

ARTNEWS

APOCALYPSE NOW: SHEZAD DAWOOD ON HIS
NEW POST-BROOKLYN FILM



Shezad Dawood, *It was a time that was a time*, 2015, film still.
COURTESY PIONEER WORKS

Over the past decade, [Shezad Dawood](#)'s films have involved aliens, the occult, mysticism, and apocalypses. Even weirder than the London-based artist's subject matter is that much of it is couched in truth. *Piercing Brightness* (2013) takes its sci-fi plot from its setting, a town with the highest number of UFO sightings in England. *A Mystery Play* (2010) borrows its surreal tableaux from the tenets of Freemasonry, which influenced the architecture of the legislative building in Winnipeg where it was shot. "I love that idea of mirroring a place back to itself," Dawood said in a phone interview.

Sure enough, the story of his latest film, titled *It was a time that was a time*, begins with another strange place: Brooklyn, the site of [Pioneer Works](#), where Dawood will have his first [U.S. solo show](#) this month. (The show shares its name with Dawood's new film.) Earlier this year, Dawood walked into Pioneer Works, in Red Hook, and struck up a conversation with the art center's director, Gabriel Florenz. They kept in touch, bouncing ideas back and forth for a new film—Florenz called their friendship “a ‘love at first sight’ thing.”

“He really wanted to get involved in the community in some way,” Florenz said. “He had this proposal for a tai chi film, where he'd do these tai chi classes with the community and then turn it into this surreal film with tai chi and drone footage from the area.” Ultimately, Florenz and Dawood decided on something a little more understated—“a ritualistic, apocalyptic film that was about what would rise from the ashes after this natural disaster,” as Florenz put it. That became *It was a time that was a time*, the film that Dawood produced during a one-month residency at Pioneer Works.

In the film, Brooklyn is left in shambles, as though it has been hit by a disaster several times worse than Hurricane Sandy. The remnants of society have developed their own set of dance-like rituals—ones that are balletic and fluid, and entirely unlike the way modern humans act. (The film has no dialogue because, as Dawood said, spoken language “allows you to lie. Movement and touch require a level of presence where it's harder to lie.”)

To find the new beginning that comes out of the end of the world, Dawood and his 12 crew members—a group consisting of a choreographer, a costume designer, an experimental musician, local artists, and Brooklyn youths—became the society they were depicting. “We all collectively decided that, rather than it being a kind of fiction film, we should really try to embody this community and be documenting ourselves, almost crossing that line between fiction and belief, and trying to immerse ourselves in the acting of this community,” Dawood said. Accordingly, the film was made using only technologies—like Super 8 cameras, which can be hot-wired using saltwater batteries—that would survive a disaster.

Neon sculptures may seem to have little to do with this society, which would have no use for them, but Dawood plans to display them at Pioneer Works alongside his new film as what he called “signposts,” which are a way of helping the viewer navigate his show. “I always think there's something kind of funny about asking someone to cross the threshold into your universe,” Dawood said.

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