

# Certain bounds hold against chaos<sup>1</sup>

Oliver Basciano

The artist Shezad Dawood will perhaps forgive me if I start with reference to another, the poet Robert Duncan. The reader will perhaps forgive me if I quote generously from one of Duncan's best-known works, which takes its title from the opening line.

*Often I am Permitted to Return to a Meadow  
as if it were a scene made-up by the mind,  
that is not mine, but is a made place,  
that is mine, it is so near to the heart,  
an eternal pasture folded in all thought  
so that there is a hall therein  
that is a made place, created by light  
wherfrom the shadows that are forms fall.*

The poem is taken from Duncan's 1960 collection *The Opening of the Field*.<sup>2</sup> I would like to offer up a question in relation to both the opening line and the title of the anthology that homed in on it. The question, often posed or perhaps even answered through Dawood's art works, is how to navigate a field? How do we orientate a plain? If we think of a literal field, then the answer, 'why, by the edges of course', might come. What if it is a pasture as Duncan describes, 'eternal', and 'folded in all thought'? One 'created by light' – like all that is perceptible, like everything that is touched, experienced, seen – a Bergsonian plain of images in which the route we find is perception itself. And can an art work disrupt, or direct, redirect, that sojourn?<sup>3</sup>

Let us turn to a work by Dawood, *Through Pierced Flesh and Skin of Dreams*, 2014. On five stretched pieces of found, traditional ralli textile, abstract and semi-abstract motifs have been painted and screenprinted, often overlaying one another.<sup>4</sup> A tangle of blue and red flowers colonise the yellow surface of one; in another, a dystopian gas-masked figure emerges from a camouflaging forest of murky markings. Each textile is suspended by wires from

the ceiling, and installed in parallel to one another across the gallery room. Viewers can walk around the individual elements, drawing in and out of the shadows played by the directional lights that heighten the drama of the installation. The works are, to an extent, surrealist, but it's a surrealism overtaken by layers of abstraction: the dreaminess overshadowed by something darker, murkier, increasingly disturbing, all corralled on to the textile surface. While other paintings and textile works by Dawood – such as



*Through Pierced Flesh and Skin of Dreams*, 2014  
→ p.36



*Mên-an-Tol*, 2013  
→ p.30

# Or what happens when art lets chaos through the cracks

*Mên-an-Tol*, 2013, a simple landscape over which two discs float, one orange, one yellow – with their use of discrete, quasi-symbolic forms and a sensuous colour palette could be seen to quote Hilma af Klint or the later works of Wassily Kandinsky, *Through Pierced Flesh and Skin of Dreams*, in addition to its figurative elements, mines a darker, more traumatic vein of abstraction akin perhaps to Gerhard Richter's early 1990s *Abstrakt* paintings.

*Shouldn't we really be talking about plural realities?*

Philip K. Dick, on madness.

You could spend many rewarding hours and words exploring the various narratives and referential tangents that Shezad Dawood weaves in and out of his practice as a whole, and *Through Pierced Flesh and Skin of Dreams* is no exception. Some subjects he leaves happily loose and unresolved, others he explores to something of a conclusion. *Through Pierced Flesh ...* contains nods to mythological narratives, speculative fiction and to cultural-specificity. These are recurring areas of interest for the artist, picked out in subject matters and visual allusions, to which we can also add beat fiction, alternative mind states, cinema, and eastern and western cultural and religious practices. They cohere as installation, sculpture, video, performance and, as of 2013, cinema, making a distinctive, inventive, body of art. Yet it is not what the work is about – the apparent headline subject matter – that will help one orientate, or disorientate, our plain of images. Taken independently, each historical or literary reference is a comfortable narrative of the symbolic. Instead, it is the nature of a myriad and diverse subjects operating together in a single work, and the effect this has on the viewer, which offers one a way of thinking about the world beyond the confines of the perceptible. What happens when we don't orientate ourselves through imagery linearly, but instead pluralistically, dualistically? *Through Pierced Flesh*

and *Skin of Dreams* does not primarily seek to answer this question through the individual motifs of each stretched material element, but in their hanging together: by the manner in which multiple images and subjects are presented simultaneously; how each element succeeds the one before it; how the artist encourages visual spillage and viewer distraction; and how we are permitted to see the reverse of the stretched textiles and notice the extra pieces of cloth that Dawood has invariably, but until now invisibly, sewn on to the back of the ralli works. Dawood asks us to look at the most traditional of mediums differently, the 'wrong' way round, to search out the normally invisible. Literally and metaphorically, things are presented back-to-front, upside-down.

*Something strange, ineluctable, is approaching ... Images and chains of images, long submerged memories ...*

Charles Baudelaire, on smoking hashish.

This playing with structures and presentational norms – of re-orientating elements, disorientating others – is prevalent in all aspects of Dawood's practice, including his film and video work. *Piercing Brightness*, 2013, is the artist's first feature film, in which two aliens, having taken human form, arrive to bring home a population of their compatriots who live, incognito, on Earth. While the audience follows their various trials and tribulations, it is never fully put at ease as to whether or not the aliens have malevolent intent. What is clear is that their very *alien* presence subtly, and perhaps largely unconsciously, disrupts the lives of the town's inhabitants either for better or worse. With the film, and through all his work, Dawood is perhaps asking us to think of his art as an alien presence; objects that through a disruption of our day-to-day experience open up an alternative to the norm, an opportunity that is antagonistic to the accepted perception of *things as they are* and normative readings of both art and

life. While, I would posit, the Red Scare alien-invasion-genre movie form of *Piercing Brightness* is a motif generously used by the artist to signpost this intent – working in harmony with his ongoing series of elliptical neon works, reminiscent of flying saucers or planetary rings – the narrative of the film avoids a neat Hollywood arc. The storyboarding is nonlinear and the characterisation is left purposely open, motives are never rounded or resolved. The movie is an uneasy – albeit entertaining and meticulously shot – watch, with resolution and passive comprehension never high on the artist’s agenda. In this way it perhaps expresses a dialogue with those of Dawood’s peers whose works mine an interest in hauntology and the conflation of space and time – Croatian artist David Maljkovic for one – and more appropriately, Dawood and Maljkovic’s common precursors, most obviously Alain Resnais’s beautifully confusing *Last Year at Marienbad*, 1961. Resnais’s



*Piercing Brightness* (film stills), 2013  
→ p. 102

unnamed male and female protagonists have similar qualities to Dawood’s inbound aliens. The same stillness and vacancy is required from the actors in the initial half of both films, both sets of characters are swept up in a time and place which they seem to have no control over, both instil in the viewer an element of disquiet and fear.

A new short, *Towards the Possible Film*, 2014, comes from similar filmmaking intent, which though entertaining and meticulously shot, seeks neither resolution nor the viewer’s passive comprehension. Taking its catalyst from a description in Robert Anton Wilson’s *The Schrödinger’s Cat Trilogy*, 1979, of ‘blue-skinned astronauts’, Dawood has developed a fantastical plotline in which these oddly hued extraterrestrials emerge from the sea on to an incredible red rock landscape to do battle with apparently indigenous cavemen. If this seems a straightforward case of a supposedly advanced civilisation colonising a developing



*Towards the Possible Film* (production still), 2014  
→ p. 52–63, 72



*A Mystery Play* (film still), 2010  
→ p. 12–15

one, the artist relentlessly twists our assumptions and cultural conventions, with recourse to paleocontact hypotheses – such as the theories of Swiss writer Erich von Däniken concerning ancient astronauts – and reveals rather that it is the spacemen who are from the past, and the cave dwellers who are the image of the future. This mergence of past, present and future, narrated through a monologue composed of fragments of texts by Dawood himself and a range of authors key to the artist’s research, rendered in Tamazight, the ancient Berber dialect, proves a delightful piece of theatrical discombobulation. If the symbolic can be thought of as a conscious narrative of the present, of cause and consequence, then something that disrupts this – something that we *struggle to understand*, something that confuses us, wrong foots or disorients our idea of linear time – can be thought of as a shamanic entity that seeks to heave us from the well-worn track of everyday perception. Art in general can be thought of as such a guide. Dawood’s art in particular is one that deliberately, but subtly, examines the possibilities.

*After all, there is nothing real outside our perception of reality, is there?*

Brian O’Blivion in David Cronenberg’s *Videodrome*, 1983.

Building on the viewer’s insecurity about watching genre films that are less than formulaic – the use of narrative slippages perhaps can also be found in an earlier video work, *Feature*, 2008, [→ p. 116–125] which can be best, if

incongruously, described as a ‘zombie-western’, albeit one in which the figure of Krishna stars – Dawood also invariably plays with the mind-state of his audience through the actual framework of the film, the cinematography and editing. *Piercing Brightness* is characterised by a ‘flicker’ between scene takes as if there has been an error or interruption in the transmission. While this can be explained as a hermetic structural motif analogous to the film’s plotting in which the ambassadorial aliens are constantly attempting to communicate with their extra-terrestrial home, this type of falter can also be observed in previous works, in different forms, by the artist. For example, in his *noirish*, nightmarish film *A Mystery Play*, 2010 – a burlesquing of Buster Keaton slapstick and Harry Houdini routines edited into a strange 13-minute set piece – Dawood uses similarly disruptive jump cuts. Figures appear and disappear or, in one instance, change characteristics, as happens in one juddering edit when a gas-masked figure, a recurring motif, takes on the head of a stag. The



*The Black Sun*, 2010  
→ p. 126



*Harvest Moon*, 2013  
→ p. 99

combined subtlety and suddenness makes the viewer question what they are seeing. It offers a gap in the constant stream of images, a gap that can be imaginatively exploited by the audience.

*We must storm the citadels of enlightenment, the means are at hand.*

William Burroughs, writing to Brion Gysin, c. 1959.

Other works offer a disruption of – a possibility of freedom from – the relentless projection of perception, in very real, physiological terms. *The Black Sun*, 2010, an exactly circular white neon sculpture mounted on a black-painted gallery wall, is a case in point. While the artist undoubtedly intends to stir within us thoughts and narratives pertaining to the mythological connotations of the solar eclipse – including, as he has previously noted in an interview, representations of Kali worship in India, alchemical treatises from the Renaissance, and philosopher Julia Kristeva’s explorations of melancholy – it is also sensorially affective too. Having looked at the searing light, the viewer is likely to experience the optical phenomenon of afterimage, a memory of the circle temporarily retained on their retinas. In removing the necessity of its immediate presence for the experience of the light-image, Dawood is playing with our basic definitions of conscious perception. It is this type of device that similarly proves the visual basis for the artist’s multifarious 2011 work *New Dream Machine Project* [→ p. 90–93], a zoetrope sculpture – based on Brion Gysin’s 1960s kinetic light work *Dreamachine* – which Dawood has used in a series of multisensory events and concerts. Viewers are invited to close their eyes and let the light rapidly, rhythmically, flicker through their eyelids, inducing, and enveloping them in, a trance-like state. If the most basic definition of art is that it is ‘something made to be looked at’, then Dawood’s project, after Gysin, is one that again undermines such a preconception.

*Though experience be our only guide in reasoning concerning matters of fact; it must be acknowledged, that this guide is not altogether infallible.*

David Hume, ‘Of Miracles’, 1909–14.

If this essay is concerned with the form of Dawood’s work and not necessarily its subject matter *per se*, then the *New Dream Machine Project* is a key work. It largely dispenses with a subject matter and instead concentrates on vending visceral affect. This can be observed not just through the visual properties of the work, but additionally in the artist’s mesmerising use of ‘through-composed’ music, defined by its abstract, non-sectional nature. Presentations of the *New Dream Machine Project* have been accompanied by separate, yet equally hypnotic, performances by





New Dream Machine Project II (film still), 2013  
→ p.38-41

the Lebanese experimental electronic duo, Praed, and the Sufi trance ensemble, the Master Musicians of Jajouka. Both *Piercing Brightness* and *Towards the Possible Film* also have soundtracks divorced from the prescribed strictures of traditional, classical or pop music.

Affect in Dawood's work can be thought of by recourse to the mid-twentieth-century Structuralist filmmakers, in particular, Tony Conrad's seminal *The Flicker*, 1966, which Conrad set out as a portrait of film itself. *The Flicker* offers itself as an, albeit perhaps unwitting, analogy to ideas of the real and the symbolic. If representational film traditionally provides the viewer with a narrative akin to the symbolic, then *The Flicker* showed the viewer a place beyond the fiction: film's real fabric. Dawood's similar attempts at deconstruction, or perhaps even destruction,

of the structures and preconceptions inherent within an artwork, do not come from a wish to profile the hermetic formalism of the artwork itself – which was arguably Conrad's personal motivation – but from something that finds itself consciously grounded in using the work as a method of removing oneself, albeit temporarily, from all the normal restraints of being, seeing and feeling. If, as Conrad so brilliantly exposed, film is a series of images, flickers of projected light, which, with a bit of creative input, can be remixed, stripped-down or disorientated; and the visual sensory perception of the world can be defined similarly as light hitting the eyes and subsequently signalling images to the mind; then perhaps art like Dawood's can be used to suggest ruptures, alterations, or even a transcendence of the lineal path across the pasture of images. In his work the artist seeks a momentary, joyful, conjuring of the world beyond the eye, or at the very least, a re-conjuring of the world in sight.

- 1 Quoted from the closing lines of Robert Duncan's poem, 'Often I am Permitted to Return to a Meadow'. See note 2.
- 2 Robert Duncan (1919–1988), *The Opening of the Field*, New York: Grove Press, 1960.
- 3 Henri Bergson (1859–1941), French philosopher.
- 4 Ralli textiles, typically quilted bedcovers, are made in and around the Sindh region of Pakistan and western India.

# Future Relics, Past Encounters

Sarah Brown

Leeds Art Gallery holds one of the most significant collections of twentieth-century British painting and sculpture in the United Kingdom and is a living response to the artistic activity of the past. For Shezad Dawood, our invitation to mount a show of his own works alongside some from our collection, prompted a return to Leeds. Since he studied for a PhD at Leeds Metropolitan University from 2004–2008, he knows our collection well. Though, as it is said, 'No man ever steps in the same river twice, for it's not the same river and he's not the same man.'<sup>1</sup> The opportunity to bring together a show of Dawood's recent work alongside selected historic pieces will promote new encounters and allow the coming together of seemingly disparate elements. Anchored by Dawood, they will allow him to map out enquiries into histories of place and his own recent work in the context of the history of British modernism and the significance of landscape and culture. The joint exhibition will let individual works take their place within a single oeuvre, constructed as an assemblage of points that reflect upon one another. The significance of this encounter and the bringing together of the different elements offers a new and unique opportunity to experience Dawood's work and concerns.

*Towards the Possible Film*, 2014, [→ p.52–63, 72] takes place on a shoreline where the sea meets the land, and where the landscape has been shaped over time by the sea. Dawood's new film focuses on this liminal space and reveals a meeting, an encounter or an exchange at what is a threshold for both visitors and the visited.

For artists in the past the effect of human intervention on the landscape, whether through archaeology, industrialisation or tourism, was a source of concern in the 1930s and played an important part in debates about preserving Britain's natural heritage.<sup>2</sup>

Dawood's selection of works from the Leeds collection – including among others those of Hubert Dalwood, Paul Nash, Barbara Hepworth, Austin Wright and Liliane

Lijn – looks at the tension between the role of these artists as pioneers of British modernism and their attachment to an ancient past embedded in the landscape and particularly the coast. Exploring the tensions between modernity and romantic knowledge, Dawood's selection focuses on the way the landscape is encoded with various histories – geological, archaeological, mythical and magical. Dawood's own work examines magic, mythical and fictional encounters as a counterpoint to modernity's rational progress and draws together the links that modernity has with notions such as fetishism, totemism and fiction.

Artists such as Nash were attracted to landscape in its 'wild state' where traces of human culture are merely insinuated in ancient grassy mounds and terraced hillsides. Nash was inspired by the ancient English landscape. In his *Only Egg*, 1937, a piece of shale is positioned behind two stones, one reminiscent of a bird and the other of an egg. A photograph of a pebbled shoreline forms the background and a concrete ladder-like structure lying on the ground leads one's eye to a bay. As one of Nash's few surviving objects it develops a new vision of an animated, and animist, landscape.

In Dawood's painting *Mên-an-Tol*, 2013, [→ p.30] which takes its title from a formation of standing stones in Cornwall, it is the significance of the British landscape and ancient stones that form an enquiry into the nature of belief. The encounter – a first contact between indigenous and foreign, between islanders and outsiders – is what Dawood's selection rearranges, disrupts and captures in a moment between the two forces. Corporeal touch, the transcendental brush of the encounter, erupts into the flow of time, and alien or divinity transforming to humanity emphasize Dawood's concern with the politics of place. Dawood is an artist interested in collision and in his selection of works from the Leeds collection he brings together pieces that would not otherwise be exhibited