

The Art is Dark, but the Artist Sees Layers of Light

Ali Cherri, whose work deals with death and other serious undertones, will have four shows at various locations during Art Basel Paris.

By Liz Robbins

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Ali Cherri, a Beirut-born visual artist living in Paris, is obsessed with death as much as mud. To Cherri, mud's fecund mix of water and earth represents the struggle between opposing forces: decay and rebirth, violence and resistance, myth and reality. From his clay and bronze sculptures to his award-winning films, Cherri's art interrogates power structures.

For those attending Art Basel Paris, which is open to the public Oct. 18-20, there are several opportunities to experience Cherri's works. The Almine Rech gallery booth will feature two of his clay and sand figures wearing iron African animal masks. As part of Art Basel's free public exhibitions, two of Cherri's installations will be encased at the National Eugène Delacroix Museum. Nearby, Galerie Imane Farès is presenting a solo show, "A Monument to Subtle Rot." And as part of Paris's Autumn Festival, actors with a musician will read from his 2020 work, "The Book of Mud."

Contrary to his art's darkness, Cherri, 48, is warm and funny, as this reflective interview revealed. The conversation has been edited and condensed.

You have four shows at once during Art Basel where in total you use more than 10 different materials. How do these works connect and explore common themes?

My practice has two main branches. It's moving image and sculpture objects, with installation. For me, the starting point is always materiality. It's never an innocent choice when I'm working with one material or another. And always the same question is, how do these materials reveal hidden histories and how are they the entry point in reconstructing — especially histories of violence and of trauma?



“All That Is Solid Melts Into Air” by Ali Cherri. Tazio, via Imane Fares

What meaning does mud have for you?

Any archaeologist would tell you that it's really a time capsule that contains so much information. It's the coming together of two elements of earth and water. So each element comes with its own story. Mud has been what we made the pottery from. We made our houses from mud, and we made our gods from mud, and we made creatures from mud, and we are made from mud.

When you were a child in Lebanon, did you make mud pies?

I think we all did. I mean, that was the only thing available when you're playing at school and come home covered in mud. This sensitivity to the material comes from having full hands into this material and playing in muddy waters.

"The Dreamer," which will be displayed at Art Basel, looks caught in a reverie behind the mask. Is it melting or rooted in sand?

"The Dreamer" has footprints in place of feet, with the earth as his foundation and core. His arms extend to the ground, and his fists seem to draw strength from the very soil that shaped him. In his dream-state, he becomes one with the earth, deeply rooted in it. This is how I envisioned the young boy, hidden behind his playful animal mask. Through this sculpture, I am creating ambiguity between the creators and their creations.



"A Monument to Subtle Rot" by Ali Cherri includes a video showing problematic statues being removed.
Tadzio

At the gallery, “A Monument to Subtle Rot” includes sculptures of clay fused with bronze and a video showing problematic statues being removed. Where’s the subtlety?

If you consider rot as the dismantling of oppressive structures, that takes time, and it has to start in a subtle way so as not to bring it to the attention of the oppressor. Because rot starts from the ground on up, it’s something that eats the bronze. It’s like you start to infect these long-lasting figures of authority that are made of bronze, and you infiltrate into them in order one day to have them all toppled down.

“All That Is Solid Melts Into Air” is the one that caught my eye because it is almost playful. In this tripod, which part supports the other?

It’s always this question of, who has the power? Do we give the power to the ruling class, ruling authority, or does it take its power from us? It just needs a little tip, and it would fall down. So we’re really standing on a very small, thin thread. It has a playful aspect, but it’s also kind of surrealist imagery. You could see the hand coming out of a Dalí painting. But, of course, the Surrealists were a response to the atrocities of war.

In the watercolors, you depict rotting apples in a still life after Giacometti and Cézanne, but it’s very much a movement in rot. And how long have you been working in watercolors?

I started doing watercolors during the pandemic, during lockdown. Like some people started making bread and pasta, I started in watercolors.

I go back to my interest in archaeology. The modern project of archaeology is that ruins have to be preserved in order to remain ruins. But ruins are a process of decay. Whether it’s archaeological sites or taxidermy or my watercolors, they are a stop on a moment of death in the making. It’s like it’s immortalizing death. We have this obsession of making them look alive. And what we actually create instead of life is death in front of us. It’s our way of accepting our finitude, our mortality.

Wow, that’s heavy!

[He laughs]. It became very dark all of a sudden. But that’s me, that’s totally me — very dark but yet laughing about it. I mean, that’s life. I have a tattoo on my hand that says, “*Voué à la mort*” — I’m not sure how you say it in English, “vowed to death?” Or “destined to death.” It looks like when you write a reminder on your hands not to forget something.

“The Adoration of the Golden Calf After Poussin” is on top of a plinth. via National Gallery

I’ll change the subject, but only slightly, to taxidermy. Where in the world do you find a stuffed conjoined twin lamb like the one in your piece at the Delacroix Museum?

Ask the Germans! It’s from the ’30s. I got it from an auction house. I became really, like, addicted to auction sales. I’m always checking what’s happening, what, whenever, there’s auction sale.

In “The Adoration of the Golden Calf After Poussin,” you put this golden calf on top of a plinth that is like a frieze. Did you get the lamb first as part of your residency?

No, I was looking for taxidermy. I was looking at paintings that were vandalized inside the National Gallery in London, and what violence does to these paintings. How the violence would change something, the core, the aura of these works. So my interpretation was to move from the two-dimensional surface of the canvas into these cabinets that became like cabinets of curiosity.

And this eight-legged lamb is an object of curiosity, for sure, but, also, it’s a commentary of how after this violence, what resurfaces is the monstrous. I go back to the etymological meaning of the Arabic word for monster. The monstrous is what does not resemble itself anymore.

But still, there’s a message of, well, not destruction, it’s actually possibility and joy, even if it’s a forbidden joy.

Thank you for this comment. Because for me, it wasn't about recreating images of violence. I think there's enough violence in the world. As artists, we do not need to add images of violence. What I try to do is to understand how can we live with this after-violence.

It comes from the personal, being born around the beginning of the civil war in Lebanon. And postwar thinking, OK, 17 years of war, what did it do to my body, to who I am, to my image? Am I alive? Did I survive or not? As you see, I'm alive, I'm smiling. I'm a very cheerful, happy person in life. My idea is like, how do we make out of these wounds something that we accept, we live with.

Your Instagram bio is succinct: “art and other vanities.” But your work is anything but that.

It's a joke. As artists we take ourselves very seriously. Sometimes just you have to laugh about this and that — and all these things.

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