

Raafat Ishak: recipes for aversion and strategy. Work in progress #6

Opening remarks by Professor Philip Goad, director of the Melbourne School of Design, the University of Melbourne

The Ian Potter Museum of Art, the University of Melbourne
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First, I would like to thank Chris McAuliffe for his invitation to speak here this evening. I'd like also to thank Bala Starr for her advice in guiding me through the works and the catalogue, and most particularly I'd like to thank Raafat Ishak for the mature subtlety of his installation—this is a rare and significant event for him and for the Potter Museum of Art. Congratulations.

Capturing a memory but allowing it to fade is part of everyday life. And having something that has faded indicates that it is material. You can touch it, feel its texture. It has been allowed to be chipped, scratched, used, rather like a passport photograph carried with us in our wallets that develops its own particular feathered edges. No digital image fades, our computers don't have that capacity. A city is made and fades. A person is made and also, regrettably, fades. Ideas are conceived and also fade. But despite this memories and ideas remain, often deeply subtle, deeply underlining our identity, and often deep and multiple signifiers of our attachment to and experience of a place.

The work of Raafat Ishak that you see around you this evening has, for me, this central preoccupation. The measurement and documentation of memory is much like the way in which architects, planners, sociologists, novelists and artists try to measure and document—in vain, it has to be said—the experience and data of the city. No one measurement tool can replace actual experience *nor* capture empirical data and human sensation simultaneously. The empty stadium is not the same as the maelstrom of a roaring crowd at a football match where the physical presence of the stadium has been subsumed by visual and aural cacophony. In a city no-one marks your arrival, no-one marks your leaving. In Raafat's work, there is the occasional ship, an aeroplane—signals of transience and new arrivals that the city poorly records.

At the same time, artists in the early 20th century tried to capture movement with a representational system that has become a memory of such powerful cultural imprint that when we think we see the images of a *Nude descending a staircase*, we're also looking at a memory of experiment in capturing the ephemeral or the utopian. What confounds us more in this exhibition is that the works are titled with irony—*Mount Bias*, *Mount Captivity* and *Mount Rupture* suggest the titling frankness and frequent disillusion with which early explorers mapped parts of Australia and marked their memories.

Memories are also rarely complete, invariably fragmentary. They are also documents, maps that can be pieced together but never completely. They are serial as well, and when an image is removed from the album, we mourn its loss—much like we do when a building is demolished in the city, it becomes a missing document in the library that is the city. Much of the work that we see around us occurs in serial form, there are multiples that read like modern stone tablets, with writing across them, often Arabic, indicating that most portable bearer of memory, language. There are also gaps where works seem to have been taken away or are simply missing, like the loss of a loved one or more positively a work yet to come or even be remade—again much like the city.

One of the most intriguing aspects of Raafat Ishak's work that we see here is the extent and range of the work. If there is a special excitement for me here it is the modesty with which aesthetic and collective revolution is recalled—unassuming but never ordinary. Ishak's painting technique looks mechanical but it is not. It's crafted. To see pale images of Russian Constructivist

El Lissitzky's *Wolkenbugel* or skyhooks proposed for Moscow in 1924 reappear in both rooms and then the space of the gallery reconfigured by site-specific installation where works fold onto the floor, or as outside bend round the corner of a building is also to read these as memories of that which might still be in store for the city. Malevich's black square is transformed from a brave anti-Russian Orthodox icon and dagger at the heart of pictorial representation to a triumphal marker of memory and loss of memory, perhaps even the Kaaba upturned or more familiarly, beside us, a 'miserable acquaintance'. We're lucky here to see Ishak transform the Potter into a fragment of El Lissitzky's Proun Room, 1922, but one concerned not just with the position of abstraction and the body in space but also with a deep concern for the everyday, in a way that is at once also profoundly autobiographical but to the viewer private and only suggested. The oval cameos of friends and flags on the east walls in both rooms suggest distance travelled and people left behind. If many words are painted on them back to front, it's because the mirror is ourselves. That's what memory does to us.

My last remark concerns the site-specificity of the work entitled *Recipes for aversion and strategy*, the title of this entire exhibition. High on the wall next door, a pale hollow balloon floats upward. It's behind a black column which immediately creates spatial depth. You're probably standing next to a pedestal supporting a black cube that has been sliced away dynamically. Get close to the wall and look up. There's a painted ladder and a real window and potential escape: the perfect recipe for aversion and strategy.

This is a great exhibition that is quietly magisterial. I commend it to you all.

Thank you.

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