



CULTURE M A H B

The age of forgetting

HOW WE SURVIVE BY ERASING THE PAST

INTERVIEW BY JEREMY LAWRENCE

The Czech author Milan Kundera once said, “The struggle of man against power is the struggle of memory against forgetting”. It’s an apt starting point for *Empires of Memory*, a new video installation by Owais Husain that explores themes of identity, displacement and memory. Below, the Dubai-based Indian artist discusses the subjective interpretations of memory.



ESQUIRE: What inspired *Empires of Memory*?

OWAIS HUSAIN: While conducting a workshop with undergraduate students I discovered that certain historical references were beyond the realm of context for my young audience. History that may have been a tactile experience, or at least was within reach, for my generation seemed out of place. There is always a shortage of

bandwidth and only so much that can be sustained in our mental timelines; history needs to make space for more history. This strange circumstance of human limitation is what stirred me to arrive at this video installation.

ESQ: Tell us more about the use of travelling trunks

OH: Trunks are storehouses of memory and symbols of mobility, though now perhaps more in a classical sense. They fall into a form of architecture, malleable and adaptable. This can be as a collective, such as a wall (flat, folded or undulating), or in singularity with multiple veneers of reflective mirrors or impasto (where paint is laid on an area of the surface very thickly). These multiple dimensions offer fertile opportunities for meditations on concepts of displacement, memory and issues of ownership.

ESQ: Why the use of Native American totem poles?

OH: The totem pole-like structure is almost a silent pillar of embedded babel. With mouths that carry the void of voices, the silent videos clamber upon one another, layer upon layer of narrative without words. It stands tall in its intention to devour space, and yet stationary in respect of absences: absence of sound, voice and ideas of a homeland.

ESQ: What are you reminding us about how we think about history and memory?

OH: It’s perhaps ambitious to believe you can change human perception. However, upon meditation of self-truth and its synthesis, you might aspire to offer an alternative perspective. History is seductive, with innumerable combinations of perspective, and memory is a product of a certain repetition. Recognising the element of time in a medium such as film lends a fresh voice. It moves between multiple points fluidly, and thereby outlines the narrative of history and memory.

ESQ: What resonance does this have on our world today?

OH: We are engulfed in curating history as individual circumstances, which is like a line drawn in sand – fickle and



easily manipulated. Perhaps all this is just about surviving. Surviving in the age of forgetting.

ESQ: What power structures were you thinking about?

OH: This is a universal issue of displacement; the loss and desire to control beyond our limits. There is little which is not an extension or a product of global tribulations. We occupy a world of helpless apathy with a thick air of complacency. In the age of forgetting, we all wish to celebrate an alternative.

ESQ: How do the different places you have lived inspire your work?

OH: There is tremendous opportunity to seek context within my work against variable landscapes and cultures. After a certain point, the channel of travel continues to sharpen perspective. I am a poor tourist. The people and dynamics of a city or a place are far more interesting than the monuments.

ESQ: What do you want the viewer to learn?

OH: As I mentioned earlier, there is little to learn from art as much as there is far more to experience. It mostly depends on the aptitude of the viewer. The appetite and taste buds at that moment all come into play. The seven-channelled video installation, with its architectural structure and visual drama, is motionless in its physicality. But the images on the screens are breathing still-lives. Together it represents a languid opera of memory and forgetting stretched through time. **3**

Empires of Memory, March 10-April 15, Vida Downtown Dubai; owaishusain.com