

17.10.2019 — Review

Shezad Dawood's *Leviathan*

The Bluecoat, Liverpool
by Claire Walker



In the wake of the current environmental crisis, the Bluecoat's current exhibition *Leviathan* by Shezad Dawood explores our impact within our biosphere to examine what is not only an environmental crisis but a humanitarian one. *Leviathan* is a 10 part film cycle which sprang from a dialogue with a wide range of; marine biologists, oceanographers, political scientists, neurologists and human trauma specialists. With a heavy focus on the sea both as a vessel for human migration as well as a marker for climate change; the films interrogate borders, marine welfare and trauma by envisioning an alternate reality future not too distant from our own, each shown through the eyes of different characters.

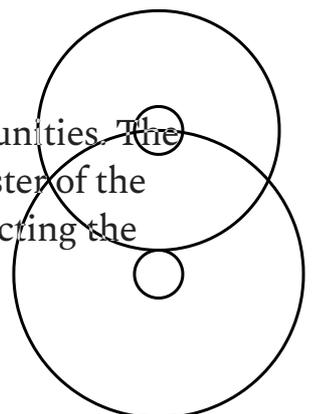
The first five films from the *Leviathan* series: *Ben*, *Yasmine*, *Jamila*, *Arturo* and *Ismael*, are shown across the Bluecoat's first two gallery spaces, with a third room concluding Dawood's virtual reality creation with *Leviathan Legacy*, in which the audience can immerse themselves in a prospective future landscape. This sits alongside his painting series *Disposable Mementoes* that references the impact tourism has on coastal regions. The first of the films

Ben is housed in the first room, and sets the backdrop of the exhibition's theme. The film explores ideas of evolution, extinction, the abyss and the destruction of the planet, and invokes a spoken word performance. This is accompanied with clips of solar flares referencing the end of the world, overlaid with shots of the Natural History Museum in London.

This then leads into the second room, containing four films each named after the main character, who narrate their own story following an environmental disaster which results in the formation of individual idiosyncratic communities as a way to survive. Each of these separate stories are linked by a couple's journey as they drift across Europe, Asia and northern Africa, interacting with these different communities, each featuring one of the other characters who convey their ideals and rituals. For example *Arturo* set in Italy, is an over indulgent community of excess both sexual and gluttonous. Akin to a cult, the character references 'the worm' as a comparison of consumerism and of the constant need for more, at the expense of our environment. *Ismael* meanwhile takes place on a cargo ship and explores global trade parallel to marine migration. It references the patriarchy and ideas of trade as a means to an end, by questioning if we are too rigid in this concept at the cost of marine life and the environment.



Each film is overlaid with references to the sea, marine life and our devastating impact on these interdependent aquatic communities. The idea of destruction is referenced in the title – *Leviathan*, a monster of the sea – and continues with the depiction of collaged material depicting the ruin of coastal and sea life.



The destruction of these species, and the battle to survive on a planet that constantly bears the human mark, is echoed in each character's story. By using fiction, Dawood takes the huge concept of environmental crisis, and makes it easier to relate to, by the use of recognisable personal stories. Disappointingly though, this is tainted slightly by the overtly sexual content in the films, which whilst relevant in some, does somewhat distract from the far more interesting insight into the link of humanitarian crises such as perilous migrant crossings and the costly human impact on our oceans.

The link between what is going on below the surface of the sea environmentally, and above it with our use of the oceans as a resource, is highlighted throughout and stresses our dependability on an ecosystem that we are so oblivious too. The exhibition jolts us, awakening the visitor to the urgency of our current situation. Unlike the friendlier incentives of current campaigns, it alerts us to the impending possibility of our future and the need to be more ecological sympathetic, by radically examining our social constructs and mindset.

Claire Walker is a writer based in Wigan

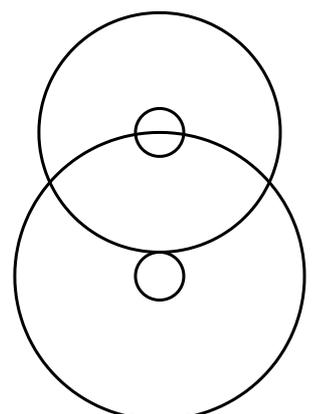
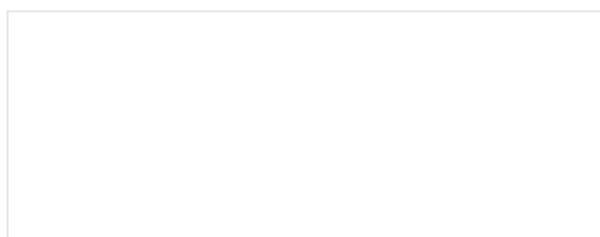
[Leviathan Shezad Dawood](#) was on display at Bluecoat, Liverpool 6 July-13 October 2019.



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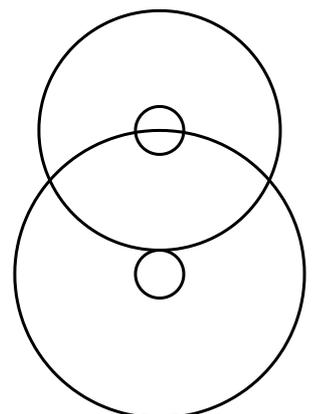
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