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Artist Project Will Replenish Books From Library Destroyed in the Iraq War

Amah-Rose Abrams, Wednesday, January 27, 2016

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Wafaa Bilal

Photo: courtesy Babcock Galleries

Artist and Tisch professor Wafaa Bilal is attempting to refill a Baghdad library as part of an exhibition taking place in at the [Art Gallery of Windsor](#), in Ontario.

“Wafaa Bilal: 168:01” seeks to address what Bilal refers to as the “cyclical history of violence against cultural institutions, and libraries in particular, during times of war and conflict.”

Each time one of these institutions is destroyed in war the [books housed within it are also destroyed](#). When the College of Fine Arts in Baghdad was burnt down during the Iraq war, 70,000 books were lost and Bilal's exhibition is seeking to redress that.

Bilal will install a 72-ft bookshelf at the Art Gallery of Windsor with white books filled with blank pages. People can participate in the work by donating \$25 through [Kickstarter](#), which will be used to buy a book lost in the fire. The donor will receive one of the blank volumes in return, and a new copy will then replace the blank volume on the shelves of the gallery. All books will be sent to Baghdad at the end of the project.



Wafaa Bilal *The Ashes Series, Chandlier*

Photo: courtesy Babcock Galleries

The installation is accompanied by Iraqi-born Bilal's project *The Ashes Series* for which he reconstructed bomb sites in Iraq in the form of a diorama and photographed them.

"Reconstructing the destroyed spaces is a way to exist in them, to share them with an audience, and to provide a layer of distance, as the original photographs are too violent and run the risk of alienating the viewer," writes Bilal in his [artists' statement](#). "It represents an attempt to make sense of the 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."

The initial target for the Kickstarter was \$9,000, but the public response to the project has been so strong that they have well exceeded their target and the total donations sits at about \$45,500 at the time of writing.



Wafaa Bilal *The Ashes Series, Saddam's Bedroom*

Photo: courtesy Babcock Galleries

The title of the exhibition in Ontario is taken from the tale of the destruction of the library Bayt al-Hikma, or the House of Wisdom, in Baghdad in 1258.

“Legend has it that they dumped its entire contents into the Tigris River to create a bridge to cross over, and that the pages bled for seven days—168 hours,” Bilal said. “The extra 1 is that second when I imagine the books turned white and drained of knowledge.”

“[Wafaa Bilal: 168:01](#)” is on view at the Art Gallery of Windsor, Ontario from January 29 – April 10, 2016.

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