

IMAN ISSA: MATERIAL FOR 2018

Spike Island Bristol 17 February to 15 April

Review by David Trigg
Art Monthly, Issue 415, pp. 29-30
April 2018

The tearing down of political monuments – whether Confederate statues in the US, images of Hosni Mubarak in Egypt or communist effigies in the former Soviet Union – reminds us of the transitory nature of such honorific structures and the ideologies underpinning them. In Bristol, the debate continues to rage over whether a statue of Edward Colston should remain, given the 17th-century philanthropist's involvement with the transatlantic slave trade. Not far from Spike Island, the Colston Hall concert venue has recently renounced its contentious name in favour of an as yet undecided alternative. This cultural backdrop makes Iman Issa's solo exhibition especially potent because much of her work stems from an interest in the way that history is constructed, mediated and memorialised, and how events of the past are understood and interpreted in the present.

Reimagining public monuments is the point of departure for *Material*, 2010-12, which comprises ten sculptural installations, or 'displays'. Objects, photographs, vitrines, plinths and wall texts (also functioning as titles) are all employed in what are ostensibly proposals for alternatives to existing, yet undisclosed, monuments. *Material for a sculpture proposed as an alternative to a monument that has become an embarrassment to its people*, 2010, consists of a walnut table on which two spherical lamps sit, illuminating alternately with a warm glow. Nearby, *Material for a sculpture commemorating the life of a soldier who died defending his nation against intruding enemies*, 2012, includes four coloured geometric sculptures resting on a long white plinth. Elsewhere is *Material for a sculpture representing a monument erected in the spirit of defiance of a larger power*, 2012, in which a wooden obelisk rests on its side, while *Material for a sculpture commemorating an economist whose name now marks the streets and squares he once frequented*, 2011, displays a man's personal effects in a vitrine, including amongst other things a pair of shoes, braces, a watch, cuff links and a wallet. It is hard to imagine how any of these exquisitely crafted maquettes might become actual public monuments, in what sort of locations they might be sited and on what scale. Yet the Egyptian artist is no

SYLVIA KOUVALI

iconoclast; she claims that her ambiguous montages are not about replacing one form with another but are instead an attempt to understand how such forms operate as carriers of meaning. Indeed, she insists that her displays are not conclusive but simply proposals that could themselves potentially change.

With *Material*, Issa suggests that our understanding of history, like language, is malleable and subject to modification; it exists primarily in the nebulous space of memory and lived experience. This notion underpins *Common Elements*, 2013, an installation presenting decontextualised quotes from the autobiographies of four public figures alongside pared-down sculptures and photographs featuring still-life constructions and architectural details. Edward Said, Nawal El Saadawi, Taha Hussein and Mourid Barghouti are the selected authors, yet their identities are unimportant since it is the way in which their writings pertain to broader socio-political issues rather than personal narratives that interests Issa. Their texts are springboards to explore how personal memory can become collective and how the subjective responses of viewers to abstracted texts and images can create new connections and meanings. A similar approach is employed in *Book of Facts: A Proposition*, 2017, a cryptic tome documenting an exhibition that will never exist. Each page features a short description of an absent image accompanied by a cartographic diagram showing the placement of objects within an undefined space. As with all of Issa's works, the onus is firmly on the viewer to make sense of all this, to weave together the multiple references to philosophy, religion, politics and more, in an attempt to uncover her thesis (if one exists).

While Issa's obfuscatory approach can irritate, the space she creates for free association and creative thinking is at times exhilarating. Take, for example, *The Revolutionary*, 2010, an audio piece made with text-to-speech software and experienced via headphones. A stilted, synthetic voice tells of a fictional protagonist with humble beginnings who became a revolutionary. Although many personal facts are revealed, we learn nothing about the man's political cause or revolutionary actions. Listeners are instead encouraged to consider how revolutionary thought and behaviour might best be defined in 2018 and what it might mean to be revolutionary today. What is the relevance of history to the present? That is the fundamental question permeating this elegant exhibition, which is predicated on inviting viewers to participate in the making of meaning. Issa has provided the materials; viewers are left to activate them.