

Memorial Ruin:

On Lida Abdul's *Once Upon Awakening*

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Lida Abdul, *Once Upon Awakening* [video still], 2006. Courtesy of Anna Schwartz Gallery.

A rope bisects the opening shot of **Lida Abdul**'s film *Once Upon Awakening*. The rope, itself bisected by a hand grasping its fraying coils, is taut against an unseen weight. The disorienting interlacing of the image emerges during this slow-motion sequence, a quality more like that of consumer home video cameras than the film's original form in 16mm. Slow-motion scenes feel clipped, palpating as if broken up into constituent frames. A break in the persistence of vision.

As the film progresses, fourteen men dressed in identical black garments are revealed, their faces twisted with the exertion of force onto their ropes that extend outside the frame. A low-lying desert landscape is seen behind the group, at once anonymous but echoing a neighborhood that appears empty or abandoned. The film crossfades to reveal the men pulling at a massive, circular architectural structure in ruins, whose crumbling walls appear. Bombed out.

The “when” of *Once Upon Awakening* asks us to consider how these ruins became a ruin: whether

through age and decay, or the destructive forces of war, and which one. The film, created in 2006, engages with an Afghanistan pulled into conflict for much of the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries: a military coup, the Soviet War, two multi-year civil wars (in which the US was a key player), and then US-led military operations and occupation. In the West, particularly within the United States, Afghanistan was represented both as a vilified *and* destroyed nation. Hence, the performative actions of the men also become ambiguous: again, is this structure being pulled down, and why? Or is it instead being upheld or rebuilt? Is the structure being demolished, or supported? The choreography alludes to any of these efforts: attempts to bolster, to destroy, to rebuild, after awakening from the fallout of war.

Abdul, a filmmaker and performance artist, fled Afghanistan as a child in 1979. She returned and began making work there almost twenty years later in 2001, after the fall of the Taliban. **Abdul's** film work from the early aughts, and in particular *Once Upon Awakening*, evokes “how architecture

bears witness to the scars that are inflicted on the urban space.” Questions of a ruin’s possibility and contending with its timeline are interwoven throughout her films made in Afghanistan. Others made in the early-2000s include *Dome*, *White House*, and *Clapping with Stones*. Performative actions, either performed by Abdul herself or groups of Afghan people, seem to gesture towards the externalization of the interiority felt in the return to a home in conflict. It is not entirely clear whether the piles of rubble were once houses, a commercial district, or government buildings. What is palpable is the sense that these spaces were once inhabited, now rendered uninhabitable. Boundaries between the public and private are demolished after disaster.

In *The Location of Culture*, Homi Bhabha writes:
The recesses of the domestic space become sites for history’s most intricate invasions. In that displacement, the borders between home and world become confused; and, uncannily, the private and the public become part of each other, forcing upon us a vision that is as divided as it is disorienting.

Abdul's *Once Upon Awakening* evinces the unhomely for those who return to a home country after flight or exile. In wartime, the violence and terror of geopolitical forces burst open the doorways of homes, disrupting any safety in the domestic, these “intricate invasions.” Ruins are the detritus of when “the home turns into another world” and “the unhomely moment relates the traumatic ambivalences of a personal, psychic history to the wider disjunctions of political existence.”

Watching the film, I was reminded of a 2006 visit to Nicaragua to see my father's family. It was the first time I visited the country and my father, who grew up there until he escaped government-required military service in 1983. He guided me through places from his younger life, a walking tour of his memory. Nicaragua, not unlike Afghanistan, spent much of its post-independence twentieth century in war, much of it including US-backed involvement connected to resource control in Latin America and later Cold War politics. In 1972, in the midst of a dictatorship and emerging resistance, an earthquake devastated the country.

My father and I visited the site of the Old Cathedral of Managua, a derelict site damaged and condemned after the earthquake. The cathedral is within Managua's old city center, which was leveled by the earthquake and subsequent city-wide fire. My father lived just outside Managua during the quake, just thirteen at the time, and has deeply-felt though often unspoken memories of the disaster. Though the facade of the Cathedral seems mostly intact, the interior is permanently closed for fear of imperceptible seismic damage. The site was empty, save for my father and I, who wandered as if through the world after its end. In that, it feels like memory architecturalized—an exoskeleton of what existed before that cannot be entered further. Concrete debris still lay around the area surrounding the cathedral when we visited. The memorial was not yet cleaned up and commodified as a tourist site. The cathedral transited from a failure of local government to prioritize the revitalization of the city, to a memorial structure. The ruins remain a standing reminder of loss and a promise of revitalization still to come. However, their existence, whether by

negligence or intention, makes possible for a more informal reflection on the memories embedded in their forms.

Revisiting a home country is like awakening; time away as eyes closed, now reopened onto unfamiliar remnants of memory. Ruins can remain or can be rebuilt, both a memorializing act. Or perhaps a ruin, relic of past destruction, should be torn down and cleaned away to build anew, memorial made secondary to a revitalized future. The 1972 earthquake, which occurred just past 1 a.m. in Nicaragua, was a moment of violent awakening. Awakening into disaster, into darkness, with sunrise awakening onto a city destroyed. Like the end of war, itself a long night, is an awakening onto a landscape transformed. From ruins emerged a greater seismic shift. Civil conflict, well underway for decades, brought forth a new government that did not manifest the revitalization of the nation. And so, the night's destruction remained.

Ruins-as-memorial challenge the notion of the monument, in which trauma and history are repackaged and polished into a palatable structure. Of monuments, Abdul has said: “I feel that they give easy answers to complex questions. They also cover things up. The ruins as ruins in *White House* preserve the history. You can’t just say, ‘Oh, let’s build a monument for that.’ It is far more complex.” The building in *Once Upon Awakening*, at once delicate yet immobile, refuses to be forced down. Although a remnant, it remains. The building is indeed in decline: an ephemeral structure of rocks and concrete that will continue to degrade with weather and future intervention in the landscape. But within the film, the structure becomes preserved: always in this particular moment, with the rocks in this particular formation, unfazed by the exertion of force to alter its form. *Once Upon Awakening* transforms the structure to monumental ruin: one that does not play into the trappings of monument as polish, as pristine, as re-branded history. This ruin as monument itself bore witness to that which ruined it, rather than a monument that reenacts or

repackages, which **Abdul** has said “are cover-ups for ruins for me, they mask the trauma, death and suffering that people have endured during conflict and the struggle for independence.”

Once Upon Awakening alludes to the failure of the traditional monument: monuments that mark known sites like city centers or otherwise “important” buildings center a collective though sanctioned mourning. The vernacular ruins central in **Abdul**’s films resonate differently. The film’s site does not bear the markers of a widely- or immediately-recognizable landmark. The significance is the understanding that it was formerly occupied, and then the subsequent understanding of how this destruction impacted those who lived within. The building in *Once Upon Awakening* begins to stand with and for ruins of houses across geopolitical space, creating bridges between sites of imperial violence.

Abdul’s films are more than (re)enactments: they are exercises in contending with the fragments of memory through the physical ruins

in homeland. Salman Rushdie writes of the “imaginary homeland” that exists in diaspora. The laborious pull on a massive architectural ruin is this physicalization of interiority, as Rushdie writes of literature: writers “will not be capable of reclaiming precisely the thing that was lost: that we will, in short, create fictions, not actual cities or villages, but invisible ones, imaginary homelands...” and as Abdul said, “geographies of the mind.” In Abdul’s work and for my father, homeland becomes a construction of what was and what is imagined to be from afar.

I only now realize that the trip to Nicaragua was one of vernacular ruins into imaginary homeland, the inevitable and nostalgic futility of visiting one’s home country after decades away. We visited my father’s old secondary school in Jinotepe. He picked up a rock and threw it across the field, perhaps residue of childhood memory. My father also stood in el río, a river outside his family home that he remembers swimming in, by then merely a stream. We visited El Crucero, a neighborhood directly between El Salto (my father’s childhood

neighborhood) and Managua, where his older sister once lived with her late husband. Their home was also destroyed in 1972 and by 2006, still remained a ruin, plants growing around grey concrete crumbled around the relics of blue and white tiled walls. Family disagreement over inheritance, an impasse, prevented any rebuilding. My father, standing in the crumbled walls of the house, contemplated purchasing the land to build anew.

Once Upon Awakening concludes in the last third with a collaborative burial. The performative actions within the film have a repetitive nature that creates poetic rituals. Of performance in her work, Abdul has said: “The pieces are almost like rituals as well, they are real performances, and the performers and I are going through the process at the same time. That in itself is a kind of meditation on the idea of the monument of the war.” The men conclude the film by unwrapping a large concrete rock, fragment of a relic, and tenderly place it into a shallow hole in the earth, whose circular shape mimics a crater or perhaps impact of an explosion,

or a terraformed embrace. The action is gentle and precise, as if the stone is imbued with the ritual of their effort, and its burial a remembrance of the site.

Deep-Time Construction is on view at CCA Wattis Institute, San Francisco, from May 31–July 28, 2018. This exhibition is curated by *contemporary*.

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