



The Ashes Series

Wafaa

Bilal

Curatorial Statement

The Ashes Series marks a shift of the platform of Iraqi-American artist Wafaa Bilal. Known for provocative, performative, and innovative artwork often using technology and new media, Bilal has cultivated an aesthetic of conflict, tension, and direct confrontation with the social, political, and ethical dynamics of the modern world. As counterpoint, the photographs in *The Ashes Series* are still — almost serene. This exhibition is the American premier of *The Ashes Series* in its complete form — ten photographs of models constructed by the artist based on mass-syndicated images of the destruction of Iraq in the aftermath of Operation Iraqi Freedom. Quiet scenes of a chair persistently standing amidst the rubble, Saddam Hussein's unmade bed, or a lone hospital bed pillow left behind offer meditative and ephemeral moments addressing erasure and violence. In all the photographs, he has removed the human figures that were present in the original images, replacing them with 21 grams of human ashes scattered throughout the ten models. Referencing the mythical weight of the human soul, these 21 grams infuse a human aura within the photographs, troubling the serenity of the scenes — the afterimage of conflict. The proverbial dust, captured suspended in mid-air by the camera, will never settle.

To date, Bilal has distinguished himself as an innovative, reflective, and committed provocateur. In *Domestic Tension* (2007), he lived for 30 days in a Chicago gallery where a paintball gun was installed and connected to a computer allowing remote viewers to log in and shoot him — to shoot an Iraqi. In *The Night of Bush Capturing: Virtual Jihadi* (2008), Bilal hacked the Global Islamic Media Front's *Quest for Bush* — a modified version of the first person shooter game *Quest for Saddam* which allowed players to hunt down and kill Saddam Hussein. Bilal cast himself as the main character who, after learning of the real-life death of his brother at a US checkpoint in Iraq in 2005, enlists as a suicide bomber whose goal is to hunt down President Bush. His intention was to draw attention to the susceptibility of Iraqi civilians to recruitment by violent groups such as Al Qaeda due to the wars in Iraq and the racist generalizations and stereotypes of violent games such as *Quest for Saddam*. Reflecting on the pain he felt in losing both his father and brother in the wars in Iraq and responding to the pain experienced by both Iraqis and Americans to mounting casualties, Bilal performed *...and Counting:* (2010) — a 24-hour-long live performance where tattooed dots were placed onto a borderless map of Iraq on the artist's back, near the site of every civilian and military casualty. Grappling with his inability to reclaim the things he has left behind since his departure as a refugee from his home in Iraq in 1991, Bilal created *3rdi* (2010–2011), surgically embedding a digital camera into the back of his skull which, for an entire year, took a photograph every minute and published it to a website as an act of *sousveillance* (inverted surveillance).



Hospital, 2003–2013. Archival inkjet photograph, 40" x 50". Courtesy of the artist.

Artist's Statement

The Ashes Series depicts the suffering of war not through human displays of emotion, but rather through the absence of human life in once occupied homes. It investigates the impact of the destruction of these private, domestic spaces in war and media images of such destruction. These intimate spaces are literally ripped open and become public through external violence and the act of destruction. The images exist in the aftermath of atrocity, with the presence of the human spirit represented only by the monochromatic whiteness of the ashes. These images also serve as mirrors to my desire to return home to Iraq when this is not possible, as well as to explore the duality of my life as a former Iraqi refugee and as an Arab American between two clashing worlds. Reconstructing the destroyed spaces provides a way for me to exist within them and, in a sense, to rebuild the places in Iraq where my brother and father were killed. As an artist I constantly negotiate between the expression of aesthetic pleasure, which is necessary to seduce the eye, and conveying the aesthetic pain of destruction. *The Ashes Series* represents my attempt to make sense of destruction and to preserve the moment of serenity after the dust has settled: to give the ephemeral moment extended life in a mix of beauty and violence.



Piano, 2003–2013. Archival inkjet photograph, 40" x 50". Courtesy of the artist.

The Intermediary-Spaces of Wafaa Bilal's *The Ashes Series*

The Comfort Zone versus the Conflict Zone

Wafaa Bilal has just taken one of many Polaroid tests that will lead him to the final photograph. He is framed beside a flash unit whose light bulbs remain on during an interval in the shooting; the strong light almost erases the details of a model of a destroyed room whose concrete debris contrasts with the warmth of the wooden

table and the floor of the photographer's studio. We are witnessing a *lull* in the session, between the act of starting to create the art photograph and pausing to think how to continue working on it, a testimony to the long meditative and arduous process of *construction-photography*.¹

This record of the photographer's method of work provides a paradigmatic clue to how to construe the meaning of Bilal's *The Ashes Series*. Peeling off the cover of the Polaroid test to see the image of the model emerge on its surface elicits several associations: (1) it evokes

the difference between the three-dimensional space of the miniature model and the two-dimensional flat surface of the photographic image that will eventually hang in the gallery; (2) it draws attention to the photographer's hands, reminding us that although the traditional tenets of photography emphasize *de-corporeal vision*, here, the photographer's labor of construction is more important than the act of photography per se, especially because the model replaces reality and becomes the photograph's referent; and (3) the Polaroid, under these circumstances, presents two antithetical aesthetic strands. The first represents the studio style of photography in which the Polaroid is used like a painter's sketch to test how the model will come out in the photograph and whether the artificial flash setting is correct. The second way we conceive of Polaroid aesthetics is far more familiar. It represents the antithesis of artificial staged photography because its instant character is more suitable for snapshots and leisure style photography.²

In other words, the action of tearing open the Polaroid test exemplifies how Roland Barthes described the inseparable indexical relations between the photograph and its referent. Not only is the photograph "literally an emanation of the referent"—the body of what is photographed is linked by light rays as by an "umbilical cord" to the spectator's gaze—but the photograph also belongs "to that class of laminated objects whose two leaves cannot be separated without destroying them both: the windowpane and the landscape."³

Wafaa Bilal, Iraqi born, started to construct models from cement and other materials around 2003, inspired by news photographs, real locations, and places he considered to have personal and cultural resonances for him. The idea for *The Ashes Series* came about gradually and, at first, with no definite purpose. Witnessing, from afar, the tragedy that had befallen his native country, spurred him to start building the models in order to engage in a *reconstructive act*, as an antithetical gesture to the sights of destruction and death in the wake of war. One can construe this as a therapeutic act of mourning for the loss of close family members and for his own identification with the pain of his fellow countrymen. *The Ashes Series* mediates between two spheres of experience that Bilal terms the *conflict zone* and the *comfort zone*. The former is characterized by the way in which armed conflicts and civil strife generate news images that propagate in the media and quickly lose their meaning, leaving viewers either numb or indifferent but rarely reflective; the latter is exemplified by the way the choice of war images becomes sanitized and self-censored: such images are incapable, for example, of conveying to the broad public the responsibility of the US army for the killings of so many innocent Iraqi civilians, nor were they able to show, for example, the images of US army soldiers flown back in body bags, for fear of turning public opinion against the war.

Miniature Space versus Gallery Space

By constructing models of locations that are inspired by the *conflict zone* in the domain of his studio, in the *comfort zone*, Wafaa Bilal creates an *intermediary zone* that typifies the long and arduous process of constructing models and then photographing them.⁴ I use the term *intermediary zone* not only to typify the meditative process in which the photographer turns into a craftsman who needs to pay great attention to the small details of a miniaturized world, but especially because the model never gets to be displayed; it remains a *transitional object* of sorts, which stands at the *intersection* between the art image that has yet to be photographed and the photojournalistic, or imagined image, which formed the basis for the creative process of *The Ashes Series*.

A discussion of the role the miniature plays, in phenomenological terms, gives us a glimpse of how to begin characterizing the *intermediary zone* as a space of thought. For this purpose, I refer to Susan Stewart's characterization of the miniature, which she claims does not take part in any lived historical time.



Wafaa Bilal examines test polaroid for Chair. Photo by Luis Mayorga.



Instead, “the reduction in scale which the miniature presents skews the time and space relations of the everyday life world, and as an object consumed, the miniature finds its ‘use value’ transformed into the infinite time of reverie.”⁵ In other words, the miniature tends to emphasize spatial rather than temporal relations, and it is aligned more with the *tableau* than with the *narrative*, offering the viewer a place for fantasy. The miniature’s ability to create

an “other” time, outside the time of everyday life, which some writers associate with transcendence, leads us to wonder what is expected of the viewers when they observe the miniature, especially for a long time. Gaston Bachelard likens the experience to the use we make of a magnifying glass that enables us to isolate and especially linger over details. It makes such a process conducive to reverie: “To use a magnifying glass is to pay attention, but isn’t paying attention already having a magnifying glass? Attention by itself is an enlarging glass.”⁶

I want to liken Bachelard’s characterization of the role the *magnifying glass* plays in engaging our reveries, to the action of the camera that records and also enlarges the model. In *The Ashes Series*, Bilal presents large-scale photographs of miniatures, and by doing so he contrasts two divergent modes of viewing. The miniature invites us to look down, come close, and peek into a world whose stillness reminds us that it is a self-enclosed world which, as Stewart remarks about the character of a dollhouse, “we can only stand outside, looking in, experiencing a type of tragic distance.”⁷ On the other hand, the large photos hung in a gallery space invite us to face them in a different manner, because we have to take into account the architectural setting in which they are displayed. The relationship between the miniature’s space of *reverie* and the wish to amplify this effect by creating a space of *contemplation* for the gallery viewer was not lost on Ian Alden Russell, the curator of the exhibition. He decided to design an exhibition space that both invites and negates the spectator’s relationship with the images. The space of the exhibition features ten white columns (6 feet wide and 12 feet high). On each column, a single landscape-size image (40" x 50") was hung. In order to circumvent the viewer’s need to take in the entire exhibit at a glance, Russell decided to place the photographs on the far side of the columns, in an inverted position to where the viewers enter the gallery and would expect to see the photographs.

The idea that an entry into a gallery can, in theory, be exercised by coming in from behind the exhibition, which here is actually the front, can be disconcerting. It creates an odd effect of displacement in which the spectators, having thought for a moment that they are entering the wrong side of the gallery, suddenly realize that they are invited to walk along a colonnade of ten columns whose architectural effect is reminiscent of monolithic structures and modernistic totems that connote the

architectural spaces of memory and mourning. The colonnade also invites the spectators to stroll through the gallery in a sort of contemplative journey that is motivated by the way they have to *turn around* each time in order to see each image on a separate column; thus creating a quiet, meditative, solitary space between the viewer and the image that no one can interrupt. In sum, the impression the viewers have of entering from “behind” the gallery which creates an initial encounter with blank white columns, is significant in preparing the viewers to make a *turn* that places them in the company and in the footsteps of such biblical and mythological figures as Lot’s wife and Orpheus, who paid a heavy price for their curiosity, looking back over their shoulder at that which was forbidden for them to see. We associate the action of turning to look back with petrification, frozen photographs, and losing our grip on the unfolding events, which slip away from us and become the stuff of memory, monuments, and history.

Art Photography versus Photojournalism

Here is a ruined room in Saddam Hussein’s Palace. It was photographed by Robert Nickelsberg on April 11th, 2003 during his assignment as an embedded cameraman traveling with the 3rd Battalion of the 1st Marine Division. Can we, at first glance, really tell the difference between the photojournalistic version of the real location and Bilal’s interpretation which is based on Nickelsberg’s photo-



graph? Might we not say, once we realize the differences between them, that the real location could well resemble a *staged space* while the model almost looks real? It is understandable why Bilal found this photojournalistic image appealing. It is not typical of news images of wars, which tend to concentrate on the action, but instead it portrays the character of the aftermath

of violence. Here a (pseudo) royal-looking chair, symbolizing the dictator’s characteristics of wealth, grandiosity, and corruption, now symbolizes the fall of the dictator and the defeat of the Iraqi army, precisely because it is the only object that remains intact in a devastated room. The main difference between the “real” photograph and the photographed “model” is in the positioning of the chair. Nickelsberg focuses on the chair and provides the impression of depth behind it. By foregrounding the chair and clipping one of its legs, we become conscious of a snapshot style photograph that attests to the first-person vision of a witness who was at the place. Bilal’s version is far more static and theatrical. The emphasis on



Chair, 2003 – 2013. Archival inkjet photograph, 40" x 50". Courtesy of the artist.

the depth of the room takes place in the foreground of the constructed space, and much more of the ceiling is included, which makes the image look far more dramatic.⁸ Here, the chair looks far bigger in relation to the room (almost disproportionately so) in order to stress the symbolic power of a chair which now looks much more like a throne: one that attests not only to the fall of Saddam Hussein but also, as Bilal has defined it, as a symbol of what has gone wrong during the post-war period: the US army was not only responsible for the devastation of Iraq but also kept its occupying army there for far too long in order to prop up a corrupt regime and benefit from the natural resources of the country.

Into the space of the simulacra, in which a news photograph becomes the source for a model that becomes the foundation for an art photograph, Bilal scatters human ashes. In each of the models in the series human ashes are sprinkled in reference to the popular and mistaken belief that when a person dies he, or she, immediately loses twenty-one grams of their weight, representing the flight of the soul from their bodies. In *Chair*, the ashes have a double effect: they represent the quintessential insertion of the *real* into the *body* of the work (this is the only indexical clue to a referent outside the artificially created miniature world). The scattering of the ashes into the empty space of the interior also represents the actual dust and debris that signify the aftermath of violence that has been done to the interior.⁹

Finally, the transition between the model and the making of the art photograph on the basis of a news photograph, leads, by coincidence, to another rendition of a transitional zone which is far more concrete and political. On the 11th of April, 2003, the day that Nicklesberg set foot in Salaam Palace and encountered the devastated room and the lone chair, the US Secretary of State, Donald Rumsfeld, was reported to have made a famous statement, which was considered a gaff, to the media. In response to the concern journalists had regarding the looting of so many cultural artifacts from the museum in Baghdad, as well as the growing sense of lawlessness in the streets, Rumsfeld defended US policy by claiming there were no shortcomings in the planning for the *day after* the war ended. He explained that looting and lawlessness are natural and spontaneous expressions of people who have suffered under dictatorships and are now liberated by the forces of democracy. In other words, the quietude of Bilal's *Chair* is prompted by a photograph that captures another sort of *transitional space* that exists between the fall of one order and the propping up of another; one in which chaos, lawlessness, and fear for the loss of personal safety become very acute.

The Twilight Zone of the Constructed Image

In this section I discuss the most distilled image of *The Ashes Series*, exemplifying the series' quintessential spirit. It presents us with *Chair* as a ghostly image, barely visible in a murky sea of darkness, as it appears on the ground glass of the Mamiya



medium format camera. It illustrates a liminal space in which the image *lies in wait*: an in-between space, inside the camera, that is *no longer* the model *per se* and is also *not yet* the image of the model that will be registered by light-rays on the plane of the negative film. This evanescent image represents the hidden and unconscious link between the artistic and the factual; between the transcendent and the political image; it is an *ungraspable* image that always remains in the dark layers

of invisibility precisely because it points out the limits of what photography can convey to us. Although it is typified by an acute sense of stillness, in which the image appears to us as if it was retreating slowly to complete invisibility, it nevertheless aroused in my thoughts associations with the movement of the cinematic medium: in the framework of the prehistory of cinema, I imagined the phantasmagoric patterns of the light and shadows shimmering on a wall like the effect of a candle whose short wick causes the flame to flicker madly moments before it suddenly gasps

and dies out, leaving us in utter darkness. It also recalled the effect of another sort of flicker, that of the early silent movies, especially when the film has sprung out the projector's sprocket holes, causing the black lines to appear on the screen and remind the viewers that the cinematic movement was created by means of many pictograms.

All ten images in *The Ashes Series* act in a similar way: they are both literally and metaphorically the dark *intervals* in a roll of negative film that separate one filmic-still from another in today's maddening fast world of disseminated digital images, whose purpose is to shock and numb us, but hardly ever to suspend our attention and make us stop and contemplate what we are seeing. This *ungraspable* image, which *lies in wait* on the ground glass of the camera, as it appears to retreat from us into the twilight, or perhaps, if we are more hopeful, to be emerging from darkness, demands that each of us pause and consider the first image that springs to mind: I imagined the eerie images that we will never see of torture and incarceration; of the mental spaces of faintness, beyond pain and endurance, of the victims whose heads are covered by dark hoods, gasping for air as they feel the wet cloth tightly around their mouth and nostrils during long sessions of the infamous water-boarding techniques; of the sense of darkness and dislocation created by the pressure of the blindfold against the sockets of the eyes — a touch on the skin of a foreign object which makes the prisoner strangely aware of himself from the outside because he has lost all sense of his humanity (inside).



Conclusion: The Murmuring Image of Reverie

I have chosen to end this essay with yet another photograph of the *intermediary zone* of Bilal's studio, being fascinated by the contrast between the panoramic format photograph (which we associate with landscapes and with an entire tradition of looking from up above at the horizon) and the subject of the photo that shows the artist sitting in the interior of his workspace among the models. Bilal chooses to have himself represented as an artist who prefers to look inwards: this is conveyed by the way he sits by a desk, slightly bent and concentrating, his back turned to us and to the outside world, manifested by all the windows that enable so much daylight to enter the studio.

I chose to end with this image not only in order to show the contrast between the inside of the studio and the outside, between the spacious space of workmanship and the condensed space of the miniatures, but mainly to remind us of the importance of the intermediary zones that have been the focus of this essay: I began by describing a *lull* in the artist's work, in which Bilal *turns away* from the model of *Chair* and looks at a Polaroid test. This pause and moment of quietude between different stages in the process of photographing the model led me to characterize the entire studio space as a place that represents a transitional area between the *conflict zone* and the *comfort zone*, and to discuss other *in-between* spaces as paradigms: the construction of *miniature* models was contrasted to the *large* art gallery images, pondering on the nuances between the photographer's meditative process of work and his invitation to the viewer to contemplate his photographs in the gallery space. *Snapshot* photojournalistic photography was distinguished from studio *construction* photography. The immediate subjective character of the witness, in the style of *embedded reporting*, was shown to differ entirely from the detached style that Bilal employed in photographing the models in the studio.

In sum, one could say that the intermediary zone, which I have characterized as a real place, a state of mind, a suspended area between two different types of presentation, is an area in which reverie can occur precisely because such spaces are associated mainly with *waiting* rather than with action. Finally, I would like to relate to the importance of this transitory space, which has the quality of enabling us to pause and appreciate its quietude, by thinking of the role the *interval* plays in other areas such as conversation and writing. An interruption, explains Maurice Blanchot, is necessary in a conversation in order to understand things — an interruption introduces between two persons a space of waiting and it is a silence that encourages the discourse to move on. Jean Luc Nancy

reaffirms this by claiming that “it’s because of the interval that everything is possible and impossible. In it we begin to speak and it is what remains when we’ve finished. If it weren’t for the interval, there would be neither ‘together’ nor ‘apart.’”¹⁰ The interval, the pause, the lull, the suspended image of a chair on the ground glass of the camera are the principles on which the entire idea of *The Ashes Series* is premised: to stop for a moment from all the declarative statements, the noise of media propaganda, even the personalized witnessing of stories of pain, the legal and the traumatic discourse, in order to let the aftermath of the disaster, its forensic evidence, speak for itself in that space where speech can never be fully formed and is reduced to an inaudible murmur, whose faintness is the loudest evidence of their experience that the Iraqi people, the prisoners and torture victims can muster.

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- 1 Bilal is a relative latecomer to the scene of constructive photography. He was introduced to the subject as a student at the University of New Mexico while studying with Patrick Nagatani, whose own work involves constructing large-scale sculptures, small models, and paintings in front of the camera. Bilal’s skills and inclination for such work were also influenced by the experience he had in carpentry, which was his father’s hobby too.
- 2 The Polaroid is antithetical to constructive photography in another sense as well. In Jean Baudrillard’s terms, it exemplifies an “ecstatic” need for self-reference and affirmation. It performs in a narcissistic way, as its modernist short-circuiting character causes the subject/object, reality/representation paradigms to become intertwined and appear inseparable. See Jean Baudrillard, *America*, trans. Chris Turner (London: Verso, 1988), p. 37.
- 3 Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, trans. Richard Howard (London: Jonathan Cape, 1982), pp. 80–81, 6.
- 4 The idea that a place of work (a studio) or an art work can combine two locations in order to create a *third critical space* is especially apparent in Martha Rosler’s *Bringing the War Home: House Beautiful* series, from 2004. Her work recalls the Dada and Surrealist techniques, invoking the action of cutting and pasting, in order to bring together the “home zone” and the “war zone” as the images of horror from the war enter the domestic interiors of advertisements and other images from American popular culture. The insertion of one type of image into another creates a further type of image, which critically regards the way the American public has largely glossed over and avoided facing the real issues and the consequences of yet another American war and occupation abroad.
- 5 Susan Stewart, *On Longing: Narratives of Miniature, the Gigantic, the Souvenir, the Collection* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1993), p. 65.
- 6 Gaston Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space*, (Boston: Beacon Press, 1994), p. 158.
- 7 Stewart: *On Longing*, p. 70.
- 8 The composition of the image of the model becomes reminiscent of the way Orson Wells in *Citizen Kane* used deep focus techniques and emphasized the ceilings of the interiors of film sets to create dramatic effects that had not been done prior to it.
- 9 The presentation of interiors devoid of persons can evoke nostalgic and uncanny feelings. Walter Benjamin noted that the detective story began in the 19th century with the rising importance of the role that the interior played for the collector; every room was a potential scene of a crime to be solved, and we can add to this that in every such room Edgar Allan Poe’s *Purloined Letter* may have been lying around. In our case study we can argue that Bilal’s empty interiors hide in potential the Weapons of Mass destruction that the US government claimed Saddam Hussein was hiding—the ‘smoking gun’ that was never found.
- 10 See, Maurice Blanchot, “Interruption: As on a Riemann surface,” *The Infinite Conversation* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota press, 1993), pp. 75–79; and on the ‘interval’ see the conversation between Jean Luc Nancy and Ann Smock, “Speaking Without Being Able To,” Jean-Luc Nancy, *The Birth of Presence* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1993), p. 317.

About the Artist

Wafaa Bilal is an assistant arts professor at NYU’s Tisch School of the Arts.

He is known internationally for his provocative online performative and interactive works. Bilal’s work is informed by the experience of fleeing his homeland and existing simultaneously in two worlds — his home in the “comfort zone” of the US and his consciousness of the “conflict zone” in Iraq. Bilal graduated from the University of New Mexico and later obtained an MFA at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago. In 2008 City Lights published *Shoot an Iraqi: Art, Life and Resistance Under the Gun*, about Bilal’s life and his 2007 project *Domestic Tension* — an installation that placed him on the receiving end of a paintball gun that was accessible online to a worldwide audience over the period of a month in a Chicago gallery.

The Chicago Tribune called it “one of the sharpest works of political art to be seen in a long time” and named him 2008 Artist of the Year. Bilal lives and works in New York City.

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