

Visual Arts**Artist Ali Cherri's histories of violence**

The Lebanese artist's work, subject of a major new UK show, tells stories of conflict and its aftermath

Maya Jaggi

Published 9 HOURS AGO

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The mud and bronze from which the Lebanese artist Ali Cherri sculpts his latest creations are freighted with history, memory and trauma, but alive with the possibilities of imaginative rebirth. "Sphinx" (2024), a winged creature on its haunches with leonine musculature and a human face, borrows from fascist iconography while evoking ancient Assyria and Egypt. Yet this imperious hybrid made of mud totters on metallic-green claws.

For Cherri, bronze embodies "top-down history; we're used to seeing male heroes in bronze", whereas mud is a "time capsule" of history from below. The bronze claws might seem "solid, durable", he says, "but mud with its humidity can infiltrate bronze and start rotting it. It's a poetic way to show how power could be toppled."

"Sphinx" and other new sculptural works are on show from April 12 in *How I Am Monument*, the Paris-based artist's first major institutional show in the UK, at the Baltic Centre for Contemporary Art in Gateshead. "Of Men and Gods and Mud", a video installation for which he won the Silver Lion for best emerging artist at the Venice Biennale in 2022, is among recent works in the show. It follows mud-brick makers (played by themselves) near northern Sudan's Merowe dam, as women narrate creation myths in which clay births life. While it might resemble documentary, Cherri's work crosses freely into flights of the imagination.



Installation view of Ali Cherri's 'Of Men and Gods and Mud' (2022) © Courtesy the artist and Imane Farès, Paris

“I’m first a moving image person,” he says. “That’s how I build my thoughts.” Yet he constructs sculptural installations “like a movie set — directing the gaze, and what the audience sees first, with light, shadow, drama”. His oeuvre ranges from the feature film *The Dam* (2022), set during the 2019 Sudanese uprising, and performances such as “My Pain is Real” (2010) — a video installation made after the 2006 Lebanon war in which witnessing others’ pain bruises his own face — to delicate watercolours of birds or prickly pear cacti, found like barbed wire along militarised borders.

Though he has lived in Paris for more than 10 years, and moved there to be with a partner, Cherri returns every two months to Beirut, “my centre of gravity, my home”. From this point zero, he roams to explore “geographies of violence” — the invisible scars and indelible traces left by political violence on artefacts, bodies and landscapes. “The wound comes back in my work,” he says. “How you treat these marks of violent history.”

The Baltic show expands an exhibition at Secession in Vienna, whose opening last December the artist missed, owing to the shocking deaths of his parents — civilian casualties of an Israeli drone strike in Beirut on November 26, hours before a ceasefire in the Israel-Hizbollah war. (Although, Cherri confirms, a Lebanese newspaper erroneously reported that the artist’s parents were related to the target — an MP of the same surname — the paper corrected this error.)

When we meet in his third-floor studio in Pantin, a north-eastern suburb of Paris popular with artists, Cherri declines to speak about the shattering events. But he tells me his mother was a kindergarten teacher and his father a textile merchant, recalling that his grandfather's textile shop had closed down during the Lebanese civil war of 1975-90.



Still from Cherri's 'The Watchman (2023) © Courtesy the artist and Imane Farès, Paris

Born one year into that war, and growing up in Mazraa, in west Beirut of the riven city Cherri, now 48, says wartime experience shaped an abiding concern: "Is it possible to produce historical narrative after trauma?" A fascination with archaeology grew from visiting Lebanon's National Museum on Beirut's Green Line, itself a "site of conflict, empty, with a few cement cases", in which statues and sarcophagi had been entombed to shield them from snipers and shelling. He realised that a "key element in writing history is how violence affects the construction of stories".

Studying graphic design at the American University of Beirut, and performing arts in Amsterdam, his induction into the art world came through [postwar Beirut's artistic renaissance](#), among artists such as Akram Zaatari, Walid Raad, Lina Majdalanie and Rabih Mroué: "I'd play in films, design books, do stage and set design." That older generation's focus on archives questioned "who has the authority, who has the power of writing history". In Lebanon, "the war had no winners or losers; it finished with a general amnesty, so the narrative was suspended: the war's over; let's rebuild from a blank page." This blanking of the past was a "big problem". The failure to wrestle with, or agree on, history left artists free, but without institutions.

Cherri has since trained a quizzical eye on museums as instruments by which the powerful impose their view of history. In the short "Somniculus" (2017), he was filmed in light sleep and wandering with a torch in the Musée du Quai Branly and other ethnographic collections in Paris. His 2022 exhibition after a residency at the National Gallery in London, *If you prick us, do we not bleed?*, probed the institutional forgetting of acts of political vandalism against famous paintings, such as the suffragette slashing of Velázquez's "Rokeby Venus".

Les Veilleurs ("The Gatekeepers"), a solo show to open on June 6 at the Museum of Contemporary Art in Marseille, explodes the divide between natural history and art. Totem-pole "assemblages", recalling objects from a pre-Enlightenment wunderkammer, incorporate stuffed animals and archaeological relics acquired at auction houses in Paris into his own creations. His aim with such "chimera sculptures" is to embrace "objects left out of the dominant history of museums because they're dubious or too broken. I'm very impulsive — I choose objects for aesthetic reasons."

Infiltrating them into museums, "I consider myself a smuggler, bringing them back as intruders." Making no distinction between fake and authentic, he "grafts species" together like a surgeon or botanist, hoping to "merge and create new life". Though this grafting might recall Japanese kintsugi, Cherri demurs: "I don't practise repair. I think there's no turning back on this violence." Nor does he urge restitution for colonial wrongs: "These stories have to be taken into account but can't be reversed."



Cherri's 'How I Am Monument' (2024) . . . © Sophie Pözl; courtesy the artist and Imane Farès, Paris



... and a work in Cherri's Paris studio © Felipe Romero Beltrán

His latest work at Baltic foregrounds monuments, “another form of storytelling”. The exhibition title is a line by the francophone Palestinian novelist Karim Kattan, whose text from the perspective of a statue alternates with images of tumbling icons, in the slide projection “A Monument to Subtle Rot” (2024). “Toppled Monuments 1-6” (2004) alludes to deposed leaders, from Baghdad to Bristol, through empty plinths, reflecting, Cherri says, on “what stays and what vanishes”.

Though he has not set a film in Lebanon since 2013, he feels himself circling back. His short “The Watchman” (2023), also at Baltic, shows a young soldier guarding the unrecognised Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus as he hallucinates a spectral enemy. “Cyprus was always an echo chamber of what happens in Lebanon,” Cherri says. “Nicosia is still a divided city. The Port of Beirut explosion [in 2020] was heard in Cyprus.” It can, he reflects, be “easier to look at the pain of others”, though his question is always, “What can representation do to a place of constant disaster?”

His own answer might lie in the resilient belief that his “constellations” of objects “create a community of broken bodies, a solidarity in stories of violence”. For him, “I make no distinction between our bodies and others. These fragmented, violated objects can teach us about ourselves.”

‘How I Am Monument’, April 12-October 12, baltic.art; *‘Les Veilleurs’*, June 6-January 4 2026, musees.marseille.fr

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