

CONDÉ NAST

---

# Traveler

## One Artist Asks: What If Superstorm Sandy Had Been Bigger?

Written by Molly Elizalde

To enter the creative mindset of Shezad Dawood is both alien and almost tangibly familiar. The British artist's films, which he describes as "fantastical documentaries," are guided by in-depth research of a place and its people, reimagining histories in a way that seems to run parallel to memory.

In Dawood's latest film, *It was a time that was a time*, he creates an alternate history of Superstorm Sandy's aftermath. The film was commissioned by Pioneer Works (a cultural research center and exhibition space in Brooklyn's Red Hook neighborhood) during a trip Dawood took to New York City last summer. He began thinking, "What if a much bigger flood hit? What would the surviving communities around the New York coastline look like?" Working with a group of performers and members of Red Hook Initiative (a local program for underserved youth), all of whom were affected by the storm, Dawood used the space at Pioneer Works to workshop ideas about this alternate, post-Sandy community.

"It was really cathartic," Dawood explains, "This idea that everyone moved from their trauma into how this future community might find new forms of expression for language." Filming in Staten Island, the Rockaways, and below ground in the aquarium at Coney Island, which still had not been repaired from the flood damage, the film's participants worked to embody this community through a kinetic language they created together with choreographer Lauren Bakst. The idea was that, through movement, the community would be more honest, more direct. Even the cameras and the film they used were authentic to a devastated area. Using Super 8 and early digital cameras with film capabilities ("because you could've gotten those working through homemade, salt water batteries," Dawood explains), the participants took turns filming as if they were documenting themselves in this new life.



Photo by Gabe Florenz

Two artworks, titled *Ville Urbaine* (2010) and *Pierced Flesh and Skin of Dreams* (2014), which are part of Shezad Dawood's exhibition at Pioneer Works.

The film will be shown for the first time in an exhibition at Pioneer Works. It will be on view alongside a number of Dawood's other works (which range from neon wall pieces to textile paintings) that draw similarly from place. "It's all editing in time and space," says Dawood, "The symbolism gives you access to these other universes."

In keeping with this theme that runs throughout his work, Dawood's new film comes out of a kinship with the community in Red Hook. Cultivating this relationship during his residency in the neighborhood, he creates a possible reality that's woven into the work's narrative, and is reflected back to the viewer: "I always show my films where they were made," says Dawood, "That brings a fiction back to the place. Like a kind of mirror." In that way, *It was a time that was a time* takes on the quality of a found document, an antithetical picture of New York that we can all be transported to.

*It was a time that was a time* will be on view at Pioneer Works through November 1, 2015.