

Issam Kourbaj: Urgent Archive

2 March – 26 May 2024

Press view: 1 March 2024,
10.45am – 1pm



Issam Kourbaj, *Urgent archives, written in blood*, 2019. Photo: This Is Photography. Courtesy the artist.

Kettle's Yard is pleased to present the largest solo exhibition to date by Cambridge-based artist Issam Kourbaj (b. 1963, Syria). For 13 years Kourbaj has been recording the conflict in his home country of Syria, where more than 14 million refugees have been forced to flee their homes in search of safety. Exploring themes of destruction, forced displacement, shelter, time, memory and renewal, 'Issam Kourbaj: Urgent Archive' will offer an opportunity to engage with the artist's multifaceted daily practice and will feature new and existing works from this period including painting, drawing, film, performance and sculpture.

The title 'Urgent Archive' gestures to the artist's ongoing and often laborious work to record events in Syria from a distance. Having last visited the country in 2007, with travel now impossible, Kourbaj feels a strong responsibility to use his work as a tool to foreground the trauma and difficult conditions that the Syrian people continue to face. The exhibition will coincide with the 13th anniversary of the Syrian Uprising, which began in March 2011.

Much of Kourbaj's work is created using found objects and materials that are gathered, carefully scrutinised and given new purpose. These are inspired, in part, by the notion of survival and memories of family members who dismantled unexploded bombs in order to make domestic tools and cutlery. Today, Kourbaj employs repetitive, archival procedures such as the collecting, ordering and reordering of found materials and images, ultimately exploring the potential of art to help us comprehend

traumatic events on both historical and personal scales.

'Urgent Archive' will comprise two main sections; the first will draw together performance, video and experimental sculptural works into an active space of production and process. A combined display structure and workspace, inspired by the artist's studio, will present works that will continue to develop throughout the exhibition's run, exploring the idea that, like the conflict in his homeland, Kourbaj's work is continuous. Hundreds of date seeds will be stitched individually onto a canvas tent; papers will be stamped; sketches will be drawn; seeds will grow. For the artist, a seed is an archive because it is a repository of information, particularly as natural heritage and agricultural sites have become further victims of the war. In 2015 the national seed bank in Aleppo was bombed, forcing the first withdrawal from the global repository in Svalbard in order for the International Center for Agricultural Research in the Dry Areas (ICARDA) to replenish and safeguard ancient crops from the Fertile Crescent. In his work, *Leave to Remain: A Single Syrian Grain, Airborne* (2020), Kourbaj printed a poem about these seeds in his Syrian passport, translating it into Arabic and Braille from the original English.

Kourbaj's concern with seeds will flow through the exhibition in new body of work. Throughout the past year, he has collaborated with researchers at the Sainsbury Laboratory, a research institute in the School of Biological Sciences at the University of Cambridge, to use powerful microscopes to examine Syrian wheat seeds

**For further information
and images**

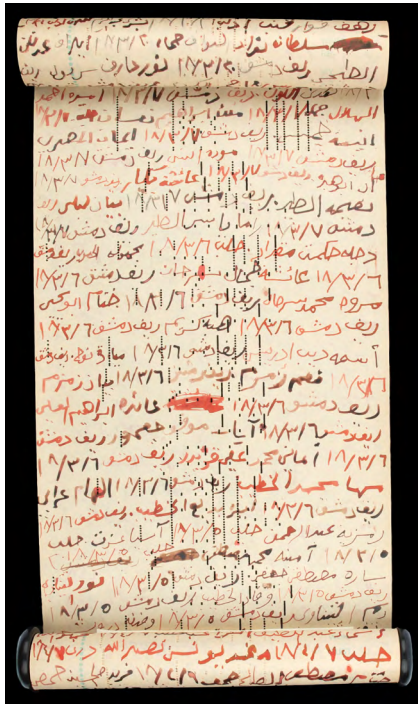
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Issam Kourbaj. Date seeds. Photo: This Is Photography. Courtesy the artist.



Issam Kourbaj, *Killed, detained and missing (women)*, 2019, ink on Pianola scrolls. Photo: This Is Photography. Courtesy the artist.

that have been burned. The resulting images take on the appearance of skin, or parts of the body, which will be presented alongside recent works such as *Killed, Detained and Missing* (2019), which comprises a sound work and two found pianola scrolls on which the artist has documented the thousands of Syrian women who have been killed and detained, or who remain missing, since the conflict began. Their names will feature alongside a large number of figurative ink drawings that will be displayed together for the first time.

Kourbaj will also present a selection of objects from his series *Dark Water, Burning World* (2016) – a fleet of tiny boats made from repurposed bicycle mudguards and filled with burnt matchsticks to suggest huddled refugees. Inspired by the miniature lead boats that carried goddesses from 4th century BC Syria, which Kourbaj came across in the collection of the Fitzwilliam Museum, the work has been described by former British Museum director Neil MacGregor as standing ‘for all migrants anywhere, driven by fear, guided by hope’.

Inspired by a seed’s urge to sprout roots in new environments, Kourbaj will grow Syrian wheat (donated by ICARDA) outside Kettle’s Yard with the support of Cambridge University Botanic Garden, as well as at the Royal Botanic Gardens, Kew, where it will be harvested by the artist, milled and made into bread for the exhibition. A new video work documenting wheat growing in the form of a written poem by Mahmoud Darwish will be included in a concurrent exhibition, ‘You are not you and home is not home’, at the Heong Gallery, Downing College, Cambridge.

‘Issam Kourbaj: Urgent Archive’ is curated by Guy Haywood and Amy Tobin. A new publication will explore Kourbaj’s early life, as well as the themes and artworks across both exhibitions. The publication is designed by Mark El-khatib, with contributions from Brian Dillon, Bonnie Greer OBE, Rana Haddad, Guy Haywood, Issam Kourbaj and Prerona Prasad.

Notes to Editors

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About Issam Kourbaj

Issam Kourbaj was born in Syria and trained at the Institute of Fine Arts in Damascus, the Repin Institute of Fine Arts & Architecture in Leningrad (St Petersburg) and at Wimbledon School of Art. Since 1990, he has lived and worked in Cambridge, where he has been artist-in-residence, a Bye-Fellow and a lector in Art, at Christ's College. Since 2011 his artwork has related to the Syrian Crisis and reflects on the suffering of his fellow Syrians and the destruction of his cultural heritage.

His work has been widely exhibited and collected, and most recently it was featured in several museums and galleries around the world: The Fitzwilliam Museum, the Museum of Classical Archaeology, Kettle's Yard, Cambridge; the British Museum and the V&A, London; Tropenmuseum, Amsterdam; Penn Museum, Philadelphia; Brooklyn Museum, New York; the 2019 Venice Biennale and the Henry Moore Institute, Leeds. *Dark Water, Burning World* is in the permanent collection of the Pergamonmuseum, Berlin, and the British Museum. For the BBC's 'A History of the World in 100 Objects,' Neil MacGregor (the former Director of the British Museum) chose *Dark Water, Burning World* as the 101st object.

About Kettle's Yard

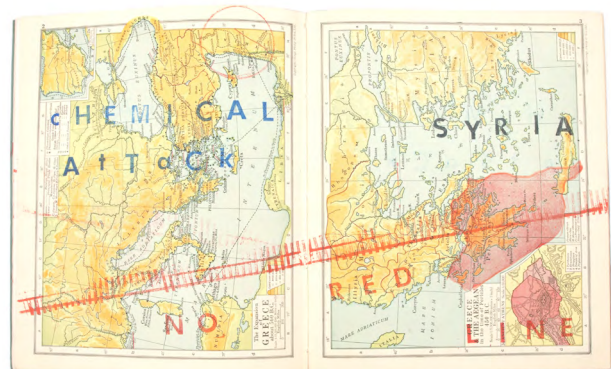
Kettle's Yard, part of the University of Cambridge, is a leading gallery and unique house with a remarkable collection of 20th-century art. Its founders Jim and Helen Ede believed in art's ability to transform lives, a vision upheld today through critically acclaimed exhibitions, pioneering community and learning programmes, and research of the highest quality. Our aim is to offer an inspiring and enriching experience for everyone who visits. Find out more and get involved at: www.kettlesyard.cam.ac.uk

About The Heong Gallery

The Heong Gallery at Downing College was inaugurated by Sir Alan Bowness in February 2016 as a new public gallery for exhibitions of modern and contemporary art. The Gallery was designed by Caruso St John Architects (winners of RIBA Stirling Prize 2016) and so named in gratitude for the generous benefaction of Alwyn Heong. www.dow.cam.ac.uk/cultural-life/heong-gallery



Issam Kourbaj, *Another Day Lost*, 2019, old diary and broken date stamp. Photo: This Is Photography. Courtesy the artist.



Issam Kourbaj, *Defaced Intermediate Historical Atlas*, 2019. Photo: This Is Photography. Courtesy the artist.



Issam Kourbaj, *Dark Water, Burning World*, 2016, 1000 small boats, made from recycled bicycle mud-guards, packed with upright burnt matches. Photo: This Is Photography. Courtesy the artist.

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