Wafaa Bilal
Ashes Series

Philosophy

The Ashes Series investigates the impact of the destruction of private, domestic spaces in war and the images of such destruction. These intimate spaces are literally ripped open and become public through external violence and the act of destruction. I want to make these spaces intimate again, to re-domesticate them and to bring the viewer closer to them, and thus closer to the destroyed culture. The destruction of the living space by imperial power serves to strip indigenous people of dignity and to impose the occupier culture on the occupied. By turning the private into an image for the public to see, I hope these images will enter human consciousness and function as a symbolic reminder of the engine of oppression in human and cultural conflict.

The origins of the images may appear to be ambiguous at first, but upon looking more closely, it becomes clear that the images reference media photographs of the conflict in Iraq to anyone familiar with such photographs. The images thus have a dual meaning: those unfamiliar with the referenced photographs will look upon the images mainly through an aesthetic or emotional lens, and for those who recognize the sources, the images will be politically charged. This duality serves to spark a dialogue between aesthetics and politics without overwhelming the viewer.

Western culture rejects images of violence and war in order not to be implicated in the resultant suffering, as the act of seeing such images and knowing of their existence creates passive participation and acceptance of such conditions. Consequently horror is aestheticized or censored and incorporated into the "comfort zone" of acceptable media images. Once images of violence are made acceptable or unreal, dehumanization of the suffering may occur. Dehumanization of conflict is useful to those who benefit from the conflict to achieve their own objectives, such as government and corporate interests, as it allows for inaction by the populace and for the destruction to continue. There is a dialectic between the government and corporate interests who commit acts of violence and the larger society, which may choose not to act until it sees whether the outcome will benefit it or not, whether it will enhance its comfort or not. However, if the culture fully faces and accepts images of real violence, humanization of the conflict will occur, leading to empathy and the ability to relate to the conflict and those suffering, and eventually to action to stop the destruction.

Images of war in the media are a collaboration between two cultures, on the one side the occupied or destroyed, and on the other the occupier or destroyer. My reconstructions of these images represent both the desire for peace and the fear of the destruction of culture and society, with the replacement of that society with a more radical and violent one. The recreation and beautification of these images of horrific moments is an attempt to free them from restriction in order for them to become a part of our visual history.

To reconstruct the media images, I build miniature models based on photographs of destruction in Iraq. The models function as transitional spaces, echoing the original media images while also becoming ephemeral. However, unlike the media photographs

and reality, my images are absent of human figures. Unoccupied of any atrocities, they remain pure, with the presence of the human spirit represented only by 21 grams of human ashes mixed with other ashes and spread over the model landscape, literally bringing a human aura to the images. The resultant monochromatic whiteness of the space indicates the removal of human presence and violence from the aftermath of horrific events while rendering every object equal in importance. White also remains a symbol of peace, hope, and the ability to heal and start anew.

I construct the miniature models using such materials as cardboard, wood panels, styrofoam, plaster, concrete, paint, and a mix or organic ashes and miniature objects. I considered reconstructing the media images using 3D computer modeling but ended by disregarding this method of working due to the lack of physical presence. Building the models, on the other hand, allows me to be involved physically with the material over a period of time, allowing the time to become a meditational healing process and spiritual journey. The photographs of these models are printed large in order to impact the viewer physically, as the body reacts instinctually to the size of image it is confronted with.

The models serve as mirrors of my desire to return home or to find my home when this is not possible, and in a sense to rebuild the places where my brother and father were killed. Reconstructing the destructed 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. 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.