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## *The Haunted Museum*

Nadira Husain

In *The Haunted Museum*, Nadira Husain crafts a reappropriative narrative around artifacts displaced during the colonial period from their places of origin to European museums, breathing life back into objects that are held captive within institutional displays.

More specifically, she reinterprets Egyptian artifacts from the Tell el-Amarna period, focusing on the iconic bust of Nefertiti, housed in Berlin's Neues Museum. Husain approaches Nefertiti as a symbol of Berlin's post-migratory identity, caught between two realities: on one hand, her origins in Egypt, where she remains absent, and on the other, her significant presence in Berlin's cultural landscape since the 1920s, where she became a cultural icon to its citizens, standing as a key masterpiece to this day. Surrounding her are references to the architectural complex of Babylon's Ishtar Gate and Processional Way: here, the focus is not on isolated objects, as is often the case with most artifacts displayed in Western museums, but on entire architectural elements that were displaced and reconstructed in a museal context— Berlin's Pergamon Museum.

Husain weaves these elements into a three-dimensional triptych consisting of painted canvases, topped with painted capitals and adorned with mirrors and ceramic details, evoking Babylonian columns. The panels portray Nefertiti as a modern-day immigrant in Berlin, dressed in Adidas clothing and captured in nonchalant everyday scenes – a nod to Amarna art, which revolutionized the artistic conventions of ancient Egypt, particularly during the reign of Nefertiti's husband, by introducing genre scenes depicting royal family life. Here, Nefertiti becomes the protagonist in a narrative of emancipation and reappropriation. She is sometimes pensive, sometimes active, but fully unafraid to look back at us, inverting the gaze long bestowed upon her, and ultimately symbolically exiting – at least, a version of her – Procession Street atop a Babylonian lion, directly mirroring the decorative figures on the reconstructed city walls. The feline creature – extended here to a lioness with her cub – is both a character and recurring motif in the installation; exuding a sense of maternal, mammalian protection, the texture of its fur pattern imbues the atmosphere of each panel, anchoring the viewers' eyes throughout the narrative.

The narration's unfolding, non-linear and open-ended, is inspired by a fusion of Mughal miniature compositions and comic-book strips. Husain crafts maximalist, multilayered compositions with no strict hierarchies, which absurdly interweave high and low-brow cultural codes. Buti flowers and Babylonian tile patterns thus intersect with painted Nefertiti replicas – usually made for tourists in Egypt – and monobloc chairs, making up an inevitably kitsch urban landscape. The visual saturation and exaggeration of the pieces both robs viewers of singular entry points into the compositions and highlights the irreverence towards hierarchical systems, thus subverting the traditional categorizations of ornamentation and art. Ornamentation, in

*The Haunted Museum* and Husain's practice overall, is not used to complement main subjects – it is artistically autonomous and imbued with Islamic art notions of closeness to the infinite.

Amidst the dense web of visual richness and aliveness of its figures, *The Haunted Museum* stakes a loud claim to reappropriate the museum apparatus. It permeates the piece – in the monumentalisation of the installation, in Nefertiti's gaze, in our own reflection through the mirror appliques – and urges us to address the question of restitution, prompting us to reflect on our own role within the legitimising framework of the museum itself. The bust of Nefertiti has been the subject of restitution claims by Egypt almost since its arrival in Germany, much like the Babylonian artifacts claimed by Iraq—demands that have consistently been denied. This extraction and relocation of major elements of Egyptian and Mesopotamian heritage were made possible through the colonial complicity between Germany, France, and the United Kingdom, underscoring the intrinsic connection between museums and colonial history. Beyond this, the work also highlights parallel issues such as the economic and cultural capital accumulated by Western countries through the appropriation of these objects, and the strict border policies imposed on populations from the very regions where the artifacts were taken.

Ultimately, *The Haunted Museum* explores the role these artifacts play in European museums for post-migration communities, and the symbolic and imaginary power they generate, seeking, through pictorial narration, to science-fictionalize them. Husain revives the Babylonian architectural complex, rendering it a mythical meeting point – an inhabited, contemporary city structure – where viewers fluctuate along questions of multiculturalism and reappropriation, under Nefertiti's watchful eye.