

**FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE**

**LAWRIE SHABIBI AT THE ARMORY SHOW**

***Canto III* by Wafaa Bilal**

Booth 560, Pier 94, NYC, New York, 4-8 March 2015

Lawrie Shabibi is proud to present *Canto III* a solo project by New York based Iraqi-American artist Wafaa Bilal at The Armory Show.

*Canto III* is directly inspired by a tribute that the members of the Ba'ath party in Iraq planned in honour of their ruler, Saddam Hussein, at the height of his power: to propel a golden statue in his likeness into space to orbit Earth for all eternity. This absurd idea highlights the extremes the personality cult of Saddam Hussain reached before his downfall. This tribute never took place.

Bilal references this tribute in *Canto III*, juxtaposing the larger-than-life man who was used as justification for a U.S. war, with the everyday realities of the American men who fought that war. Specifically, Bilal will invite a selection of American war veterans who served in Iraq to assist with the artwork's fabrication, for which they will be compensated at minimum wage. Through this action, the artist seeks to raise awareness of the neglect veterans face on their return home.

*Canto III* is rooted in a broader history of despotic rulers who seek to immortalize their own image. The title derives from a passage in Lord Byron's poem *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage* (1812) written in close proximity to Percy Bysshe Shelley, who followed with *Ozymandias* (1817) a few years later. Both texts describe visions of ruined empires once thought to be indestructible.

"This project is intended as an inquiry into homelands and frontiers," Wafaa Bilal comments, "from my homeland of Iraq, to my new home here in the United States, to our peoples' forays into outer space. Through explorations of subjects such as the treatment of veterans returning home across the globe, the egomania of a dictator, and the mundane brutality of the systems we construct, I hope to shed light on how borders and political exigencies can impact the people that give the most support to their homelands."

"We are thrilled to give Wafaa Bilal a platform to present this fascinating new project which is highly topical, commenting as it does on a specific history of the region and more generally on extremes of the human condition." says Gallery Director and Co-founder Asmaa Al-Shabibi. "To debut the project in Wafaa's home city of New York, in our first presentation in the Armory Show feels right – we look forward to seeing people's reactions to the piece and starting a wider dialogue."

*Canto III* will represent Lawrie Shabibi's debut at the seventeenth edition of The Armory Show this March, the first time they have attended the New York fair. They are one of fifteen galleries invited to take part in Armory Focus: Middle East, North Africa and the Mediterranean, curated by Omar Kholeif.

### Media Contact

For more information, images or media enquiries contact Nadine Fattouh

[nadine@lawrieshabibi.com](mailto:nadine@lawrieshabibi.com)

+9714 3469906

### Artist Biography

**Wafaa Bilal** (b. 1966, Najaf, Iraq) lives and works in New York. He is known internationally for his online performative and provocative interactive works, which deal with international politics, surveillance and internal dynamics: often using his body as a canvas. Bilal's work is constantly informed by the experience of fleeing his homeland and existing simultaneously in two worlds – his home in the “comfort zone” of the U.S. and his consciousness of the “conflict zone” in Iraq. Bilal suffered repression under Saddam Hussein's regime and fled Iraq in 1991 during the first Gulf War. After two years in refugee camps in Kuwait and Saudi Arabia, he came to the U.S. where he graduated from the University of New Mexico and then obtained an MFA at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago. He is currently an Assistant Arts Professor at New York University's Tisch School of the Arts New York. Bilal's works are part of the public collections of Los Angeles County Museum, USA; Mathaf - Arab Museum of Modern Art, Doha, Qatar; The Museum of Contemporary Photography Chicago, USA and the Milwaukee Art Museum Milwaukee, USA. He has been featured and reviewed in many publications including the New York Times, Chicago Tribune (where he was named 2008 Artist of the Year for his *Domestic Tension* installation), Art Asia Pacific, The Huffington Post and Harpers Bazaar Art. In 2008 City Lights published *Shoot an Iraqi: Art, Life and Resistance Under the Gun* about Bilal's life and the *Domestic Tension* project.

### About Lawrie Shabibi

Lawrie Shabibi is a contemporary art gallery housed in a 3000 square foot warehouse in Dubai's Alserkal Avenue. The gallery's programme supports international contemporary artists mainly from the Middle East, North Africa and South Asia. By holding a regular programme of exhibitions, screenings and talks, publishing catalogues and participating in international art fairs, the gallery engages the wider local and international community. The gallery represents Hamra Abbas, Adel Abidin, Shaikha Al Mazrou, Wafaa Bilal, Asad Faulwell, Nadia Kaabi-Linke, Taus Makhacheva, Nabil Nahas, Driss Ouadahi, Nathaniel Rackowe, Marwan Sahmarani, Larissa Sansour, Yasam Sasmazer, Shahpour Pouyan and Adeel uz Zafar.

### About the Armory Show and FOCUS: MENAM

The Armory is the leading New York fair for modern and contemporary art, in its seventeenth year. It is the sixth year the fair has highlighted a chosen geographical location as a curated section. Omar Kholeif, curator of FOCUS: MENAM is currently Curator at the Whitechapel Gallery, London, Senior Visiting Curator at Cornerhouse and HOME, Manchester as well as Senior Editor of Ibraaz Publishing. Focus: MENAM is presented in collaboration with lead cultural partner Edge of Arabia and education partner, Art Jameel.

### Further notes

The inspiration for the title comes from a well-known passage from Byron's poem *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage* (1812) which he wrote when in close proximity to Shelley who followed with *Ozymandias* a few years later. They were written shortly after Napoleon's defeat at the Battle of Waterloo and therefore are rife with visions of the ruins of an

empire once thought to be indestructible. This was the time when the British were making archeological excavations in Syria and Egypt, sculptures they found are still in the British Museum collection today. Byron and Shelley probably didn't actually see the finds in person but their poems speak of the effigies created in honour of rulers who had absolute power but were violently overthrown.

**Extract from Lord Byron's *Canto III* from *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage* (March 1812)**

Stop! – for thy tread is on an Empire's dust!  
An Earthquake's spoil is sepulchered below!  
Is thy spot marked with no colossal bust?  
Nor column trophied for triumphal show?  
None: but the moral's truth tells simpler so.  
As the ground was before, thus let it be;-  
How that red rain hath made the harvest grow!  
And is this all the world has gain'd by thee,  
Thou first and last of fields! king-making Victory?  
(stanza xvii: 11. 1-9)

**Extract from Shelley's *Ozymandias* (1818):**

Half sunk, a shatter'd visage lies, whose frown  
And wrinkled lip and sneer of cold command  
Tell that its sculptor well those passions read  
Which yet survive – stamp'd on these lifeless things –  
The hand that mock'd them and the heard that fed;  
And on the pedestal these words appear:  
'My name is Ozymandias, king of kings:  
Look on my works, ye Mighty and despair!'  
Nothing beside remains. Round the decay  
Of that colossal wreck, boundless and bare,  
The lone and level sands stretch far away."