

SHEZAD DAWOOD: IT WAS A TIME THAT WAS A TIME

Pioneer Works - Brooklyn, New York

By Keren Moscovitch



Shezad Dawood, *It was a time that was a time*, 2015, film still. Commissioned by Pioneer Works. Courtesy the artist and Timothy Taylor, London.

A palpable air of mystery and disorder pervades Shezad Dawood's first American solo show at Pioneer Works, a notable center for the research, production and presentation of art, technology and critical discourse. As an artist-in-residence, Dawood had ample opportunity to engage the energy, history and inhabitants of the local industrial waterfront of Red Hook, Brooklyn, a rapidly gentrifying neighborhood still haunted by the devastating aftereffects of Hurricane Sandy, to construct a narrative on time, hope and the destiny of human relations under threat of catastrophe. A complexly interwoven, diverse set of sculptures, two-dimensional pieces and films threads through Dawood's early depictions of ritual and the occult, to his recent cinematic and social experiments with a post-apocalyptic fantasy set amidst the wild tangles of New York City's outer banks.

The exhibition's conceptual centerpiece is the eponymous *It was a time that was a time* (2015), a film commissioned and produced by Pioneer Works in a partnership that showcases the venue's commitment to creative practice as both product and process. Produced with a collaborative, anti-hierarchical methodology by which Dawood relinquished full authorial control, the film is an artifact of a much broader investigation of power and artistic agency. Shot on old analog cameras - devices that would ostensibly survive a flood - by a motley crew of artists, performers and neighborhood residents who assembled for a workshop and film experiment exploring the hypothetical narrative of an "environmental cataclysm," the film is designed to pantomime how human behavior might unfold in such reductive conditions of life. Its protagonists wander through tall brambly brush and along littered industrial beaches wearing fantastical handmade costumes that challenge gender and social conventions, exploring new strategies for personal engagement, including group massage and dance. They eventually reach the Coney Island Aquarium, where they convene with marine mammals in what appears to be a mating dance, homecoming celebration or otherwise climactic interspecies dialogue. The handmade quality of the film heightens the association between the industrial urban landscape ravaged by the forces of nature, and the desolate dreamscape inhabited by artist-nymphs seemingly looking for a place to nest, roost, mate or resettle.

Also displayed in the spacious atria of the warehouse are large neon wall pieces in geometric configurations implying a kind of extrasensory link to sacred epistemology. *Harvest Moon* (2013) alternately resembles a question mark, lunar stage and body part, and is installed conspicuously at the entrance to *Mystery Play* (2010), a film featuring Masonic symbolism and deconstructed vaudeville scenes. Further informing the cinematic work are paintings on stretched vintage fabric that occupy the intersection of mark-making, embroidery and cartography. Works such as *YTR I* (2010) and *Scooby Doo Yantra (Ubu roi)* (2011) echo these same mysterious geometric elements that appear to trace and repeat a symbolic order older than those who inhabit it, regurgitating a language system that determines relations and ideologies. *Come, sweet Death, with Madness Marked and end the Sceneless Revelry* (2012) evokes the Weighing of the Heart ceremony from the Egyptian Book of the Dead, tying the nonlinear wanderings of his films' protagonists to an ancient search for truth and direction in the realm of the divine.

Dawood seems to have opened a doorway into the collective unconscious through integrated approaches to research and activism that deconstructs itself from within its own imaginary structure. His work's ritualistic component references a corporeal mode of worship and intimate manifestation of the holy that drives creative and revolutionary action, perhaps even tapping into energies latent in the land but concealed by urban development. Straddling the lines between science fiction, modernist abstraction and community-based initiatives, Dawood succeeds in imagining the unimaginable and creating linkages between prophetic reverie and the very real visionary model of artistic intervention into unregulated spaces. *It was a time that was a time* destroys preconceived notions of genre and artistic intention in a series of anarchic practices pointing towards a kaleidoscopic future of rebirth and becoming.

It was a time that was a time was presented in conjunction with *Crossing the Line*, the French Institute Alliance Française (FIAF)'s annual fall festival of interdisciplinary art and performance. ■

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