

decoded 'Ashura commemorations and the journeys pilgrims undertook to Karbala in 2004.² In this article I focus on the second room.

The art installation brought into play an experiential approach to remembrance and memory, archiving and repertoire, and embodiment and performance. My work is informed by Diana Taylor's (2003, 192–93) work, which sheds light on the different ways of arranging, conveying, and disseminating memory: "The archives . . . can contain the grisly record of criminal violence—the documents, photographs, and remains that tell of disappearances. . . . The repertoire . . . holds the tales of the survivors, their gestures, the traumatic flashbacks, repeats, and hallucinations—in short, all those acts usually thought of as ephemeral and invalid forms of knowledge and evidence." The art installation and written work are also informed by interviews with women in my family and community and participants and bystanders in the rituals and performances.

The installation simulated 'Ashura rituals and pilgrimage to Karbala, inviting the audience to walk through the space as a multilayered interpretation of 'Ashura, exploring new relations between performative embodied practices and witnessing and the possibility for reparation. Replicating the pilgrim's journey, audience members navigated the multiple objects, such as the black silhouettes, until they reached the shrine (figs. 1–2). Such navigation between space and matter is meant to assist pilgrims in transcending their specific realities, to create a rupture in their everyday lives, and to encourage them to enter a liminal space. This in-between space represents the experience pilgrims undergo. Um 'Ali, my aunt, affirms that these performances allow the community to transcend their predicaments by projecting their pain and suffering into the calamity of the Karbala narratives. She

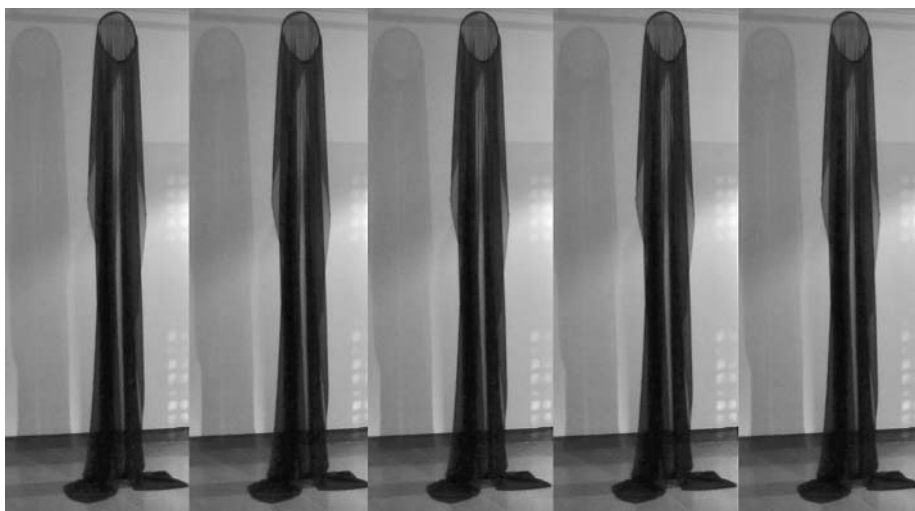


Figure 1. *Black Silhouettes*

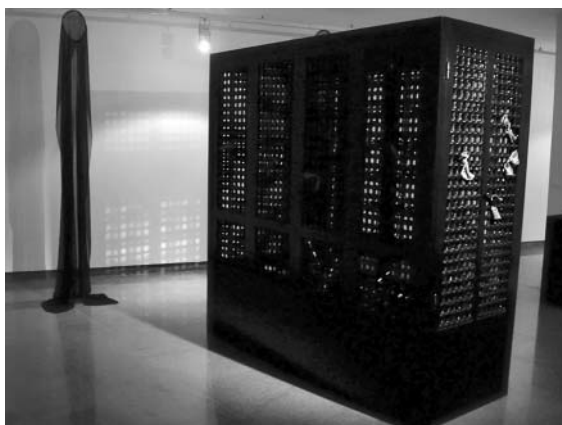


Figure 2. *The Shrine*

claims that the shrine and the rituals are portals for pilgrims to cross time and space to connect to a higher plane that provides comfort and minimizes their own pain and suffering compared to this catastrophe. The Karbala narratives epitomize Shi'i history of martyrdom, which must be placed in a universal narrative of redemption. Performative rituals are not merely cathartic and a quest

for deliverance; they also symbolize unequivocal devotion and a pledge to their imam to continue his revolutionary message for justice.

The tension between the fixedness of the centripetal art installation of Husayn's shrine as opposed to the marginal, fluid, and disembodied black silhouettes hanging across each corner of the shrine was evident in the second room. On the other side of the shrine, I placed a black mantelpiece against a dividing wall. The black box supports a bowl filled with green ribbons of various sizes.

Reconstruction of the Shrine

The second room of the art installation reconstructed the shrine, which represents and embodies symbolic, cultural, and religious ideals sought by pilgrims. The pilgrims travel to the shrine to renew their covenant with their imam while seeking his intercession and blessings.

The reconstructed shrine was a massive rectangular, three-dimensional black tomb. The shrine was made of wood to the dimensions of approximately 1.9×1.9×0.75 meters. The bottom quarter was solid, in contrast to the balance, which was porous. On closer inspection, you would notice that the pores were in fact an intricate construction of arabesque panels (*shansheel* or *mashrabiya*)³ that provided a restricted view into the sepulcher. The lighting in this room was set up to illuminate the arabesque designs. The illumination of the arabesque designs reflected elaborate star-like shapes, enhancing the shrine's stateliness. These reflections further enhanced the themes of this room that represent the marginal and unseen (the silhouettes) versus the central and seen (the shrine).

Peering through the arabesque holes into the encasement, you would become aware of Husayn's simulated martyred corpse covered in black cloth and impaled by silver arrows (fig. 3). I pierced the arrows into the replicated corpse to represent Husayn's slaying in Shi'a imagery. The shrine provided a symbolic aperture into these visual and performative expressions, histories, and narratives.

The black silhouettes represent the main female figures in the Karbala stories (such as Fatemeh, Zaynab, Zaynab's sister Omm Kalthoum, Husayn's daughter Sokayne, and Kalthoum, among others) dressed in 'abayas. I hung these figures at the corners of the shrine to symbolize their roles as key pillars of the commemorative movement. The black silhouettes also represent Zaynab's moving and expressive narrations at Umayyad caliph Yazid Bin Mu'awiya's⁵ court, since the narration and performative rituals marked the evolution of Shi'ite rituals.

By representing the black silhouettes as disembodied, I wanted to suggest that while women have been visible symbols in the debates on the war and current events in Iraq, they have also been invisible victims of the US invasion and occupation. The depiction of the disembodied figures as larger than life signifies how women have been exploited by the US war campaign to rally support for its continuous war on Iraq. The transparent silhouettes symbolize this visible-invisible tension employed by the US media, military, and government. For example, the Abu Ghraib prison scandal exposed American soldiers' abuse of Iraqi men but did not publicly mention the soldiers' consistent sexualized violence against and sadistic torture of the female inmates. In a briefing paper presented to the UN Commission on Human Rights, Kristen McNutt (2005) maintains:

Attorney Amal Kadham Swadi, one of seven female lawyers now representing women detainees in Abu Ghraib, began to piece together a picture of systemic abuse and torture by US guards against Iraqi women held in detention without charge. This was not only true of Abu Ghraib . . . but was . . . "happening all across Iraq." . . . "Sexualized violence and abuse committed by US troops goes far beyond a few isolated cases." . . .

. . . A fifty-three-page report . . . written by Major General Antonio M. Taguba . . . points to complicity to sexual torture by the entire Army prison system. . . . Taguba found that . . . there were numerous instances of "sadistic, blatant, and wanton criminal abuses" at Abu Ghraib.

As a response to such stories and other incidents of sexual assault on women by both American soldiers and Iraqi men, many women were forced to become marginal spectators and invisible phantoms, relegated to the private sphere. The installation represents the marginalization of Iraqi women in the public realm and those who have died and disappeared.

Green Ribbons as *Nadhr* (Vowing)

I placed the green ribbons in a bowl on the black mantelpiece across the shrine. Before the opening night, I tied a green ribbon around one of the star-shaped pores of the arabesque panel of the shrine just as pilgrims do in the shrines in Karbala. A descriptive note on the wall above the bowl encouraged the audience to participate

in this specific ritual. During the opening night, participants walked up to the black mantelpiece, picked a green ribbon, and tied it around a star-shaped pore of the arabesque panels. By the end of the exhibit, numerous green ribbons adorned the black shrine.

I used the color green — the color of Islam, the Prophet Muhammad, and the Prophet's descendants — since this is the color pilgrims use. Green is the dominant color throughout Shi'ite iconography and imagery. Pilgrims customarily purchase the green ribbons from sayyids, descendants of the Prophet who work as shrine keepers. Pilgrims rub the green ribbons against the shrine while making their vows to their imam, seeking blessings from him. After their vows, pilgrims tie the green ribbons around the shrine grating or their own wrists. Lubna, my cousin, suggests that while vowing, repenting, and pleading for their imam, the intercessor between them and God, the faithful trust that the green ribbon can serve as a medium to salvation. They hope that in his love for their imams, who are the legatees of his Prophet, God will grant them their wishes. A plea is customarily expressed through vowing (*nadhr*) that if their wishes are granted, they will make an offering in return.

My aunt Um 'Ali vowed and pleaded with Imam Husayn to rescue her brother, who was severely wounded by shrapnel from a bomb explosion in Basra during the Iraq-Iran War in the 1980s. A fellow soldier dragged him from the battlefield to a hospital in Basra. My aunt found his blackened body rotting on the hospital bed. She was forced to leave her work, home, and family and drive from Baghdad to Basra (during the war a very risky endeavor) to nurse him until he miraculously recovered. My aunt is still fulfilling her promise to the imam. Vowing can take many forms, such as distributing water to pilgrims on foot, donating money to the poor, and cooking *kemma* (a dish customarily cooked during 'Ashura as a *nadhr* and distributed to the community), among others.

The Karbala tragedy continues to unfold in the present day. My cousins recently said that their main concern is related to the expansion of the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS), especially to Karbala. Displaced women who fled the violence in the north of Iraq have resettled in shelters near Karbala. The Organization of Women's Freedom in Iraq (OWFI) founded Women's Peace Farm shelters near Karbala and throughout Iraq. The OWFI shelters provide safe housing, education, and training; support women farmers; and create support networks and community. These women farmers reassert their agency while providing for their families. It is evident that women have had to carry the brunt of the violence inflicted by the old regime, the Iraqi state, the US occupation, military forces, various extremist militias, and armed forces that cross sectarian lines. My interest in crafting the art installation and simulation of the pilgrimage was to provide an alternative historiography situated at the intersections of memory, trauma, and resistance.

DENA AL-ADEEB is an artist and scholar-activist born in Baghdad and now based in New York. She is a PhD candidate in the Middle Eastern and Islamic Studies Department at New York University. She is also a visiting instructor in the Humanities and Media Studies Department and in the School of Architecture at the Pratt Institute. Contact: daa317@nyu.edu.

Notes

1. Since 2004 the new governing bodies and ruling elites have co-opted 'Ashura's meaning, practices, and rituals to advance their own political agendas.
2. I have published articles related to the first and third rooms of the *Sacred Spaces* art installation. See Al-Adeeb 2008, 2012.
3. A traditional Arabic architectural feature projecting oriel windows enclosed with carved-wood latticework usually located on the second story of a building and sometimes used internally in a courtyard. Its main social function is to conceal or create a visual boundary between the private domain and the public, including ensuring segregation of the sexes.
4. Black clothing that covers the entire body.
5. Yazid sent his troops to Karbala, Iraq, to eliminate Imam Husayn and his seventy-two followers in AD 680. Zaynab and the other women were taken as *sabaya* (captives) to his court in Damascus.

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