

AUDIO DESCRIPTION

Issam Kourbaj, *Dark Water, Burning World: 149 Moons and Counting* 2016 –

Repurposed bicycle steel mudguards, extinguished matches, and clear resin

Collection: Artist



Photo: Rob Harris

TRANSCRIPT

This is an audio description of *Dark Water, Burning World: 149 Moons and Counting*, an installation created between 2016 and 2023 by Issam Kourbaj, a Syrian born artist. It will take about 4 minutes to listen to.

Dark Water, Burning World: 149 Moons and Counting is one of seven artworks situated in the second gallery space within the exhibition, *The Weight of Words*, at the Henry Moore Institute in Leeds. It comprises 149 miniature boats made from repurposed bicycle steel mudguards, extinguished matches, and

clear resin. The sculpture, which is displayed on the floor of the gallery, can be viewed from different perspectives, but, for this description, we will describe the full installation, before moving on to describing the detailed individual boats that make up the piece.

Kourbaj placed every unique boat individually. They all face in the same direction which gives the work a visual dynamic of forward movement. The installation spans half of the gallery floor measuring around 10 metres in length and a metre in width. The installation begins in the centre of the room and moves diagonally towards the top left corner of the gallery space, from the point at which you enter. It continues slightly into the subsequent gallery at a consistent flow, before the boats appear to pass through the gallery wall. Within the installation, the boats seem to be swaying right to left as they progress up in streamline. This mimics the idea of traveling through the water towards its destination, moving due to the water's current, and the reflection of the boats on the polished floor of the gallery adds to the impression of them travelling across water. The installation is surrounded by black tape to prevent damage from visitors.

Kourbaj's small boats vary in size from around 7 centimetres to around 18 centimetres and are made from cut and folded bicycle mudguards, onto which burnt matches are set upright in clear resin. The boats resemble rowing boats, flat at the rear and pointed at the front. The painted metal surface of the boats is worn and chipped, giving the impression that they are old and have travelled a long distance. Their colours, including red, white, brown, and blue are faded. Some boats have blue letters and numbers painted on their backs which relates to their placement. There are around twenty matchsticks in each boat. They huddle together. Some boats contain matchsticks of varying heights, giving the impression of families. They are all burnt, variously damaged, and have a distinctly vulnerable presence.

Throughout the galleries you can hear sounds from two other artworks. Male and female voices read out a series of various, perhaps unfamiliar words in English and Irish for Caroline Bergvall's sound and video installation *Say Parsley*, which is located in the third gallery but is audible throughout all three gallery spaces. You can also hear the constant ticking of letters on Shilpa Gupta's sculpture *Words Come From Ears*, which is in the second gallery space. Gupta's sound can be heard from the moving letters on the kind of flapboard signs that might be found in an airport or train station.

The March 2011 uprisings in Syria sparked a civil war that continues to ravage Kourbaj's homeland. Since the collapse of the Arab Spring, he has dedicated his practice to raising awareness about the plight of Syrians. In this installation, the number of boats corresponds to the number of months that passed since the crisis began. One new boat will be added to the display every month during this exhibition, and the title will change accordingly. The fleet of tiny, vulnerable boats are an anti-monument to the scale and tragedy of the refugee crisis.