



Ali Cherri
Humble and quiet and soothing as mud
September 13, 2023 – January 7, 2024

Swiss Institute presents *Humble and quiet and soothing as mud*, Ali Cherri's first solo exhibition in the United States, which pivots on mud as the primordial material of civilization in creation myths, cultural artifacts and ecology.

From ancient Sumerian mythology to Jewish folklore, Maori and Chinese creation myths to Hindu and Yoruba cosmogony, humankind has time and again been narrativized as originating from mud. Houses, pots and other vessels made from clay were instrumental to the beginnings of societies as they were used for cooking, heating and gathering food. It is from the aqueous solution covering the Earth, where water and soil met, that the first single-celled organisms emerged, birthing every living creature on Earth today.

On the first floor of *Humble and quiet and soothing as mud*, a newly commissioned sculptural installation is fleetingly animated by a choreography of moving lights, retelling the myth of Gilgamesh in a scene surrounding the fabled figure with other characters from the epic poem. In Mesopotamian mythology, Gilgamesh's rival-turned-companion Enkidu is formed from clay and water to help the semi-mythic king of Uruk on his ventures to achieve immortality. The bodies of Cherri's sculptures are composed of mud, with masks and fragments of found objects serving as their faces. Cherri buys these sculptural fragments in auctions, where prices fluctuate with changing desires for the objects on sale, mirroring their economic value as cultural artifacts and their political potency in recent discussions of reparations. These objects, which are often forged and then smuggled abroad, are less a question of cultural authenticity for Cherri than about the perpetuation of a lived tradition - an unfixing from the grips of archaeological time. Yet mud is the material that best preserves archeological finds. What memories might be held by its shifting topographies?

Featured on the second floor is Cherri's celebrated three-channel video installation *Of Men and Gods and Mud* (2022), for which he was awarded the Silver Lion at the 59th International Art Exhibition of La Biennale di Venezia. Shot at the Merowe Dam on the Nile River in Northern Sudan, the camera follows a group of brick makers as they shape these fundamental building materials from mud. The construction of the dam - the largest hydropower plant in Africa - in the early 2000s, led to the displacement of more than 50,000 people, social unrest, the destruction of ecosystems, and the submersion of cultural sites and artifacts. In Cherri's video installation, the gargantuan power plant looms over the arduous manual labor of the brick layers, giving rise to an allegorical tale that merges land and water, drought and deluge, destruction and creation. At a moment when water conflicts and environmentally fueled population displacements are on the rise, Cherri's work merges past aesthetic imaginings and present planetary catastrophes as a portal for more livable futures to emerge.

Swiss Institute gratefully acknowledges the Ali Cherri Exhibition Circle: Carla Chammas, Galerie Imane Farès, Sami Khalifé, MD, Laura Lati, and Elisa Nuyten.

Ali Cherri wishes to thank: Rémi Bonhomme, Imane Farès, Martina Sabbadini. Ali Cherri Studio: Valentin Rolović (director), Loïc Leclercq, Théophile Ducreux, Nour El Kaddour, Quentin Garo and Farès Hadj Sadok.

This exhibition is organized by Stefanie Hessler, Director, and Alison Coplan, Senior Curator and Head of Programs.

About Ali Cherri

Ali Cherri (b. Beirut, Lebanon) is a filmmaker and visual artist based in Paris. He received a Bachelor of Graphic Design at the American University of Beirut and a Master of Performing Arts from DasArts - Academy of Theatre and Dance, Amsterdam. Recent solo exhibitions include *If you prick us, do we not bleed?*, National Gallery, London (2022); *Tales from the Riverbed*, Clark House, Mumbai (2018); *From Fragment to Whole*, Jönköping County Museum, Jönköping (2018); *Satellite 10: Somniculus Programme*, CAPC Centre d'art contemporain de Bordeaux and Jeu de Paume, Bordeaux and Paris (2017); and *A Taxonomy of Fallacies: The Life of Dead Objects*, Sursock Museum, Beirut (2016). His work has recently been exhibited at the 15th Sharjah Biennale, Sharjah (2023); the 5th Kochi-Muziris Biennale, India (2022); the Venice Biennale, Venice (2022); Manifesta 13, Marseille (2020); the Institut Valencià d'Art Modern, Valencia (2020); Jameel Arts Center, Dubai (2019); the 5th Ural Industrial Biennale of Contemporary Art, Yekaterinburg (2019); Para Site, Hong Kong (2019); the 8th Melle International Biennale of Contemporary Art, Melle (2018); the 13th Sharjah Biennale, Sharjah (2017); MAXXI, Rome (2017), and Centre Pompidou, Paris (2017). He is the recipient of a Harvard University's Robert E. Fulton Fellowship (2016) and a Rockefeller Foundation Award (2017), and was shortlisted for The Abraaj Group Art Prize (2018). In 2021, he was Artist in Residence at the National Gallery, London and in 2022, he participated in *the International Art Exhibition of La Biennale di Venezia, The Milk of Dreams*, for which he received the Silver Lion for a Promising Young Participant. His work is featured in public collections including: Art Jameel, Dubai; Musée national d'art moderne/Centre Georges Pompidou, Paris; National Gallery, London; British Museum, London; MACBA, Barcelona; Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York; and Sursock Museum, Beirut.

About Swiss Institute

Founded in 1986, Swiss Institute (SI) is an independent non-profit contemporary art institution dedicated to promoting forward-thinking and experimental art making through innovative exhibitions, education, and programs. Committed to the highest standards of curatorial and educational excellence, SI serves as a platform for emerging artists, catalyzes new perspectives on celebrated work, and fosters appreciation for under-recognized positions. SI is committed to being an organization that is diverse, equitable, accessible, and environmentally conscious in its work, structure, and programming. Open to the public free-of-charge, Swiss Institute seeks to explore how a Swiss context can be the starting point for international conversations in the fields of visual and performing arts, design, and architecture.

SI Programming is made possible in part with public funds from Pro Helvetia, Swiss Arts Council; the New York State Council on the Arts, with the support of Governor Kathy Hochul and the New York State Legislature; and the New York City Department of Cultural Affairs in partnership with the City Council. Main sponsors include LUMA Foundation, The Andy Warhol Foundation for the Visual Arts, Friends of SI and the Horace W. Goldsmith Foundation. Exhibitions are made possible in part by the SI Artist Vision Fund with leadership support provided by the SI Board of Trustees, Ghislaine Brenninkmeijer, the Kevin Wendle Foundation, and the Freedman Family Foundation. SI gratefully acknowledges Swiss Re as SI ONSITE Partner, Vitra as Design Partner, Crozier Fine Arts as Preferred Shipping Art Logistics Partner, and SWISS as Travel Partner.

Critical operating support has been provided to SI in 2020-23 as part of a collective fundraising effort with a consortium of New York non-profit institutions. We thank the following supporters: Mellon Foundation, Teiger Foundation, The Willem de Kooning Foundation, The Helen Frankenthaler Foundation, Cy Twombly Foundation, The Stavros Niarchos Foundation, The Destina Foundation, Henry Luce Foundation, The Arison Arts Foundation, The Fox Aarons Foundation, The Jacques and Natasha Gelman Foundation, David Rockefeller Fund, Sotheby's, Blavatnik Family Foundation, Robert Lehman Foundation, The Jill and Peter Kraus Foundation, Imperfect Family Foundation, The Milton and Sally Avery Arts Foundation, The Richard Pousette-Dart Foundation, and The Jay Defeo Foundation.

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