

Issam Kourbaj*Imploded, burnt, turned to ash,
2021***Howard Theatre, Downing
College, Cambridge**

Live-streamed drawing and sound
performance in collaboration with
composer Richard Causton and
soprano Jessica Summers

15 March 2021, 5pm

This performance by the Syrian-born and Cambridge-based artist Issam Kourbaj marks the tenth anniversary of the Syrian uprising – a crisis that resulted in violent armed conflict and ongoing civil war. Kourbaj's performance will take place on the 15 March, the first day of the unrest a decade ago. The artist describes his project in his own words below:

To mark the tenth anniversary of the Syrian uprising, which was sparked by teenage graffiti in March 2011, this drawing performance will pay homage to those young people who dared to speak their mind, the masses who protested publicly, as well as the many Syrian eyes that were, in the last ten years, burnt and brutally closed forever.

I will draw fragments of Arabic words and eye idols on a large surface in layers, repeating and obscuring them beyond all legibility and recognition. It will become a palimpsest of these two elements, the first is inspired by the graffiti that was quickly erased even before it was completed, and the second is based on three Syrian eye idols from the collections of The Fitzwilliam Museum, made of alabaster and dating to around 3200 BC, excavated at Tell Brak, Syria, in a building now called the Eye Temple.



Issam Kourbaj, *Burning*, 2020

I will then burn the final drawing and place the remaining ash in a glass box. This will be exhibited in a sacred space to memorialise every victim of the last decade, while also being dedicated to all Syrians lost, displaced and still suffering from this ongoing crisis.

Towards the end of the performance, the viewer will hear words written by myself, set to music by renowned composer Richard Causton (Faculty of Music, University of Cambridge) and sung by soprano Jessica Summers.

Issam Kourbaj

This project is a collaboration between the artist, Kettle's Yard, The Heong Gallery and The Fitzwilliam Museum (all part of the University of Cambridge). A major exhibition of the artist's work will be presented by Kettle's Yard and The Heong Gallery in 2023. The three eye idols from the collections of The Fitzwilliam Museum can be seen in a display alongside 366 eye idols created by Issam Kourbaj from Aleppo Soap when the Museum reopens in May: [The Fitzwilliam Museum - Don't Wash Your Hands: Neither Light Agrees To Enter The Eyes Nor Air The Lungs, 2020](#)

About Issam Kourbaj

Issam Kourbaj was born in Syria and trained at the Institute of Fine Arts in Damascus, the Repin Institute of Fine Arts & Architecture in Leningrad (St Petersburg) and at Wimbledon School of Art (London). Since 1990, he has lived and worked in Cambridge, becoming an Artist in Residence, a Bye-Fellow (2007-2011) and a Lector in Art, at Christ's College, University of Cambridge.

Kourbaj's work spans many disciplines – his interests stem from his wide-ranging background in fine art, architecture and theatre design. Kourbaj works include paintings, works on paper, sculptures, film and performance works, and he frequently collaborates across the creative sciences and humanities. His work has been widely exhibited and collected; for example, in 2008, a collection of his sketches *Sound Palimpsest* was acquired by the British Museum, London, and exhibited in their *Iraq's Past Speaks to the Present*. Kourbaj created new works for the exhibition *Actions. The Image of the World can be Different*, at Kettle's Yard in 2018, and his most recent exhibition was held at the Pergamon Museum, Berlin. Kourbaj's work *Dark Water, Burning World*, is currently exhibited at the British Museum's *Reflections* display. It became object 101 in 'A History of The World in 100 Objects' when former Director of the British Museum Neil MacGregor asked which object from 2020 would best encapsulate our modern age.

Since 2011, Kourbaj has been dedicated to raising awareness and funds for projects and aid in Syria through several exhibitions, installations and performances in the UK and abroad.

He is currently preparing a [large-scale art installation](#) with and in response to objects from the collection of the Tropenmuseum in Amsterdam that inspire him, opening in April 2021. Kettle's Yard and The Heong Gallery (University of Cambridge) are collaborating with the artist on a major two-venue exhibition of the artist's work for 2023.

About Richard Causton

Richard Causton (composer) has been described as "one of the most courageous and uncompromising artists we have". He studied at the University of York, the Royal College of Music and the Scuola Civica in Milan, studying with Franco Donatoni and his music has been heard all over the world, thanks to performers such as the BBC Symphony Orchestra, Philharmonia Orchestra, City of Birmingham Symphony Orchestra, Orchestra of the Age of Enlightenment, Sinfonieorchester Basel, Rundfunk-Sinfonieorchester Saarbrücken, London Sinfonietta, Birmingham Contemporary Music Group, Britten Sinfonia and the Nash Ensemble.

His music often challenges the performers to reach unusual realms of expression to achieve his intentions. Richard is currently Professor of Composition at the University of Cambridge.

www.richardcauston.com

About Jessica Summers

Jessica Summers (soprano) has performed around the UK both in concerts and in opera. An alumna of the Britten-Pears Young Artists Programme (Contemporary Performance directed by the late Oliver Knussen) and New Vocal Repertory courses (directed by Jane Manning), Jessica has performed twentieth and twenty first century music in a wide range of venues and festivals including the Three Choirs Festival, Holywell Music Room, Oxford (Pierrot Lunaire), St John's Smith Square, Brighton Festival, York Late Music Festival, King's Lynn Festival, Dartington Hall, Ripon Cathedral, Science Museum (London) and the St Martin in the Fields New Music Series. She has sung in several tours for English Touring Opera, for Opera North (Education) and for the Royal Opera, Covent Garden. Jessica is an ardent supporter of refugees and those who have been displaced. She is a former orientation volunteer for the Red Cross Refugee Unit in London and continues to volunteer, fundraise and raise awareness of the current global refugee crisis.

<http://www.livingsongs.co.uk/artists/>

Covid Secure Precautions

The design and execution of this performance has been carefully devised to ensure that all Covid precautions have been followed. Safe distance one-to-one contact between the artist and film-maker has been limited to the filming element of the performance that takes place outside. All filming in the Howard Theatre has been arranged remotely, as have planning meetings with all collaborators.



Issam Kourbaj, *Eye idols and Arabic Grafitti*, ink on paper, 2020