

Profile: *Wilson Tarbox* visits the winner of the Silver Lion at last year's Venice Biennale and considers the role of the artist in a time of political crisis

Ali Cherri



Dressed in loosely fitting black clothes and a denim jacket, Paris-based Lebanese artist Ali Cherri glides through the Oriental Antiquity galleries of the Louvre like a dancer engaged in a complex choreography with the throngs of museum visitors around him. We stop before a relief panel depicting the Tree of Life taken from the Palace of King Sargon II at Dur-Sharrukin (c.713–706 BCE). Cherri has been studying this panel for several months in preparation for his forthcoming exhibition at the Giacometti Foundation, Paris, in January. The artist pulls out his phone to show me the progress being made on a 3D interpretation that will be the centrepiece of his show. ‘It is the first time that I will be working in bronze,’ he explains excitedly, swiping past images of the scale plaster model and screenshots of conversations with his chief studio assistant, Valentin Rolovic. Rolovic oversees five other assistants, some of whom I recently observed at the artist’s Paris studio constructing semi-transparent cactus leaves out of resin and massive heads out of styrofoam and fibreglass for ‘Dreamless Night’, an exhibition at Bergamo’s Galleria d’Arte Moderna e Contemporanea, which opened in early October.

As we wander the galleries, Cherri demonstrates his capacious knowledge of both Middle Eastern archaeological history and its entwinement in the contemporary geopolitics of the region. Pointing out a pair of vitrines filled with limestone busts from the ancient city of Palmyra, in present-day Syria, he explains: ‘When the Syrian Civil War broke out in 2011, these busts flooded the marketplace, but 90 percent of them were fake.’ The fickle line between ‘legal’ and ‘illegal’ antiquities is a source of great fascination for Cherri, who scours auction houses for objects of dubious quality, authenticity and provenance. ‘I am very interested in the invisible criteria that allow some objects to be collected and preserved in museums whilst others are traded in the private sector,’ the artist tells me as we observe a pair of sarcophagi (stone coffins adorned with relief sculptures) from present-day Lebanon. ‘I like to buy antiquities at auction and then integrate them into my work,’ he says. ‘It’s my way of sneaking the excluded object back into the museum.’

Cherri’s work grapples with the artist’s place in a world in crisis.

This bit of sculptural alchemy was part of the artist’s Silver Lion-winning installation, *Titans* (2022), at last year’s Venice Biennale and has been a trademark in his practice since he created *Fragments* (2016), an installation of archaeological artefacts and curiosities – including pre-Columbian and Mesopotamian figurines, a human skull and a taxidermy bird – arranged on a light table. The work is a clever and seductive musing on the way that museums have historically shaped, and at times deformed, our understanding of the past, as well as a reflection on the potential for institutional collections and display strategies to alter an object’s cultural and monetary value.

Sculptural collages also formed part of *The Gatekeepers* (2020), Cherri’s contribution to Manifesta 13, presented at the Museum of Fine Arts Marseille. Consisting of objects and artefacts from non-Western traditions paired with taxidermy animals, the work sought to bridge the collections and missions of the Museum of Fine Arts and the Museum of Natural History, which, despite both occupying wings of Marseille’s Palais Longchamp since the 19th century, had *never* collaborated in their programming. ‘It was not only a way of bringing the two museums together but also of questioning and challenging the separation between man-made art and the natural world that is imposed upon us by the project of enlightenment modernity,’ explains Cherri.

The following year, as artist-in-residence at London’s National Gallery, Cherri realized a number of what he calls ‘grafts’, displayed in vitrines. *If You Prick Us, Do We Not Bleed?* (2022) was the product of the artist’s research into damaged or vandalized works of art. From Diego Velázquez’s *Rokeby Venus* (1647–51), slashed by suffragette Mary Richardson in 1914, to Leonardo da Vinci’s *The Virgin and Child with Saint Anne and Saint John the Baptist* (c.1499), shot at point-blank range by Robert Cambridge in 1987 to bring attention to what he called the ‘political, social and economic conditions in Britain’, Cherri was struck by the political dimensions behind these acts of vandalism and the ways in which the press likened the material damage of the artworks – which a Manchester Guardian article alluded to as ‘victim[s]’ with ‘wounds’ – to the human body. When asked about more contemporary acts of vandalism – including the Just Stop Oil activists, who threw soup on Vincent

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Ali Cherri’s studio; photographs: Boris Camaca

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Titan 2 (detail), 2022, front part of a Mayan cult vase modelled after a priest wearing a mouth mask evoking the Monkey God Hun Batz or Hun Chouen, terracotta with smoothed orange engobe, clay, sand, loam, gesso, pencil, pigments, 198 × 70 × 50 cm. Unless otherwise stated, all images courtesy: the artist and Galerie Imane Farès, Paris





Cherri's practice is deeply invested in questions of human dignity and welfare.



van Gogh's *Sunflowers* (1888) in autumn 2022 – Cherri responded: 'I don't think it's useful, not for these kinds of actions. I'm not against protest, even violent protest, but I don't think art is the right target.'

Institutional critique, the inquiry into the workings and politics of art institutions born out of the conceptual turn of the 1960s, is also present in Cherri's film work. *Somniculus* (2017), for instance, shows the artist wandering through and sleeping in the Louvre, the Musée de Quai Branly Jacques Chirac (France's national ethnographic museum) and the National Museum of Natural History in Paris. At one point, the camera is trained on various masks. Suddenly, an out-of-frame flashlight snaps on, dramatically illuminating the abstracted faces. Divorced from all context and mystified as much by the display strategies as by the cinematography, *Somniculus* presents a critique of the manner in which museums display non-Western objects and artefacts.

This is reminiscent of Ghislain Cloquet, Chris Marker and Alain Resnais's essay film *Les Statues meurent aussi* (Statues Also Die, 1953), which was partially censored by the French government for drawing specific connections between European colonialism and the commodification of cultural artefacts from the African continent. 'When men die, they become part of history; when statues die, they become art,' intones Jean Négroni, the film's narrator. Cloquet's camera pans over displays of masks in a way that is evocative of Cherri's own nocturnal perambulation in *Somniculus*.

In another scene, we see Cherri supine on a bench in the Museum of Natural History: behind him is a triumphant procession of dinosaur skeletons and taxidermy animals led by a free-standing specimen of man. 'I wanted to contrast the 19th-century ideal of erect male posture with one that was evocative of the marginalized. The position [I adopt is] of the homeless and migrants that we see sleeping on benches in every major city.' It is also a composition evocative of Francisco Goya's *The Sleep of Reason Produces Monsters* (c.1799). Goya's work is an enlightenment plea for reason against the obscurantism of the medieval world that, at the turn of the 19th century, was drawing its death rattle. Cherri's riff on the

famous image in his video serves as a reminder that the following 200 years proved capable of delivering just as much horror.

The youngest of four children, Cherri was born in Beirut in 1976, a year after the start of the Lebanese Civil War, which resulted in an estimated 120,000 fatalities and close to one million people forced to leave the country over the course of its 15 years. Cherri and his family were among those who remained, although the artist admits that the family would often flee to stay with his grandparents in the southern Lebanese towns of Khirbet Selm and Tyre when the fighting in Beirut reached fever pitch. The two decades that followed the conflict birthed a rich and vibrant artistic scene in the city. Artists of Cherri's generation, who had grown up against the harrowing backdrop of bombing and foreign occupation, embarked upon projects that, as Chad Elias describes in his book *Posthumous Images: Contemporary Art and Memory Politics in Post-Civil War Lebanon* (2018), were both 'highly theoretical' and 'poignant'. Working primarily in lens-based media, Joana Hadjithomas, Khalil Joreige, Lamia Joreige, Lina Majdalanie, Rabih Mroué, Walid Raad and Akram Zaatari gained prominence during a period marked by the 'documentary turn' in contemporary art. During his studies for a BA in graphic design from the American University in Beirut at the end of the 1990s, Cherri found himself enmeshed within this Lebanese contemporary art renaissance. 'As a graphic designer, I began to work with many artists, designing their catalogues, artist books and other publications,' Cherri recalls.

Since his first foray into filmmaking in 2005 – the same year that he received his MA in performing arts from Amsterdam University of the Arts – Cherri has made ten films, for which he has received nine nominations at international film festivals and won five awards – notably the Muhr Arab Award at the Dubai International Film Festival for *The Disquiet* (2013), the New Vision Award for *The Digger* (2015) at CPH:DOX and Best Artistic Achievement Award at the Thessaloniki Film Festival for *The Dam* (2022). *The Dam*, Cherri's first feature-length production, was also nominated for the

Opposite page
The Dam, 2022, film
stills. Courtesy:
the artist and Kino
Elektron, Paris



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Golden Camera Award at the Cannes Film Festival in 2022. The film follows Maher, one of a group of Sudanese labourers who spend their days in the hot sun collecting mud from the banks of the Nile to make bricks. The gigantic titular dam is never explicitly at the centre of the narrative, but serves as a backdrop to a film that hinges around what is omnipresent but cannot be seen, such as the protests that led to the ousting of President Omar al-Bashir in 2019 (the radio reportages of which are audible in the background as the labourers toil) or the Sudanese revolution that interrupted filming for a period of several months, a delay that was prolonged another two years by the COVID-19 pandemic.

Finally, there is also Maher's dream of escape through creation and imagination, which manifests when, stealing away from his fellow workers, he escapes into the desert to sculpt a giant golem out of mud. Intriguing and disconcerting – especially since this enigmatic construction echoes an equally mysterious wound that scars Maher's back (the drive to create is a stigmata with a further resemblance between this injury and the cracked earth) – Maher arrives one day to his *plein air* studio only to discover that torrential rain has washed away his creation. In sadness and anger, he kills a dog that has been following him since the beginning of the film.

When I ask Cherri about this scene, his good-natured smile suddenly falters, revealing a rare moment of exasperation. 'In every single interview I did to promote this movie, someone asked me this question,' he confesses. 'A woman actually screamed during that scene when it was screened in Paris and the film was even refused by several North American festivals because of it.' Cherri's



Opposite page, above
Fragments (II), 2016, set of 40 archaeological artefacts, taxidermy bird, light table, dimensions variable

Opposite page, below
Petrified, 2016, video still

Above
Somniculus, 2017, video still

frustration at the reactions of audience and institution alike to a scene that is merely alluded to, never shown, seems rooted in the unspoken observation that violence and cruelty towards animals generate more outrage and censorship than violence and cruelty towards humans. Despite an abiding interest in seemingly parochial concerns such as artistic creation, museums and the antiquities market, close examination of Cherri's practice reveals it to be deeply invested in questions of human dignity and welfare.

Inspired by the stories of the real seasonal workers at the brick factory featured in *The Dam*, Cherri emphasises the value of witnessing historical events from the margins, showcasing how distant such events can feel when one is not directly connected to central power structures. The film also explores how dictatorships can manipulate citizens' perceptions and imaginations, making it difficult for them to envision an alternative world. In so doing, the film highlights the need to imagine a different reality before working towards its construction. The protagonist, Maher, takes control of his destiny by pursuing a project that could potentially transform his socio-economic and political reality.

It is the juxtapositions between humanity's struggle to coexist and the artist's struggle to create, between artefacts and animals, between Eastern sculptural antiquities and Western paintings, that highlight the differences of value and signification each entity holds or transmits in our cultural collective conscious. Questioning the Western gaze, Cherri's sculptural installations and films symbolize his enduring attachment to his Levantine roots and the tension between cultural and political sensibilities that are at the heart of debates regarding Eurocentrism in the arts. The ensemble of Cherri's work grapples with the issues of the artist's place in a world in crisis and the value of the work created in those conditions. Appreciating the full depth of his interrogation requires viewers to do a little bit of digging to mine a body of work that is as dense and rich as the sediment from which Cherri extracts his antique treasures and artistic inspiration ●

Wilson Tarbox is an art historian and critic.