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Dina A. Ramadan  
*Humble and quiet and  
soothing as mud: Ali Cherri*  
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### Ali Cherri Interviewed by Dina A. Ramadan

*Film and sculpture that articulate the relationship between life and death.*



Installation view of *Ali Cherri: Humble and Quiet and Soothing As Mud, 2022–23*. Swiss Institute. Courtesy of the artist and Imane Farès, Paris.

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Over the last decade, artist and filmmaker Ali Cherri has explored the imagined separation between life and death, between human and environment, and between material elements. In a trilogy of films— *The Disquiet* (2013), *The Digger* (2015), and *The Dam* (2022)—he traces the fissures of political unrest in the Arab world through an investigation of the perils posed by the natural environment. Set in Lebanon, the United Arab Emirates, and Sudan, respectively, the films recognize the deeper geographical fault lines that endanger life in the region. In *The Dam*, Cherri's first feature-length film, mud made into bricks along the banks of the Nile is both a source of life and a threat to it.

In Cherri's practice, mud has emerged as a material and a metaphor linking human relationships to their natural surroundings with the space and structures of preservation that emerged in late nineteenth-century Europe as part of imperial and colonial conquest. He draws on the strategies of display central to museological practices to introduce intruders into these revered institutions. Through these interventions, Cherri interrogates how historical—and especially archaeological—objects are created, gaining meaning and value once placed in a museum display case.

—Dina A. Ramadan

### **Dina Ramadan**

You've been using mud both as a material and a concept for several years now. Maybe we can start by talking about how you approach mud as transhistorical and transcultural, and as a medium that both precedes human existence and is part of our DNA in a mythological and religious sense.

### **Ali Cherri**

My interest in mud started from a wider preoccupation with the material imagination of elements. It's an aesthetic thought characterized by the relationship between the world of natural elements—the reality around us—and the world of images and perceptions. The imagination's materiality corresponds to the production of images sparked by the elements. These images always combine a dialectical perspective: on versus off, hot versus cold, living versus dead, or wet versus dry. Since ancient times, for example, the image of water has been the archetype of the human consciousness as well as a place of origin. Countless water images originate from some of the oldest myths in history. Ancient Greeks considered the ocean to be the origin of both gods and all creatures. In the Vedas, "an expanse of water with no light" is the prime source of everything. In the Quran, water is the Creator, the Sustainer,

the Giver of Life, the Righteous Teacher, the Accounter, and the Rewarder. Simultaneously, the amniotic fluid is where every human form of life originates, the point zero of our consciousness.

The elements hold a material memory but also an imaginary. What happens when these two elements, earth and water, meet? It's a fertile mix for the birth of all kinds of mythologies, stories, and creatures. The first gods we dreamt up made the world from mud, and then a deluge of mud and water unmade it so that we could cast ourselves as those who built it anew.



Still from Ali Cherri, *Of Men and Gods and Mud*, 2022, three-channel video installation, five-channel surround-sound audio. Courtesy of the artist and Imane Farès, Paris.

## DR

The shape-shifting nature of mud seems especially important to you. In your artist project *The Book of Mud* (2019, 2020), you describe it as “not earth or water but both and neither.”

## AC

Mud has the ability to hold or break. It is the material manifestation of violence, of trauma, of loss, but also of sedimentation and prosperity. Mud can be an entry point for reconstruction histories, especially histories of violence. Violence can disseminate in landscapes; it can seep into the earth, the trees, the water, and human bodies. So, what if we start writing histories of

trauma from what it has produced rather than what was destroyed? It's a look at the materiality of history—a history read through its material manifestation.

In *The Book of Mud*, which I co-wrote with Lina Mounzer, we ask, "If mud had its own memory, what might it deem worth remembering?" Whose voices are heard in the material history? Whose stories are told and whose are left to oblivion? It's a decentralization of anthropocentrism and an invitation for us, as a species, to a horizontal encounter with the world.

## **DR**

Can you speak a bit about the centrality of *The Epic of Gilgamesh* in your work?

## **AC**

At the heart of the Mesopotamian epic is the profound love and friendship between Gilgamesh and Enkidu. Enkidu is "an animal and a man" created from clay and water by the gods to humble Gilgamesh's arrogance. However, the two eventually become inseparable companions after a series of trials and adventures. For me, Gilgamesh's grief over his friend's death is one of the most beautiful lamentations ever written. Gilgamesh's last words to Enkidu are: "What is this sleep which holds you now? You are lost in the dark and cannot hear me." Can Gilgamesh ever survive the death of the one he loved? Of two friends, one always leaves before the other. When the friend disappears, the other becomes a survivor. It's not the end of the world but the end of *a* world because death leaves no room for replacement. We are used to opposing life and death, but there is no symmetry between them. They cannot add up, constitute a duality, enter the same system of opposition. This journey of grief is a universal journey.

I see all these themes at the core of my own quest. I'm still asking the same question since my first film, *Un Cercle autour du Soleil* (2005): Did I survive the seventeen years of civil wars in Lebanon? Being a survivor is being there in this implicit articulation between life and death. Death is not the beginning nor the end of anything. From artifacts to taxidermy, it is present in everything during this state of survival, and it is the objects and the bodies which have managed to survive that I am looking for.



Installation view of Ali Cherri, *Of Men and Gods and Mud*, 2022, three-channel video installation, five-channel surround-sound audio. Courtesy of the artist and Imane Farès, Paris.

## **DR**

Mud's preservation properties connect to your interest in conservation and museological practices. Your sculptures begin as fragments in auction houses which you shape into "cultural artifacts" that infiltrate the sacred space of the museum.

## **AC**

I am interested in structures of authority and the production of knowledge through institutional practices: how the production of meaning around material culture is part of museum ideologies. The public space of a museum has continually been a site of politics. The historical fragments that I incorporate in my work are always sourced through the "legal market," mainly from auction houses. What fascinates me about auction houses is that you witness, in real time, the fluctuation of desire around objects. These objects on the market have been left out of the dominant history written by museums, maybe deemed "unworthy," perhaps too damaged or of dubious origin. Through my work, I try to move artifacts from the

market value system to the value system of a museum, where they become intruders into the institutional collection.

## DR

And as intruders, they are not just subverting the museum's narrative.

## AC

I am often invited to make interventions within museums of archaeology or history. I really appreciate these opportunities, as they allow me to play with the codes and language of the institution. These interventions do not try to present a counternarrative to that of the museum. I am not interested in constructing ideologies; instead, I want to test their breaking point, their weak points and fragilities. These interventions raise several questions: Do historical objects have a place in a contemporary art institution? Who should write the condition reports—contemporary art conservators or archaeological conservators? Is the museum responsible for authenticating the provenance of these artifacts?



Ali Cherri, *The Dreamer*, 2023, ram horns iron-cast mask (Mali), wood, xps, clay, sand, pigments, pvac glue. Courtesy of the artist and Imane Farès, Paris.

**DR**

I am interested in the theatricality with which you stage these characters and especially the use of lighting. Again, the play with museological strategies is compelling here.

**AC**

Museums are fundamentally not about objects but about representation, and anywhere that operates as a space of representation can, in a way, be called a museum. The exhibition apparatus is a space of biopolitical circulation in which visitors adopt the narrative of museological authority. From the scenography, to the lighting, to the labeling, all these constitute the politics of visibility of the institution and, specifically, what is allowed to be seen and what remains invisible, what is brightly lit and what lingers in the dark corners of the galleries. Adopting a more theatrical presentation is a way of reversing the tendency that links what is visible with what is legible. I think of my sculptures—hybrid beings of different inspirations and cultures—as living characters shown on a kind of stage. Like taxidermy or dioramas, this is not a still life but a glimpse of timelessness in the present. The objects are not a symbolic form of survival in the face of time's destructiveness but a representation of the marvelous, of a reality that is outside of the duality of life and death or seeing and imagining. It's a theater of death presented in its immortality.

Ali Cherri: Humble and Quiet and Soothing As Mud *is on view at the Swiss Institute in New York City until January 7.*

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