

Emii Alrai
Showcase – A Perpetual Remaking
iniva, Stuart Hall Library, 16 John Islip St, London SW1P 4JU
14 October - 10 December 2021



iniva (Institute of International Visual Arts) are pleased to present Emii Alrai as the second artist to be commissioned by Future Collect. Showcase – A Perpetual Remaking takes into consideration the ongoing artistic research and processes within Alrai's practice.

Emii Alrai (b.1993, Blackpool) is an artist based in Leeds. Her practice is informed by inherited nostalgia, geographical identity, and post-colonial museum practices of collecting and displaying objects. Focusing on ancient mythologies from the Middle East alongside personal oral histories of Iraq, she weaves together narratives by forging artefacts and visualising residues of cultural collision.

Alrai creates monumentally-scaled installations which play on museological displays and dioramas. She draws attention to the clash between the polished aesthetics of imperial museums and the states of ruin which befall archaeological artefacts and their landscapes of excavation. Alrai's art often contains elements which appear broken or unfinished. In this, they point towards moments of rupture and of diasporic separation from homeland. Their incompleteness asks the viewer to imagine archaeological sites as spaces of active memory.

Capture (2021), the film resulting from research Alrai undertook on the Triangle Astérides residency in Marseille, explores these concerns through slow, unfolding contemplations on fragments, the landscapes they leave behind, and their new, classified existences within the museum. Its title alludes to the metal armatures which hold such objects, devices which assume neutrality yet ensnare, asserting ownership and inflicting colonial violence.

Armatures also appear in the ink drawings in this showcase, propping up jewel-green, disembodied hands. A tangling of links between armour, arm, and armature is present. As with the archaeological object absent from its landscape, the viewer is drawn to think about the arm which once filled the contours of its armour.

Armour is a kind of container, much like the turquoise vessels nestled in the bookshelves. Glimmering like oxidised copper, their patinated and bumpy surfaces imitate the ravages of time. In fact, they are made of clay: 'imposter' works which fabricate ancient histories and challenge ideas of value and origin in museological hierarchies. Similarly, a painting of a terracotta vessel shaped like a mythical animal is an imagined object.

Here, these works are brought together under the notion of the 'showcase', or exhibit. The term 'showcase' also refers to the glass cases which museums use to display artefacts, encasing them in temperature-controlled and dust-free bubbles. Alrai's works make visible the mechanisms of museum display, and of colonial appropriation more broadly. They find resonances within the setting of the Stuart Hall Library itself - the crumbling exposed brick revealing the underlying structure of the building, and the steel bracketing which welds bookcases to walls.

In highlighting these mechanisms, an emphasis on 'process' emerges. The drawings and sculptures have been selected from the works Alrai had available in her studio. They represent processes of working and experimentation rather than finished outcomes for exhibition. Alrai recycles her materials, perpetually remaking old artworks into new ones. These transformations present interesting questions for museums, in which acquired objects traditionally enter a static death state, to be preserved exactly as they are from the moment of their entry into the collection. In the Stuart Hall Library, a place for learning and research, Alrai's own research-based works will remain active and in-dialogue with surrounding texts and the library's users.

Alrai's Future Collect commission will be exhibited at The Hepworth Wakefield in Spring 2022. Its display and acquisition will bring it into conversation with existing works in the collection, disrupting linear museological narratives. It will also be accompanied by a public programme which will include study days, conversations, and work with local communities.

Amber Li, 2021.

List of Works

Main Library

Wall (from left to right):

'Hand for Curling the Harvest' (2021). Ink on paper, 40.4 x 31.4cm.

'Hand on Armature' (2021). Ink on paper, 40.4 x 31.4 cm.

'Hand for Clearing Water' (2021). Ink on Paper, 40.4 x 31.4 cm.

Bookcases:

'Vessel' (2021). Clay, copper leaf, vinegar, 29 x 10 cm.

'Vessel' (2021). Clay, copper leaf, vinegar, 26 x 12 cm.

'Vessel' (2021). Clay, copper leaf, vinegar, 23 x 18 cm.

'Vessel' (2021). Clay, copper leaf, vinegar, 31 x 17 cm.

'Vessel' (2021). Clay, copper leaf, vinegar, 39 x 20 cm.

Alcove Shelf:

'Lymph' (2021). Clay, copper leaf, vinegar with wire armature. 11.5 x 7.5 cm.

'Lymph' (2021). Clay, 7 x 8 cm.

Informal Library

Television:

'Capture' (2021). Film with narration, 12:17 minutes.

Wall:

'Study for Rice Vessel' (2021). Ink on rice paper, 40 x 40 cm.

Capture (2021) - Emii Alrai

Film, 12:17 minutes.

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In partnership with: Musées de la Ville de Marseille, Musée d'Histoire de Marseille and the Dépôt archéologique de la Ville de Marseille. Translation by Zahra Tavassoli Zea.

The most beautiful and perfect archaeology begins with ruin. Eyes which have lost their patina, faces which are cratered from sleeping in sea water, shards which reconcile the past. We meet them, have met them, elevated to our noses behind the glass of museum vitrines, vestiges. We look into the scored lines of broken stone, and imagined histories unfolding, a magic making, a romance of the past.

The vestige in a museological sense means 1. A trace or remnant of something that is disappearing or no longer exists. In the biological sense vestige means 2. a part or organ of an organism which has become reduced or functionless in the course of evolution. The vestige is always a ruin, or something in the process of ruination.

In the museum, we see vestiges held, taut and captive, in a process which removes them from their further deterioration. We witness them in the split between living and dying, between their absence and presence. They are understood as places which hold memory. They are preserved in the moment in which they were beginning the process of disappearing.

The process of taking objects from landscape is mysterious, and their journey to display as we know them is rarely referenced. They go through stages of process. Burial, excavation, extraction, removal, fragmentation, identification, association, verification, assimilation, classification, hierarchisation. Some get put to work. Some get put to sleep. Some make it to display.

Outside of the ground, these shards are now seen as precious materials, stars. It is easy to forget about the archaeological landscapes they came from. How these sites are also imbued with the memory and tangibility of a past and the blossoming of presents and futures. How land can also exist as ghosts.

In the archaeological and libre site of the Greco-Massalian quarries along the French littoral, we are greeted by hewn outlines of weathered steps, leading into the sea. Here we look at images of La Pointe de l'Arquet, in the commune of La Couronne, and the quarry of Baou Tailla, an ancient pink limestone quarry used and constructed in the hellenistic period. The pink limestone was shipped to Marseille on scows, and built early structures in the city. The stones are the colour of dawn.

What now remains is the squares and rectangles of past extracted volume which evoke a sense of counterstructure. The poet Gustaf Sobin writes about how we enter the archaeological word of the negative when visiting these sites. It is also a popular picnic site.

These quarries, which frame the coast of the Cote Bleue, are spaces which are loaded with the signification, depletion, excavation and mass. They are ruins which allow us to gaze into the contours of absence, and imagine what was there, much like how objects operate in their display in museums.

Gustaf Sobin asks us, "Is memory any different than existing in these negative spaces?"

Aren't we continually running over the imprint, the deeply fissured outlines of vanished experience, attempting to read it, solidifying it as facets of understanding the past?"

How does the relationship of value between objects and landscape shift? Which vestiges are capable of holding memory the most? Do we find this in the regeneration of plants in nature at these sites, or through the meticulous study of fragmentation?

The archaeologist Laurent Olivier in his book *The Dark Abyss of Time* talks about how archaeological matter can be defined as "memory objects" that function through reiteration and repetition. Artifacts and objects can be considered as symptoms of constantly reconstructed memory rather than objects that bear witness to some past.

He also says that "for reliquaries to retain their identities and memory, he has to transform it, deform it, and in the end destroy it". These objects undergo a process of ruination, a change, a dislodging and reloading of memory which may or may not belong to them. Is this what we see happen in the processing of archaeological matter in organisational structure?

In museums, these reliquaries exist and are displayed in the framework of an armature. They are colonised by the armature. They are memorialised by the armature. The armature is described as 1. an open framework on which a sculpture is moulded with clay or similar material, and 2. the protective covering of an animal or plant. The word comes from the archaic definition of armour, which means 1. the metal coverings formerly worn to protect the body in battle.

These armatures are made from metal, which has connotations of violence in its materiality. Metal, linked to weaponry, and hunt, is the main complex system employed by museums in their final showcase of the objects. The objects become hunted, captured, held in position through this fabricated weaponry, which from a conservation perspective, is also a cause of ruination of the object itself.

A conversation with a curator at the Musée d'Histoire around these armatures told me that armatures, or les systèmes de soclage are actually forms of violence in relation to the degradation of the objects from a conservation perspective. The armature is so specific and complex, that objects are unable to escape their tethers, without inflicting potential damage to fragments, therefore also constituting its position as a ruin.

Ruination can also be seen as present in the museum reserves, which is where collections acquired by museums often are put to rest, until they are researched or invited out for display. These are often objects selected, through merit, through gift, through their wholeness. Fragments still exist here, but they are organised to reflect their museological worth. Here objects are conserved, a term here which means to stop all forms of ruination and deterioration through preventative processes, such as storage, covering, and controlling storage units climates.

In the store, we see forms caught under plastic sheeting, armour of a kind, an eternal morgue. What Olivier says becomes true, to invite these objects to survive an identity, they need to be altered, touched, transformed, perhaps suffocated, in order to retain a sense of the under

standing of the time they come from. These objects, which were ruins, re-enter the life cycle of conservational and emotional ruination.

Thinking back to the 'ruins' of the natural archaeological sites of the quarries, do these now become more alive with memory than these objects assume? Are landscapes the only sites which are free to embody memory without intervention? Does our desire for understanding the past violently implicate the life cycles of objects? Where do these objects begin to transform? To come back into parallel with the lives they once inhabited in the past, in our present?

At the depot archéologique, objects are touched. They are not laid bare, sleeping in plastazote lining in metal drawers, as we see them in the upper echelon of the museum reserve. They sit together with friends from similar digs, bathe in the same minerals of other objects, they coincide side by side, colliding, bashing into each other - alivening at the touch of a curious hand.

Fragments become landscapes in this place, where archaeological systems are applied. They still seem to be more attached to the memory of their home landscapes than an order of classification and institutional theatricality. With this in mind, we still must not forget that these are objects which have been depleted and excavated from sites of ruin. At the same time as these methods of research and object protection have enlivened fragments and allowed them to be touched, these objects still suffer the process of ruin, of forgetting and feeling.

The more we add the present onto the past, the more the past itself becomes matter for conjecture and hypothesis. The more these objects undergo the transformations of museology, the more they become removed from those histories which we are desperate to uncover.

How does it make us look at the value of archaeological geographical sites, such as the quarries? How can we value the alive residue which lingers, hidden in plain sight, and touched by the arms of passers by, eating picnics, and enjoying nothing more but the quality of dawn radiating from the traces of pink limestone.

These sites hold more mnemonics, more pastoral reflection to the portals of history than the objects which are cherry picked and wounded through the methods of display. The ruins of landscape are generative, but the ruination of objects seems finite. Can we start to think of objects as physical sites of absence, rather than these hewn geographies? And if we do, how does this change the way in which we approach a future archaeology as we think about how every landscape is a constellation of ruins.

The most beautiful and perfect landscape begins with fragmentation. It's the eyes that have lost their patina, the faces which are cratered from being macerated in sea water, the objects which are the ruins of the past. We meet them, have met them, have sat with them, grazing against the rock faces. We look into the scored lines of broken stone, and we imagine a history unfolding, a magic making, a romantic fantasy of the past.