

IN RUINS

On its summit are the hanging gardens, a wonder celebrated by the fables of the Greeks...So stout are the trees the structure supports that their trunks are eight cubits thick and their height as much as fifty feet; they bear fruit as abundantly as if they were growing in their natural environment. And although time with its gradual decaying processes is as destructive to nature's works as to man's...Tradition has it that it is the work of a Syrian king who ruled from Babylon. He built it out of love for his wife who missed the woods and forests in this flat country and persuaded her husband to imitate nature's beauty with a structure of this kind.¹

The story of the Hanging Gardens of Babylon was told and retold. This particular tale of endeavour, and devotion, was written by the Roman historian Quintus Curtius Rufus in the first century CE. Others recounted how its terraces could hold full size trees, shrubs and vines, observing how ingenious its irrigation system was, drawing water up from the river Euphrates in an otherwise barren land.¹ By the fifth century CE, Philo of Byzantium “the Paradoxographer” had inscribed the gardens as one of the Seven Ancient Wonders of the World.

And yet another image lingers. In the background of a 19th century etching of the Hanging Gardens, hovers the colossal structure of the Tower of Babel. Its story, told in The Book of Genesis, details the gathering of all of the people after The Great Flood, a monolingual humanity who began to build the tower to reach the heavens. However on seeing this enterprise, God confounded their speech so that they could no longer understand one another and scattered the people across the globe. From the Flemish artist Pieter Bruegel the Elder’s iconic 16th century series of paintings to French artist Gustave Doré’s etching *The Confusion of the Tongues* (1865), the story of this mammoth tower as the location of the dismantling of a singular shared language endures. The Hanging Gardens of Babylon and the Tower of Babel act as a symbolic force representing the alliance between humanity and nature and a place where language and people are one. The sources for these two stories are multifarious but locate their construction between the rivers Tigris and Euphrates, in the ‘Cradle of Civilization,’ present day Iraq, near the town of Hillah, about 85 kilometres south of Baghdad.

As scholar Cornelia Vismann outlines the love of ruins has travelled throughout history, explored by historians, geographers and thinkers in order to shape our thought and belief systems. She elaborates, it “has generated various epistemes and disciplines: In the sixteenth century it informed philology, in the nineteenth century historiography and criminology,” shifting its status from “an allegorical one in the Renaissance to a literal, positivistic one at the beginning of the twentieth century.”² For the Hanging Gardens of Babylon and the Tower of Babel,

¹ Quintus Curtius Rufus (active 1st century CE) referred to the writings of Cleitarchus, a 4th-century BCE historian of Alexander the Great in *History of Alexander* V.1.35-5.

¹ Strabo, *Geography* XVI.1.5, translation adapted from HL Jones, Loeb edition (1961).

² Vismann, Cornelia. 2001. ‘The Love of Ruins’, *Perspectives on Science*, Volume 9, Number 2, Summer 2001, p196

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there exists no singular artefact, or present day ruin to visit. Any written testimony which endures was not contemporaneous. Liberating any material remains from their form, philosopher Giorgio Agamben takes ruins “in their discursive form as that which is and which is in language.”³

It was this same location, between the Tigris and Euphrates, where between 1983 and 1987 Saddam Hussein reconstructed the 600-room palace of King Nebuchadnezzar II (654-562 BC), who was responsible for those hanging gardens of ancient Babylon. While the Iran-Iraq War was waged, thousands of workers were imported from Sudan to lay sixty million sand-coloured bricks over present day ruins. The edifice was completed with many inscriptions, echoing Nebuchadnezzar. One announces, "In the era of President Saddam Hussein all Babylon was reconstructed in three stages, from Nebuchadnezzar to Saddam Hussein, Babylon is rising again." And yet the palace sat empty.

Unlike absent ruins or abandoned structures, another living depository of knowledge lingers. With the rising interest in plant taxonomy during the 19th century, scientific expeditions ventured across the globe to gather native species and bring them back to the centres of ever expanding empires. Collecting, deterritorializing, categorizing and growing; over 30,000 plant species from around the world grow at the Royal Botanic Gardens at Kew, in London, today, while the herbarium holds over 7 million species, the largest in the world. Both living and dead, this depository traces a history of evolution, charting histories of generations of plant species, anatomy, systems and families. However as artist Marina Roy articulates, an archive is “not only a repository of historical memory and artifacts for preservation and future knowledge acquisition. It captures a past violence-authority captured through fundamental naming, territorialisation, planting roots, the laying down of laws and rules of conduct, and documentation of exchange.”⁴

Within the archives at Kew sits six of nine volumes of the *Flora of Iraq*. Begun in 1960 by the Ministry of Agriculture in Bagdad, this project sought to gather and categorize over 3,300 rich and diverse species of flora native to Iraq’s deserts, marshes, plains and mountains, in collaboration with the Royal Botanic Gardens. Although incomplete,⁵ it is this archive and the resources of Royal Botanic Garden Edinburgh that Abbas Akhavan used to trace endemic and native species from the salt marshes firstly destroyed by Hussein’s Ba’athist government quelling the marsh rebels, and secondly by the Iraq war, in this fertile land near the rivers Tigris and Euphrates. *Iris barnumea*, *Astragalus lobophorus* and *Campanula acutiloba* among others were sculpted with clay, cast into wax, encased within plaster, melted and cast in bronze to be presented as charred monuments in pieces across a series of white cotton sheets on the gallery floor in Akhavan’s *Study for a Monument* (2013-2015). Plant pressings within an archive containing endemic and native species are enlarged to bodily scale, while resisting verticality, they are gathered in a funerary tradition, as an act of commemoration. A monument in becoming.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Roy, Marina. 2013. *Study for a Glasshouse: Abbas Akhavan*. Peel Art Gallery, Brampton.

⁵ Governmental changes led to the project’s cessation in 1985, but it commenced again in 2011.



In an earlier film work, *Ghost* (2013), excerpted footage of returning US army troops to their families fades from image to white. Harrowing screams are heard, the spectre of trauma remains. Writer Elaine Scarry posits that it is pain that limits one's possibility to act or to create a world. She explores the effect of the body in pain and its relationship to the ability to speak, the effect of trauma on the body in both physical and conceptual form. As she states "you can watch language deteriorate. One's ability to say sentences, and then even one's ability to say words, disappears."⁶

Michel Foucault outlines "let us say that history, in its traditional form, undertook to 'memorize' the *monuments* of the past, transform them into *documents*, and lend speech to those traces which, in themselves, are often not verbal, or which say in silence something other than what they actually say; in our time, history is that which transforms *documents* into *monuments*."⁷ Excavating the tales of ancient Babylon, the Tower of Babel and the Hanging Gardens which at once exist and are absent, the garden lingers as both a symbolic site of labour and leisure, private and public, nature and humanity, but furthermore, as a site of sovereignty and war. All of these locations, stories and histories are variations on a garden.

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⁶ Geddes, Jennifer L. and Elaine Scarry. 2000. "On evil, pain and beauty: a conversation with Elaine Scarry." *The Hedgehog Review*, Summer 2000, p.79.

⁷ Foucault, Michel. 1989. *The Archaeology of Knowledge*. Routledge, London, p.7 and 8.