

Art: Issam Kourbaj

The fractured lives of Syrian refugees

Inspired by, and based on, the refugee crisis of his native Syria, Issam Kourbaj's latest project is impossible to appreciate from a distance. Formed of five installations, it depicts loose models of the Syrian refugee camps that have sprung up as a result of the country's bitter civil war, but it is only when you get close that the real stories reveal themselves.

Ripped up book pages, discarded medicine packaging, pieces of sheet music: such fragments of culture make up every one of the 5000 'tents' populating the model camps, torn from their original home and stripped of their full purpose like the refugees themselves. Fencing in the tents is a perimeter of over 1700 burned matches, each one representing a day since the Syrian uprising of March 2011.

The project, called *Another Day Lost*, is part of London's Shubbak festival, which is celebrating contemporary Arab culture from Saturday until July 26. For Kourbaj, the festival is a perfect opportunity to draw attention to a war which has displaced over 11 million people.

"For me, not being able to go back to my own culture and not being able to see my own



■ Issam Kourbaj's *Another Day Lost* at Hampstead's Heath Street Baptist Church

childhood places has not been an easy issue to digest," says the artist, who left his home country in 1984 to study in Moscow. "So therefore the only way I could come to terms with it – and this is my privilege of being an artist – was by dealing with these issues through my work."

The five installations, or camps, in *Another Day Lost* are presented across five

different venues around London – including Heath Street Baptist Church – to reflect the geographic pattern of refugee presence outside Syria in regions such as Jordan and Lebanon.

"Scale" and "fragmentation" are two words that Kourbaj uses often: the sheer number of tents remind you of the scale of the crisis, while their incomplete aesthetics remind you of lives

separated from everything they hold dear.

While currently residing in Cambridge, Kourbaj explains that much of his family remains in Syria and face a daily battle to retain a sense of purpose.

"Like any family, my family is under the pressure of everyday life where there is often no water, no electricity, no food, no hope. "Not knowing what tomorrow

is hiding from you – it is difficult to accept that this is the meaning of life. Not knowing if tomorrow you'll wake up with anything to do, or whether you'll even exist."

As a lecturer in art at Cambridge University, Kourbaj passionately believes that art can be used as a tool against the "giant of the war machines". Nonetheless, he is aware of the lasting effect war will have on Syria and says his aim is to simply raise questions about the conflict, rather than to act as "political propaganda".

"I believe [Syria] is sadly not going to be repaired for many generations to come," he adds. "We have seen in history that psychological damage is very long lasting, more than any physical damage. So this is my way of dealing with that, as a Syrian, but equally as an artist.

"I'm really not interested in criticising anybody: Britain, Europe, anybody. It is not my job. My job is to create a question and this is what I ask: to look at the scale of the installation. Look at the scale of burning a match every day to mark another lost day of a nation."

Alex Bellotti

■ The Shubbak festival runs from Saturday until July 26. Visit shubbak.co.uk

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