



I've created a monster! Shezad Dawood on his oceanic epic Leviathan

Mass migration and climate change - not to mention a giant squid: Leviathan has it all. As his wildly ambitious new work opens in Venice, he reveals the story behind a strange odyssey that will take years to complete

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The giant squid, democracy, mental health, migration - big beasts, one and all. And each plays a role in Leviathan, a cycle of 10 films by artist Shezad Dawood that traces links from human activity to marine ecology and back again. The fates of crayfish, phytoplankton and spots on the sun are intertwined with that of the desperate souls crossing the Mediterranean in ill-suited vessels, heading for countries swinging away from liberal democracy.

Leviathan is, as its name suggests, ambitious verging on the unwieldy: Dawood jokes that he and his wife refer to the project simply as LV around the home, to stop him freaking out. As well as the films - to be shot and released over the next three years - there's a novel, paintings, sculptures and a series of talks and symposia featuring scientists and researchers who have contributed. The first two episodes, as well as a suite of paintings on cloth and a lustrous resin sculpture, will all be shown in Venice alongside this year's biennale.

Ironically, the project commenced with a severe attack of writer's block. Commissioned to pen an essay on democracy for an art publication in 2013, Dawood's writing didn't exactly go to plan. "About two years later," he says, "I had reams of notes that read like somebody with severe multiple personality disorder." He finally confessed to the editor that, instead of a coherently argued piece, all he had to offer were thousands of unprintable jottings that "contradicted each other over and over again. I almost shift from Marxist to fascist from one paragraph to the next." The editor suggested that, rather than trying to reconcile the split, Dawood approach the subject as a work of fiction - and Leviathan was spawned.

Based in east London, and with a body of work encompassing everything from painting to virtual reality, Dawood is not an artist who pursues one thought single-mindedly for long. Writing his multiple-personality novel on democracy, he started thinking "almost in parallel, about a connection between the top of the sea and the bottom". It was 2015 and the news was full of stories of perilous migration across the Mediterranean. Dawood's interest in environmental matters drew him to find links to changes taking place within the water itself.

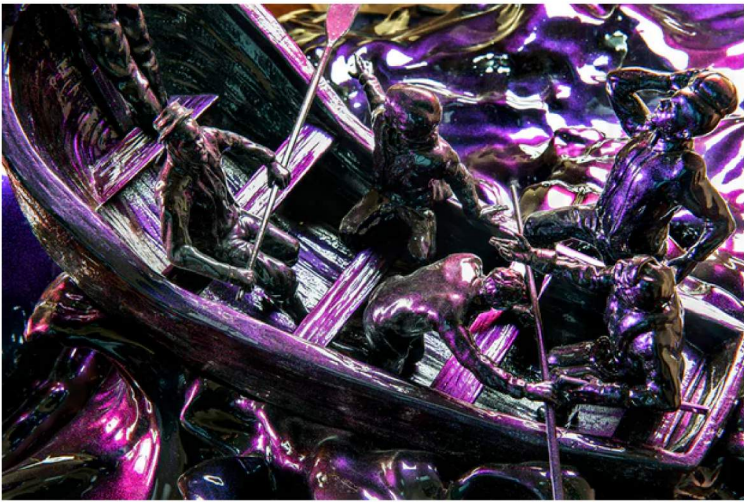


Textile paintings Mobile Phone, 2017, left, and Dark woollen gloves with red and blue Spiderman print, 2017, with the lost belongings that inspired them. Composite: Courtesy of the artist and Leviathan - Human & Marine Ecology

"I started going out and meeting with oceanographers, political scientists, migrant rights activists and neurologists. I started asking very smart people whether there was a connection between mass migration and marine conservation. I was shocked by how much they jumped on it."

At the Institute of Marine Sciences in Venice, an engineer explained to Dawood that the route from north Africa to the Italian island of Lampedusa went right over a hump on the ocean floor that had become a kind of faultline for climate change. Waters warming on one side were creating an imbalance: "The displacement of that water creates the squalls, currents and riptides that make that crossing so dangerous, so there's a direct relationship between climate change in the Med and how dangerous those crossings are."

Dawood also learned that the same environmental factors were causing a parallel migration in the sea itself, with non-native species, such as the heavy-metal-munching Louisiana crayfish, taking over the territory of its European counterpart, which changed the ecosystem and had an economic impact on the fisheries. One marine biologist told Dawood that as a left-leaning progressive, his sympathies were with the human migrants - but that his working days were spent trying "to prevent alien and invasive species coming across that hump".



On the water ... a sculpture from Leviathan by Shezad Dawood.
Photograph: Gianmaria De Luca

At the University of Milan, he met researchers who gathered the human remains, and the belongings, of migrants who had died when their ships capsized off Lampedusa: “The idea is to build up a kind of archive to help relatives find closure.” Going through photographs of their findings, Dawood found images of small plastic bags that he assumed to contain drugs, but which turned out to be earth, brought from their homelands.



Shezad Dawood.

For a keen reader of Thomas Hobbes’s Leviathan, the great 17th-century work of political philosophy, it wasn’t a big leap from democracy to creatures of the deep (Leviathan being the name of a sea monster in the Bible). But if all this sounds like an indigestibly doom-laden mash-up of Panorama and David Attenborough, think again. Described by a fellow artist as “grindhouse Derek Jarman”, Dawood’s film output bears evidence to his interest in genre and B-movies. He favours the terms “punkish” and “freaky” when describing his work.

Episode one, narrated by a character called Ben, is filled with manic onomatopoeia and Tourette’s-style tics. The story, such as one can grasp it, rattles between visits to the giant squid in its specimen tank in London’s Natural History Museum and memories of a global disaster featuring sunspots, phytoplankton blooms and mass suicide. Dawood recalls one spicy passage, about monkey-men masturbating to internet porn, causing a frisson when the piece played to prospective funders. “Monkey on monkey, multiple monkey penetration, with and without plastic penetrative aids, monkey on goat...”

The novel will be released chapter by chapter online, echoing both the political pamphleteering of Hobbes's era, and the serialisation of Victorian novels. Dawood takes a more contemporary point of reference for the film cycle, referring to it (only half jokingly) as a "box set". Anyone wanting to binge-watch will have to wait until 2020, though, when the cycle is slated for completion.



Post-apocalyptic Plymouth ... a gif featuring scenes from the Leviathan film strand's Episode 2: Yasmine. Photograph: Courtesy of the artist and UBIK Productions

With shooting locations that trace the migration route from North Africa in reverse, Dawood is on the hunt for spectacular sites that bring historical resonance to the work. The lighthouse and fortifications of the Plymouth breakwater, for example, make it into episode two, exuding post-apocalyptic squalor. "It's not that hard to find the end of the world," says Dawood cheerfully, "if you're looking for it."

Leviathan, by Shezad Dawood, is at Palazzina Canonica and Fortuny Factory, Venice, 7 May-24 September