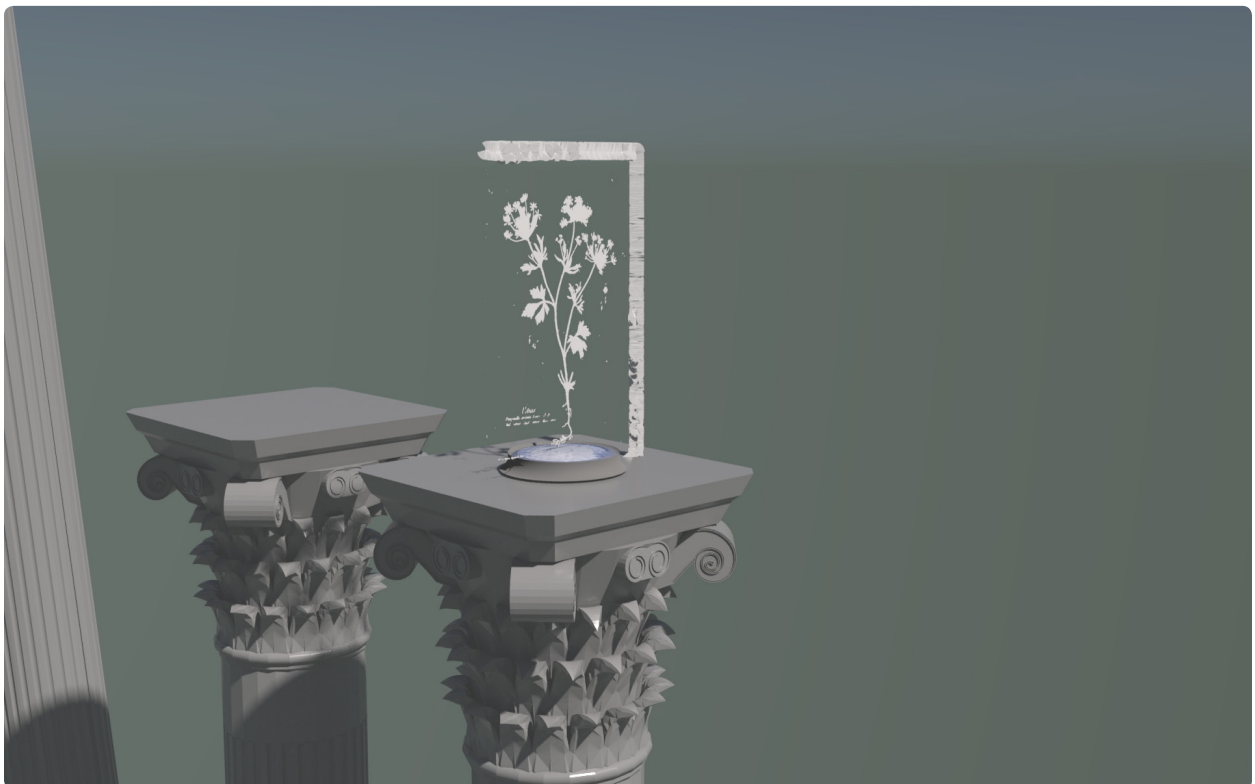
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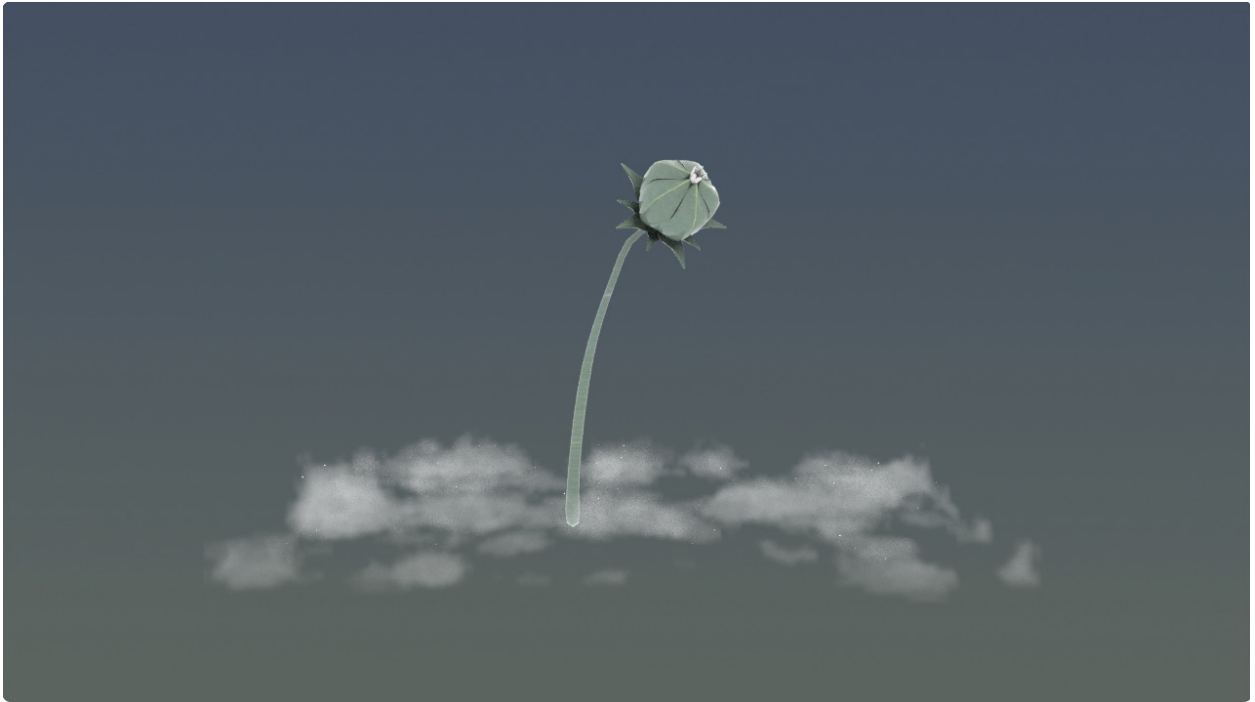
The Upper Side of the Sky, 2019, Sketches, Jawa El Khash.



The Upper Side of the Sky, 2019, Sketches, Jawa El Khash.

Jawa El Khash:

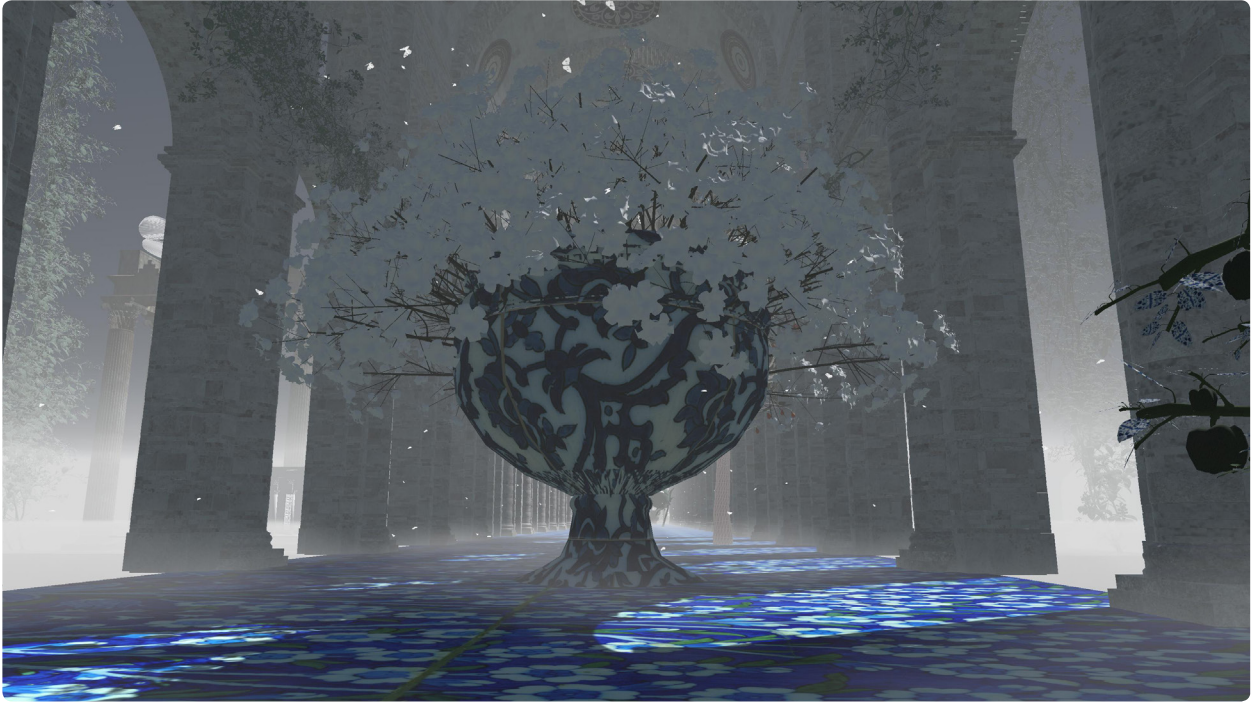
After the research, I started to work in [Houdini](#) and [Unity](#) to bring to life all these different ideas I was exploring. The aspect of VR that really captivated me was the scale, and how it can make you feel so small, rearranging the hierarchies of power between you and other living things such as plants or butterflies. With [The Upper Side of the Sky](#), from the beginning stages of world designing, I wanted the player to feel like an ant going through the world, returning to the child-like wonder and imagination of the world. During this process, I became increasingly drawn to the forms of wireframes. Wireframes act as skeletal figures and reveal the soul of the digital world. When you look at a wireframe in a VR world, you are looking at its naked form, its bare skin, reminding you that this object is made by a computer. During this process of sketching, I was also visiting the butterfly conservatory in Niagara Falls, and found myself mesmerized by the butterfly feeding plate. The butterflies were feeding on fruits in synchronicity with each other, rhythmically waving their wings up and down. I was fascinated by the delicateness of watching butterflies feed. Butterflies, as symbols for life/death, and the process of resurrection and metamorphosis, become ghosts in [The Upper Side of the Sky](#), giving life to the breathless monuments.



The Upper Side of the Sky, 2019, Sketches, Jawa El Khash.



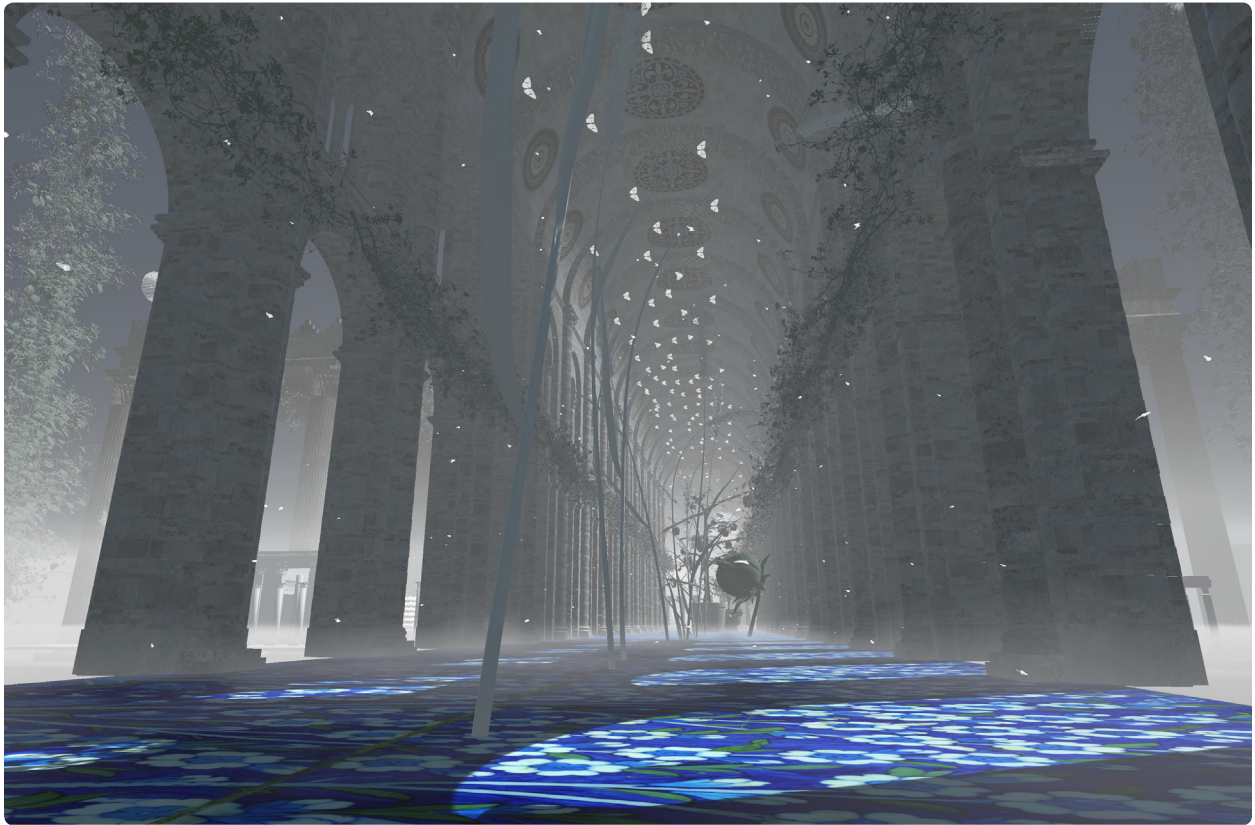
The Upper Side of the Sky, 2019, Sketches, Jawa El Khash.



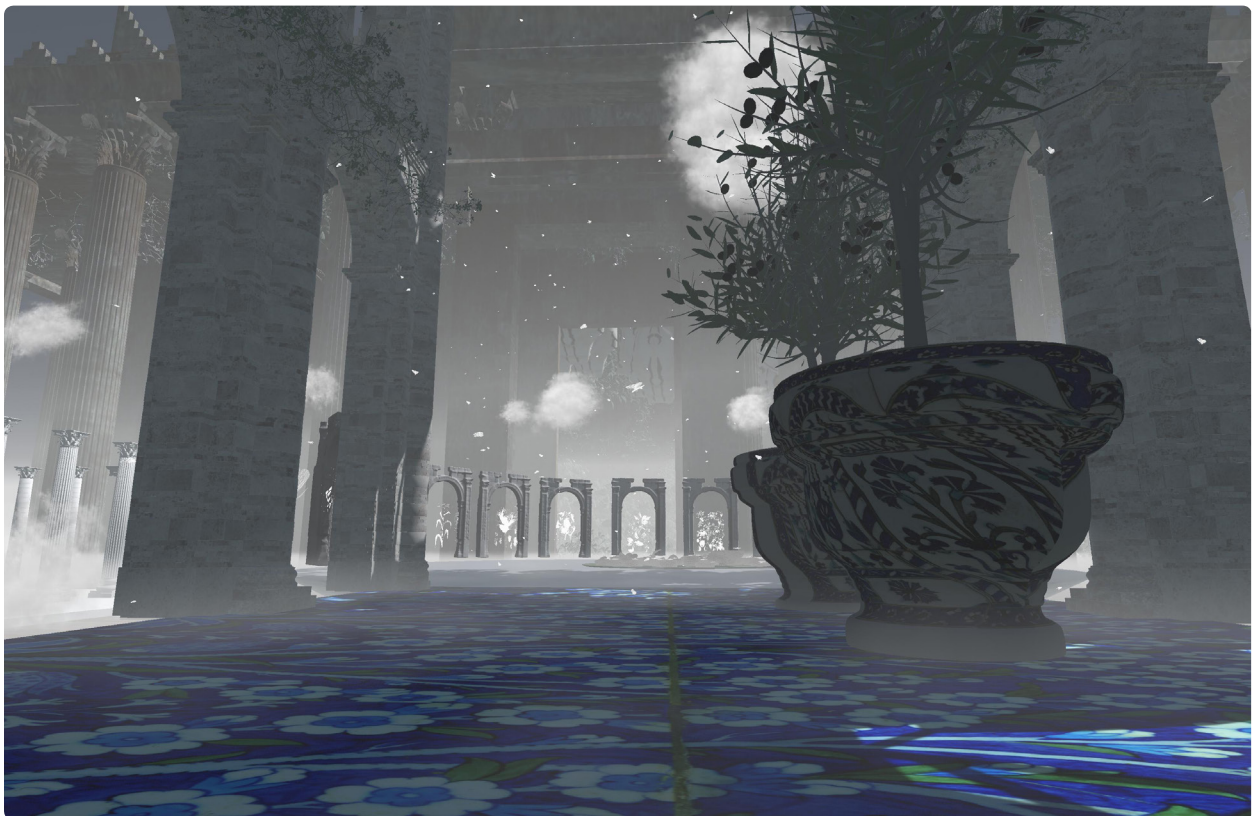
The Upper Side of the Sky, 2019, Stills from Virtual Reality, Jawa El Khash.

Jawa El Khash:

The greenhouse is a tunnel-like structure, containing plants that are varied in scale. The plant species include cotton, green pepper, jasmine, wheat, and Aleppo red pepper.



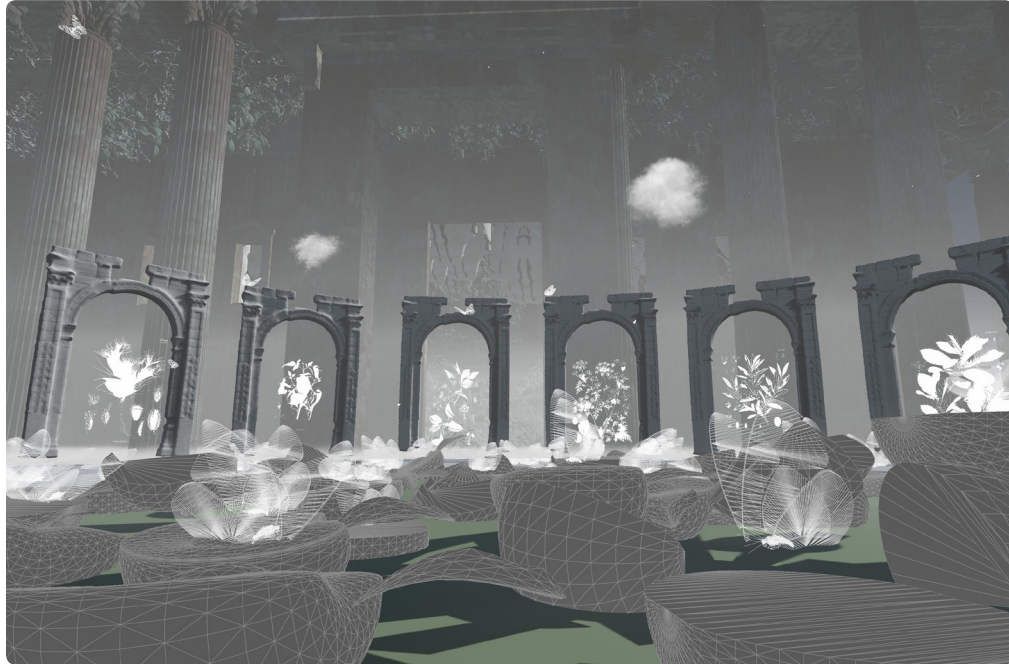
The Upper Side of the Sky, 2019, Stills from Virtual Reality, Jawa El Khash.



The Upper Side of the Sky, 2019, Stills from Virtual Reality, Jawa El Khash.

Jawa El Khash:

Inspired by Islamic geometry, at the end of the greenhouse lies a courtyard. Instead of the traditional fountain in the center of the courtyard, a butterfly feeding plate lies surrounded by an ocean of fog, and Palmyrene arches that have wireframes of spices floating in them.



The Upper Side of the Sky, 2019, Stills from Virtual Reality, Jawa El Khash.



The Upper Side of the Sky, 2019, Stills from Virtual Reality, Jawa El Khash.



The Upper Side of the Sky, 2019, Stills from Virtual Reality, Jawa El Khash.



The Upper Side of the Sky, 2019, Stills from Virtual Reality, Jawa El Khash.

Jawa El Khash:

Each section in the virtual reality world has its own audio soundtrack, and I was working with two audio designers, [Patrick Perez](#) and [TWFHTEC](#). We decided to make a separate audio track, for each section of the VR world. Atmospheric audio is a crucial aspect of the experience as it plays a big part in the immersiveness and believability of the experience. Coming in and out of the VR world, and seeing it in its beginning stages, the two audio designers started to imagine and capture sounds that mimic what it would feel like to be in the middle of the sky: What would butterflies sound like? What kind of melodies suit the atmospheric quality of this environment? Approaching the project intuitively, they created separate audio tracks that overlap as you're exiting one section of the world to the next.

I have to say, a lot of the time when I'm making work I don't really understand the reason why until it's done. A part of my practice is balancing between intuitive and research-based practice. I didn't ask myself hard critical questions about this work until I was done with the project. Why do we have this natural human tendency to recreate monuments? I am still learning about this project and soaking in the research and ideas it birthed.

Dana Qaddah:

Yeah, it sounds like every time we chat about the project it even develops for you. Considering the extent to which your knowledge – even of what you were doing at the time – becomes more and more complicated.

Jawa El Khash:

Yeah.

Dana Qaddah:

I can really see this whole marriage of being really interested in studying the facts and the importance of translating those things, but also valuing, at the forefront, personal first-hand experience in being the voice to tell these stories through, right?

Jawa El Khash:

Right.

Dana Qaddah:

And so that's why I think art is probably the best medium to marry those two things, right? It's fact and passion.

Jawa El Khash:

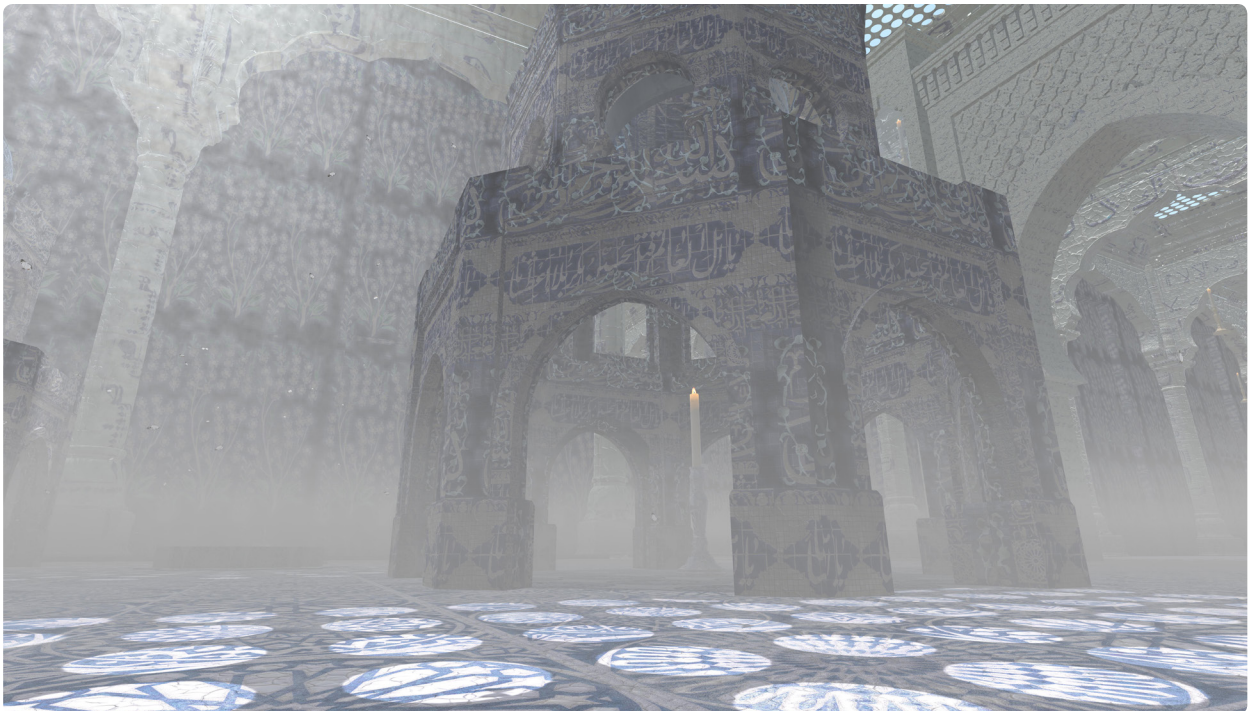
Right, right. To me every artist is an archiver, documenting our view of the world today and how we imagine it tomorrow. Thinking of the late Zaha Hadid, when she gets asked about the importance of preservation, turning old buildings into new, she says we need to have a twist on conservation, or else we leave no place for growth. It's important to know our history, but it's also important to use today's technology to imagine tomorrow's future. Can you imagine the world today without television? Can you imagine how different it would be without television, or let's think about how television has impacted how we understand the world and how it has connected us to places we've never been able to connect to before. I think this is where virtual reality is going. I get really excited when I see artists using the latest technologies to retell stories or create experiences that show us other universes, other ways of existing in the world. I think that's how we can create archives for the future. I think it is archives and these works that act as records for future generations, so they can look at these monuments and we can tell our stories through these works.

Dana Qaddah:

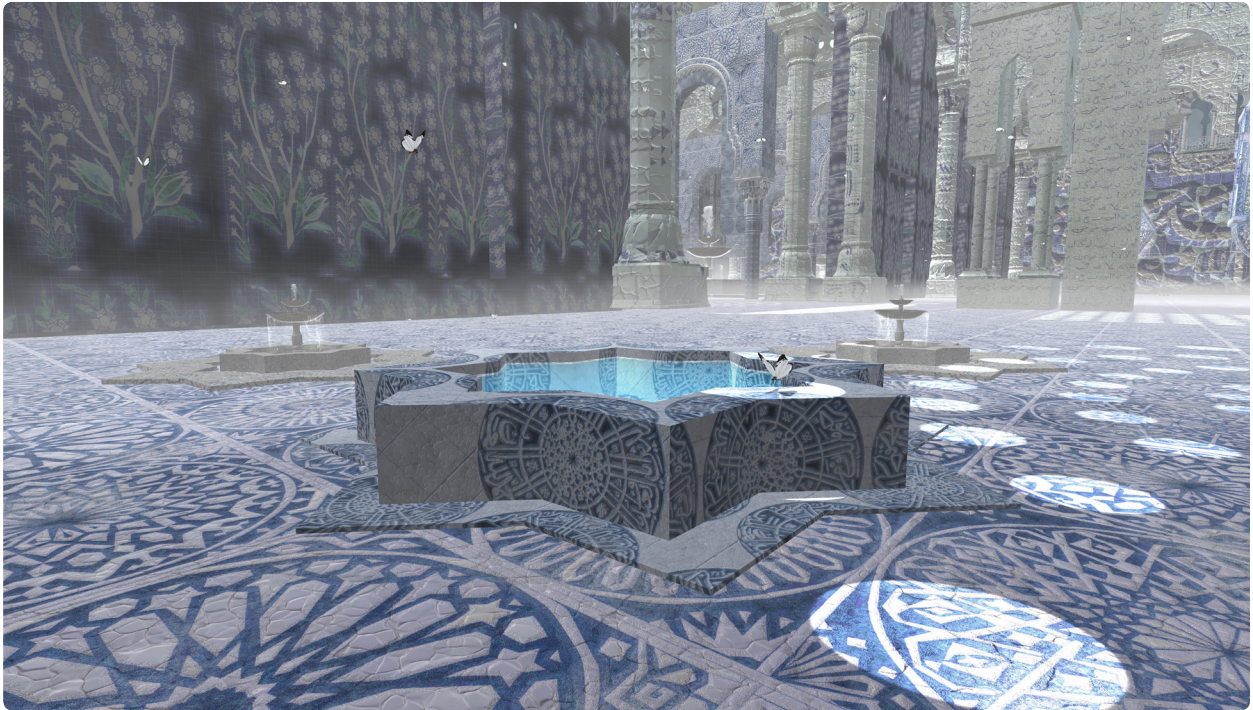
Yeah, totally.



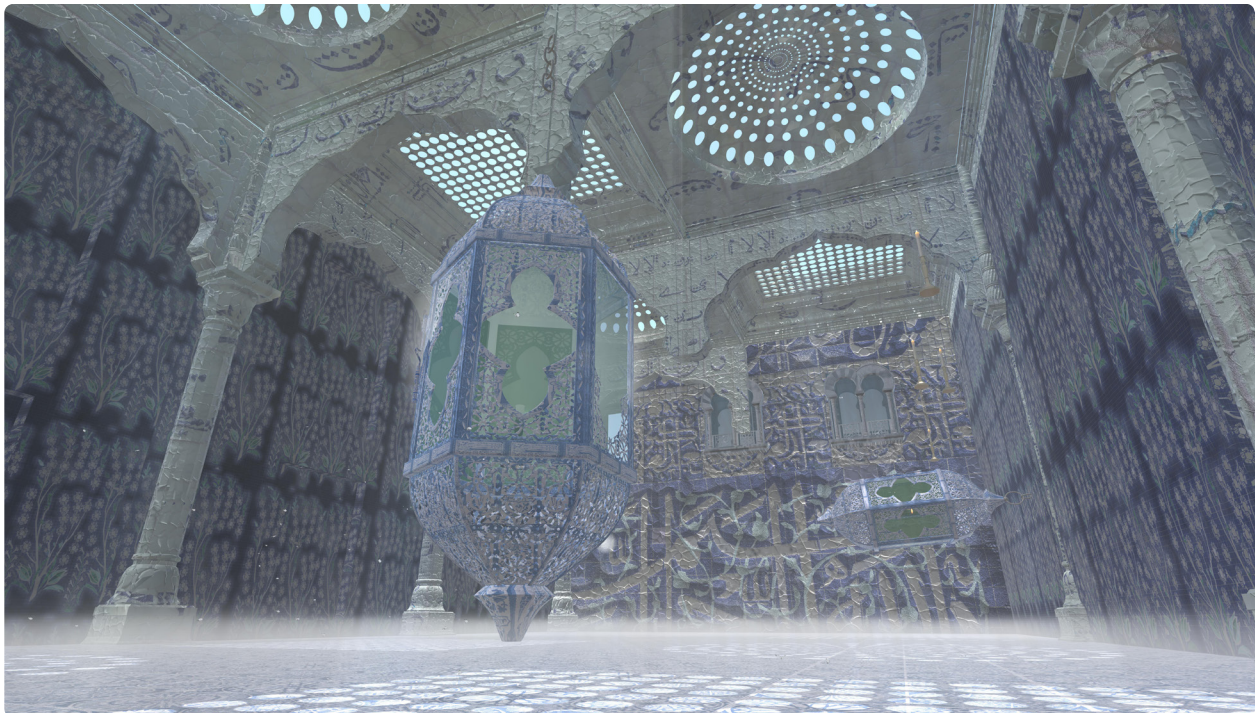
Hammam, 2020, Stills from Virtual Reality and WebGL (www.hammam.xyz), Jawa El Khash.



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Hammam, 2020, Stills from Virtual Reality and WebGL (www.hammam.xyz), Jawa El Khash.

Jawa El Khash:

I'm going to show snips of [Hammam](http://www.hammam.xyz) right now. [Hammam](http://www.hammam.xyz) is my latest virtual reality project. [Hammam](http://www.hammam.xyz) is inspired by my memories and my experience of being in a bath house in Syria. Anyone who's been to Damascus knows that it's a very chaotic and populated city and the streets are always filled with noises but as soon as you step in, into one of the really ancient

bath houses that still exist there, you go into this simulation; you become totally separated from the outside world, all your senses are enticed. And there's also something about the architecture of bath houses in Syria. What captured my imagination is the fact that all Islamic architecture and religious architecture have light as the most crucial element in the space. Light becomes the symbol of the divine, an element that exists between the invisible and the visible, between the real and the simulated. I think the spaces between these contradictions are what I've always been interested in within my practice; the delicate space between things that we can see, touch, and feel, and things that are invisible to one sense but visible to the other. With [The Upper Side of the Sky](#), VR makes it possible for the lost monuments to become visible to us. These are actually invisible in the real world. Going back to [Hamмам](#), in the center of the bathhouse lies a head from Palmyra, which was made by [ICONEM](#). With this environment, I was interested in creating PBR [physically based rendering] materials using images of tiles and ceramic design from the Fertile Crescent as references and learning Substance Designer and Painter to create facsimiles of ancient ceramics. Thinking about the roles of museums as cultural gatekeepers, and our limited access to ancient objects, I wanted to use technology to create replicas of these delicate and priceless ceramics.

[Hamмам](#) is a world where you could easily lose track of time. The sunlight acts as the protagonist of this environment, moving at a rapid pace throughout the environment, gifting the objects it touches a golden luminous presence, making the invisible visible. I wanted to push the disorienting quality of VR further by making the player lose track of time, five minutes in there can feel like five hours and vice versa.

Along with a virtual reality environment, I also created a Web GL simulation, which enables rendering interactive 2D and 3D experiences in a compatible web browser. By visiting www.ammam.xyz, the audience can explore the world at their own pace. Putting on the hat of a game developer, I created this simulation from the desire to make this project accessible to more people, without the use of a headset. [Hamмам](#) also exists as a short film, which showed at the 5th Istanbul Design Biennial

this year. I think we're living in a really exciting time, where we can use the power of the internet to create and discover as much as we like.

Dana Qaddah:

And fill in the gaps. Yeah.

Jawa El Khash:

The gaps. Yeah.

Dana Qaddah:

[laughs] Yeah, totally. Thank you for all of that.

Jawa El Khash:

Yeah no, thank you. That's the end [laughs].

Dana Qaddah:

That's the end of that. I'm happy to help facilitate any questions that people might have. I think that last point that you were talking about, about the whole inaccessibility of VR was, like, kind of hitting on the whole conversation that we were all having in April of how to fit this project into this new format that we have to distribute to people, and I'm sure that you've even had some challenges with reformatting your thinking around physically experiencing the project and then trying to really make sure that that experience is translatable into the more flat website version of it.

Jawa El Khash:

Right, yeah. For sure.

Dana Qaddah:

So we have a question from Nazanin. She says: "I wonder if Jawa can talk a little bit about the relation between space and humans in these works. The spaces created through virtual reality and their work seem very dreamlike and alive with different creatures, but there's no evidence of humankind except the man-made architectural structures. I find them almost unlivable for humans."

Jawa El Khash:

Right, I'm going to go back to Surrealism and Romanticism. Thinking about landscapes from artists such as Yves Tanguy and Kay Sage, who are artists that I'm really inspired by. Most of their landscapes are absent of a human figure, and I think - especially like if we look at *Hammam* as an example - I did not want to put a human figure there; I want you to connect with the other living beings that are in there, I want you to imagine yourself in the space. For example, playing with the scale and the presence of butterflies, the prayer beads, or the flow of the water in the bathhouse, the sunlight beaming in: I want to use VR's viscerality to open up our eyes to how other creatures might feel. The absence of a human figure brings you closer to the world as you imagine yourself as the protagonist or the super hero of this environment. This makes the VR experience more embodied, immersive and personal; a moment that you get to experience by yourself. This experience can open up our imaginations to how we can exist in the world if we're not in a human body, and how we can experience the presence and soul of other creatures/elements. Thinking about these worlds as unlivable, I think that's the beauty of VR, that we can use it to escape/return to the constructs of the real world and imagine these worlds where other possibilities arise, such as humans not being at the center of the world, and as humans, not being dominant over other life forms. I hope that answers the question.

Dana Qaddah:

Mm hmm. Yeah. She said, "thank you so much." Yeah, and there's just some good "thank you's" and some nice comments coming in. Dan has asked a question: "The intergenerational knowledge aspect of the project is fascinating. Do you ever imagine someone looking to your work as a means of understanding this site? And all the research entailed in your process far in the future? And if so, can you speak to them directly? What might you say?" Like, if someone was looking at this project as a way to study the whole site, and the plants and stuff in the future, what kind of conversation would you have with them?

Jawa El Khash:

That's kind of a wild idea!

Dana Qaddah:

Yeah, right? [laughs]

Jawa El Khash:

That's really hard to imagine, but if anything I would want this work to encourage whoever is looking at this in the future to use their own imagination to tell their own story about it. [The Upper Side of the Sky](#) is a figment of my imagination around Palmyra, as Palmyra being this place that exists in an ocean of fog suspended in the sky. So if someone in the future was looking back on my work, and looking at the history of Palmyra, of course I'd be honored, but I think a database like [#NEWPALMYRA](#) would be a much more informative - if we're talking about information, the [#NEWPALMYRA](#) database is information, while [The Upper Side of the Sky](#), it is information but it's also filled with emotion and imagination. So if I wanted anyone in the future to look at this project and take away anything, it would be to find ways to re-experience these monuments, find ways to retell their stories, and find ways to advocate the sharing of knowledge and the sharing of these stories.

Dana Qaddah:

Beautifully said.

Jawa El Khash:

That was a good question, Dan.

Dana Qaddah:

Yeah, that was a really good one. And then Emma is dovetailing onto Dan's question, and is wondering "How and if you think about or have concerns about digital preservation, considering the historical and cultural significance and research that is contained in your work? Are you imagining these works being preserved long term?"

Jawa El Khash:

Well the thing is, we can start talking about if we think websites are going to live forever. If I keep www.theuppersideofthesky.com online, and I commit to updating it, one day the process will end because I'm not going to exist forever, then what will happen to the website? Maybe it becomes a digital memory in the matrix. Obviously, it would be great if these online resources would live forever, but I think the internet is a contradictory place, it's transient and temporary but in a weird way it also has this permanent memory of every single website, Google search, upload, etc. For example, by digitizing these monuments, we are creating facsimiles, but how do we give people the opportunity to experience this work forever? Using the internet as a place to show work and communicate with one another is a crucial part of our lives now because of the pandemic, but net artists and new media artists have been doing this for years. And people have been making work that lives online for years and there's always this question of, will this last forever? Or how long will this last? So I think it relates to the philosophical question of how long will the internet last for? Will the internet last forever? Will digital databases and archives last forever? And I think I'm still even trying to discover - I'm still trying to answer that, like how long will this work exist for?

Dana Qaddah:

Okay. Yasmine is asking: "How has this project influenced the way you work with your personal day-to-day archive, in terms of the myth of the artist and the way you value the objects you collect?"

Jawa El Khash:

Since this was my first virtual reality project, it taught me a lot on how to create an archive and moodboard to document the process of my thoughts forming, and to document what I know about these objects. I do find myself asking the question, what is the best way to archive this? Learning about the process of archiving is still an endless process for me, but the archives can take place in a different life form, they can live as documents on a laptop, or they can live as a book. So this is also a question that I'm still also discovering, but I think the main

thing that I've taken from [The Upper Side of the Sky](#) is, again, using these websites as a way to empower my knowledge about these places, and empower my access to these places. So I think, again, it's really important for us as young artists, and young people who are from the region to use technology as a way to reimagine the future. And that's what I think is the main thing that I took from [The Upper Side of the Sky](#). And I think what the most important thing that I've learned is how important research is in the process of doing any work. So with [The Upper Side of the Sky](#), the first four months of research is mainly collecting information that I'm still learning from and looking at. And so I think it's important for us to take the time as artists to do our research, and look at the people who were there before us, and the artists and the thinkers who were there before us, and use the tools that we have today to tell their stories as well and to inspire and be inspired by. I hope that answers the question.

Dana Qaddah:

Yeah, I think it does, and it obviously totally resonates. Al has asked: "On the topic of persistence, have you considered using a decentralized storage protocol like IPFS, and FileCoin?"

Jawa El Khash:

I haven't. I think on the topic of persistence, what is more important to me is the actual experience of the work. So it's important for me to show the research and show the information that I'm capturing, but it's also important to focus on the fact that this is a visual experience. That's why I'm more intrigued by technological outputs such as WebXR and WebVR, that empower me by allowing me to create immersive experiences online.

Dana Qaddah:

Christine is asking: "I'm curious if you have any thoughts on the practice of Western arts institutions, historically collecting pieces of Palmyra, among other ancient sites, [busted] out of walls over a century ago? How do we think about the complicity of these institutions, colonial archaeological practice in the 20th century, and the need to

own/hold these places in comparison to recent destruction by ISIS?”

Jawa El Khash:

Thank you for that, that's a really important question.

Dana Qaddah:

Mm hmm.

Jawa El Khash:

It definitely makes me uncomfortable seeing all these Western institutions and cities printing the arch of Palmyra and putting it up in cities. I think it's problematic because it reinforces the narrative of Western civilization as the saviours, or that they're the ones who are using technology to restore the civilization of Third World countries. We can look at the example of Bassel Khartabil. When he was making the [#NEWPALMYRA](#) project, he was working with three other guys who were Westerners. And, you know, Bassel is the only one who's not with us anymore, and that just really tells you all you need to know. I go back to the idea that I think it's really important for young people from the region to use our resources, to tell the stories of the place ourselves, and for us to re-take agency over these monuments and over these stories.

Dana Qaddah:

That's a really important point of emphasis, for us to really take that agency into our own hands and reflect back on – even when you were talking about learning about Palmyra through these drawings that weren't even made by Arabs. Some things are useful for us to gain access to, but as long as the story itself is not written through that Orientalist lens, right? And it's quite unfortunate that for people like us, we have to be very cautious about getting involved with politics. And that's really because for us, there's a different sense of free speech – not that it absolutely doesn't exist, but for us, we tread those lines very carefully. So even doing this kind of work of preservation, of empowerment, of distributing resources, carrying on our family legacies, and things like that, those are risky endeavors for us to embark upon.

Jawa El Khash:

Right. And speaking on that, I want to mention [Morehshin Allahyari](#), who is an incredibly important media artist, activist, and educator. Recently Allahyari has been speaking about digital colonialism, which in her own words is “a framework for critically examining the tendency for information technologies to be deployed in ways that reproduce colonial power relations.” And that’s something that I felt was incredibly real when I was researching 3D models of Palmyra because there are Western institutions out there who have somehow been able to photograph and 3D-model these ancient sacred sites in the Middle East. They show off the 3D models on the internet, but why don’t they allow people to download them? I think that is digital colonialism, that is an example of reinforcing colonial tactics in the online world. Who gets to decide who gets access and who doesn’t? Even when we’re talking about Open Source, Morehshin complicates the narrative of the appearance of Open Source as something that is always good – Open Source gives anyone with good internet access to 3D models, but do you think anyone living in the Levant has access to good internet 24/7? No! They don’t. Morehshin has been an important figure for me when thinking about critically examining how we are using technology, and the different creative ways that we can use the internet to empower people from our region in the world.

Dana Qaddah:

Even talking about this whole difference between that Western perspective of preservation versus the way that we are dealing with it. I’m reminded of last summer when I knew people from the UK visiting Lebanon, and we’re walking downtown in the middle of all these really amazing Roman ruins and this British guy turned to me and he said: “You know, it’s quite a shame that they haven’t preserved these things very well. Imagine if they put a bit of funding or effort.” But we have bigger problems. It’s probably on someone’s plate, but it’s not the top priority. We need water and electricity and security. It’s the different stories being told through the same kind of discourses, but the rules, they’re not interchangeable – the perspectives are not interchangeable.

Jawa El Khash:

Right. Yeah. Yeah. And I guess there's this inherent impulse that foreigners have to compare the structure of their cities to cities like Damascus or Beirut, which are really incomparable, as you said. I don't think the Lebanese government is losing any sleep over the fact that these ancient ruins are lying in the street, if they're not losing any sleep over half the country starving and the economy collapsing.

Dana Qaddah:

Well, I think that's a good place to leave the audience at. I'll just do a quick scan if anyone has any last questions or parting thoughts. I'll share all your nice comments with Jawa. All the compliments and kind words. Great.

Jawa El Khash:

Thank you so much. And I want to thank Susan, Emma, and Dan for your patience with planning this, and thank you so much for making this happen. It's been so great to be able to reconnect and see your face [Dana] after all these years.

Dana Qaddah:

I know, and Jawa, one day I'll come to Toronto, we'll link up. One day we'll link up for sure. All right. Thank you guys.

Jawa El Khash:

Thank you so much.

Dana Qaddah:

Have a good Saturday. Bye.

Jawa El Khash:

Bye.

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A Virtual Reality Archive and Online Exhibition

by Jawa El Khash

Curated by Dana Qaddah

Presented by Western Front

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Jawa El Khash is an artist, technologist and researcher. Her work blurs the lines between fantasy and reality, using technologies such as virtual reality and analog holography, to explore the everyday paradoxes and obscurities of living in the world.

Dana Qaddah is a third generation expatriate artist and organizer whose interdisciplinary practice draws upon the condition of generational displacement, and being abstracted from the destruction of one's own sense of self, place and home.

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