

BRIDGET CRONE

# Comparative Monument (Shellal): *Steadfastness and the Temporal Body...*



*What is more important than resistance is our living...  
I mean this “sumud” (steadfastness) is resistance.<sup>1</sup>*

Tom Nicholson’s work is often discussed in relation to memory or remembrance. Most commonly drawing is evoked as the mnemonic practice at the heart of his work—both the activities of drawing through to the expanded and collective practices of walking (or marching), which might be understood as a kind of drawing on a collective scale. This essay shifts this focus to ideas of ‘presence’ and ‘time’ in Nicholson’s work, and it maps these terms through the third in the *Comparative Monuments* series, *Comparative Monument (Shellal)* (2014-17).<sup>2</sup> Explorations of ‘presence’ and its temporal modalities have a complex relationship within *Comparative Monument (Shellal)* where these concepts overlap, conflict and produce many knots and entanglements. Most significantly these occur between the spiritual and the secular, and between the terms “presence” and “present” (being present, the present moment of time). These complexities emerge from a series of works that each deal with the question of repatriation and return, focusing as they do upon the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and the struggle for an independent, secular Palestinian state.

In *Comparative Monument (Shellal)* these questions centre around the mosaic discovered by members of the Australian and New Zealand Army Corps (ANZACS) in 1917, now in the Australian War Memorial (AWM), and an additional mosaic by the Australian artist, Napier Waller that is also situated in the AWM. Nicholson’s work activates questions of repatriation that go beyond a straightforward notion of ‘return’ to ask: to whom and where would the mosaic be repatriated and in what form? Indeed, the work questions the very notion of *return* predicated upon an initial departure, a schism, a removal or a break. *Comparative Monument (Shellal)* therefore demands that we reformulate our perceptions of time and presence to one that disavows the division of time into a ‘before’ and ‘after’. This is a way of thinking about time without division so that the idea of return exists without departure, exile without leaving, and presence without absence. It is suggested in *Fragments from conversations with Nuri el-Okbi*, one of the videos that makes up *Comparative Monument (Shellal)*, in which el-Okbi, a Bedouin Palestinian activist, invokes life itself—the continued process of *living*—as the greatest form of resistance: “What is more important than resistance is our living... this ‘*sumud*’ (steadfastness) is resistance.”<sup>3</sup>

This practice of “*sumud*” or the “assertion of continued presence” is to stand firm, to stay alive, to remain, as Djon Mundine proposes in relation to Aboriginal Australians’ ongoing struggles for sovereignty.<sup>4</sup> Yet it also forces us to consider what ‘presence’ is and how it might be practised, as well as the influence that “the assertion of continued presence” or “*sumud*” has upon our understanding of time as continuity, rather than as separation or division. While both el-Okbi and Mundine refer to the practice of “steadfastness” as *living* through the continual violence of colonialism in its various forms, “steadfastness” or “continued presence” can also be considered in connection with an understanding of presence as a form of spiritual embodiment.<sup>5</sup> This is an understanding that is directly related to the Shellal mosaics, which are embedded in a form of animism inherent to the Byzantine tradition, and it is further emphasised by Nicholson’s activation of the Shellal mosaic in relation to the mosaic and stained glass windows by Waller (an ex-WWI soldier) that are located adjacent to it in the Hall of Memory in the AWM. In entangling the Shellal mosaic with the Waller mosaic and windows, Nicholson activates a confrontation between different orders of being in the world—the monotheistic in relation to the unitary and transcendent nature of Waller’s golden dome, and the embedded and embodied world that characterises animism. These are both simple and complex questions to raise at a point when the human

(and the human body) is challenged in so many ways, not only by the incursion of the technological but most significantly by the shift towards a competitive inhumanity and the conflict to be ‘alive’ (and to be recognised as such) against the odds of war, displacement, dispossession, austerity and so on. As American writer and theorist Tom Keenan so eloquently questions in his essay ‘Or Are We Human Beings’, why are appeals to humanity—the demand to be recognised as “human”—so common today?<sup>6</sup>

The Shellal mosaic was discovered during the Second Battle of Gaza at a site between Beersheba (now Be’er Sheva) and Khan Yunis, “on the main road from Jerusalem to Egypt”.<sup>7</sup> Uncovered by Australian soldiers on the 17th April 1917 and dated circa 561-562 CE, the mosaic was an elaborate floor piece measuring approximately 8 metres by 5.5 metres, rich with animal and fish motifs, and images of fruit, doves, olive branches, baskets, vases and birdcages. Following laborious work (in extreme heat) to excavate the mosaic, it was shipped to Australia in December 1918 after a dispute over its potential ownership (with Britain laying a claim through the War Trophies Committee in London). After touring Australia with other ‘war trophies’ and artefacts, the mosaic was cemented into the wall of the Australian War Memorial in 1941. It is significant to note that at this point, the Shellal mosaic goes from being a floor mosaic rich in its own symbolism to becoming a symbol of acquisition and conquest. Comprising a complex interrelationship of parts (“I am the true vine; ye are the branches”<sup>8</sup>) and a symbolic world that one enters in walking upon it, the mosaic undergoes a shift from the horizontal to the vertical once affixed to the wall. This move from the floor to the wall in the War Memorial is significant for the manner in which it alters the position of the viewer from an embodied experience of being within the space of the mosaic to that of a disembodied eye that looks at or upon the mosaic from a distance. This disembodied view is precisely that found in the Waller mosaics, which were designed to be viewed from afar and is thus contrary to the original intentions for the Shellal mosaic. Nicholson plays with this tension between the vertical and horizontal placement of the mosaic in *Comparative Monument (Shellal)* by opting to display his mosaics in the manner in which the original Shellal mosaics first arrived in Australia and were exhibited; each decorative motif or element of the mosaic separated from the rest and contained in a series of wooden crates, having been placed in plaster-of-Paris beds in order to be safely transported from Palestine.

Nicholson’s *Comparative Monument (Shellal)* therefore does not proceed from a simple juxtaposition of the Waller and Shellal mosaics, but from a transposition and weaving of the two together. The work comprises a series of glass mosaics displayed in shallow wooden boxes, and a two-channel video work. The mosaics in *Comparative Monument (Shellal)* have been made by processing the Shellal mosaic through the visual system of the Waller, so that Waller’s tiles and colour system are utilised to remake the Shellal. In effect, the two mosaics are folded or knotted together. Most importantly, the process that Nicholson undertakes in remaking the Shellal mosaic through the Waller recognises the location of the two mosaics in the AWM. Situated adjacent for more than fifty years, *Comparative Monument (Shellal)* suggests that neither mosaic is unchanged through their life in proximity. It is also the entanglement of two visual systems—the linear, unitary system of Waller’s Art Deco style, on the one hand, and the elaborate Byzantine whirls and folds, on the other. Situated (*living*) adjacent to each other and sharing a history of site since Waller completed his Hall of Memory in 1958, Nicholson’s gambit recognises that the Shellal and Waller mosaics have been irrevocably linked despite their contrasting visual and conceptual systems. In preparing for his commission, Waller made a series of paintings examining details of the Shellal mosaic, yet his own mosaic is markedly different in style and vision. (The first chapter of Nicholson’s video begins with an image and caption: “Detail of the Shellal mosaic from a painting by Napier Waller.”) Unlike the dispersed nature of the Shellal mosaic in



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which animal forms and other objects are situated across it in a complex bestiary linked by vines and other decorative elements, the Waller corrals the space to direct its figures—representatives of army, navy and airforce—towards a singular, golden lit dome.<sup>9</sup> The contrast is immediately stark, between a complex horizontal interrelationship of animals, vegetal and other decorative forms, and a vertical movement of human forms towards a singular transcendence that is suggested by a soft golden glow at the central, highest point of the dome. Waller *represents* symbols of loss and service—the soldier, sailor, airman and servicewoman who move upwards through the divide between the human and spiritual whereas, in its original orientation as a floor mosaic, one would enter *into* the physical space of the Shellal. In the Waller, a division is set up as a true ascendancy in which those figures that display model Australian qualities rise upwards towards the golden heights of the dome. These qualities—resource, candour, devotion, curiosity, independence, comradeship, patriotism, chivalry and loyalty as they are named by Waller—are represented through a series of stained glass windows situated in the lower portion of the dome alongside the mosaics. These figures then rise *above* the earth (following the vertical axis dominant in the Christian tradition and associated philosophies), their souls rising towards the heavens depicted by the Southern Cross.<sup>10</sup> They rise from the present towards a future redemption.

There is much scholarly literature detailing the manner in which images were considered to be an embodiment or presence within the Byzantine tradition such that the separation between body and image is collapsed and the latter is experienced as more than an aesthetic or signifying form. In her essay, ‘Presence and the Image Controversies in the Third and Fourth Century AD’, Marina Prusac observes that images and idols were considered to be “matter animated by spirit” whereby the “metaphysical aspect of images is usually referred to as presence or prototype.”<sup>11</sup> An image is therefore the isolation of a single element from the world and the enactment of a ‘linkage’ between what is presented (the metaphysical) and what is seen (the representation or likeness) so that the image is always a type of ‘presence’.<sup>12</sup> Here images are active or “performing agents”, rather than the static, isolated and mimetic traces of human agency that we too often consider them to be today.<sup>13</sup> This animism also demands that we imagine time beyond the existing limits of the human (the human body and humanistic discourse) for to imagine an image within the wild terrain of animated matter (or as itself animated) is to consider its life within and *beyond* the continuum of life as we understand or experience it.<sup>14</sup> The image, therefore, has a life that extends beyond our own presence and limited interface with the temporal nature of the present, and thus extends the notion of “presence” beyond simply *being present* towards a differing, more expansive attachment to time and space. The Shellal mosaic therefore announces a particular (Byzantine) world order that is proposed by the ‘living’ image—an image that *acts* and *lives* amongst a polyphony of other living things.<sup>15</sup> It also points to a particular conception of time that is not based on the ordering and management of time according to a human priority of organisation and division, but to a time that is more expansive—a form of time that recognises return without departure, a time of continuing presence.

Like many of Nicholson’s ‘monument’ works there is an emphasis on a process of collective action in *Comparative Monument (Shellal)*, and time is also related to a collective process. We see these precedents most significantly in his early banner marching projects in which groups of volunteers navigate through a given city following a route that retraced post-1901 (Australian Federation) national boundaries while carrying large banners bearing pixellated, dot-matrix-like (but fastidiously painted) portraits (e.g. *Documents Towards a Banner Marching Project*, 2004-07). Here there is a reactivation or re-tracing of the shape of an historical event through activity that takes place in the present, and translated across different geographic as well as historical terrains. Put simply, the past is retraced through the

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present. This activation of the possibilities of the present also occurs in more recent examples, such as *Comparative Monument (Palestine)* (2012) or the earlier work, *Unfinished Monument for Batman's Treaty* (2011). In both there is a mobilisation of the (collective) activity of distribution such that audience-viewers are invited to circulate posters across Ramallah or display them in their Melbourne homes, thus propelling the work in such a way that it produces a vast distributed 'monument'. However, unlike the earlier banner marching projects, there is a turn towards the future as these posters are distributed and laid ready to be summonsed or gathered up for a vast future collective 'monument' across the city. These 'unfinished' monuments lie dormant, latent and ready for fruition. It is in these works that a future is addressed, as the activity of the present distribution extends beyond its bounds towards a potential future, and it is this gesture towards a possible future that becomes more evident in Nicholson's recent work. Time exists here across a horizontal rather than vertical axis; rather than being neatly segmented and arranged according to assumptions and hierarchies of progress, it is a horizontal combination of parts (like the Shellal mosaic itself)—a combination of histories, hopes and present-day conditions that are never neatly ordered (or resolved) into a division between past-present-future, but stretch and loop across delineations.

The terms "presence" and "present", in which one is folded into the other (present-presence, presence-present) introduce a correlation of space and time that emphasises an event of 'now' but also seeks to escape it. Therefore 'presence' suggests both a time of encounter—an encounter with other material bodies—and a possibility of something outside this, and the "present" is activated not so much as a measurement or delineation of time but as an unfolding or ongoing site of activity. Nicholson articulates this clearly in relation to *Comparative Monument (Shellal)*, stating that he is "making something for a future" through "claims upon the present".<sup>16</sup> This thinking can also be found in the early Christian worldview in which the future could only be attained through being physically 'present' in the present.<sup>17</sup> This "making something for a future" through the present is achieved in Nicholson's artwork through an emphasis on labour or process. In the instance of *Comparative Monument (Shellal)* Nicholson utilises a complex numbering system in order to painstakingly plot the transition from the Waller to the Shellal mosaics, such that tiles from one visual system could be mapped onto another. In this endeavour, Nicholson worked extensively with the artist Jamie O'Connell developing complex 'cartoons' for the mosaics; these were plans for the puzzle of remaking the Shellal by using only the glass tesserae from the Waller dome. (The mosaics were created with the Mosaic Centre, Jericho, by artisans Rafat Al Khatib and Renan Barham.) Most obviously, this means that the Shellal mosaic changes colour, taking on the golden hues of Waller's dome. Less obviously, it presents a giant puzzle in which the unity of the Waller is disassembled into the horizontal network of the Shellal.

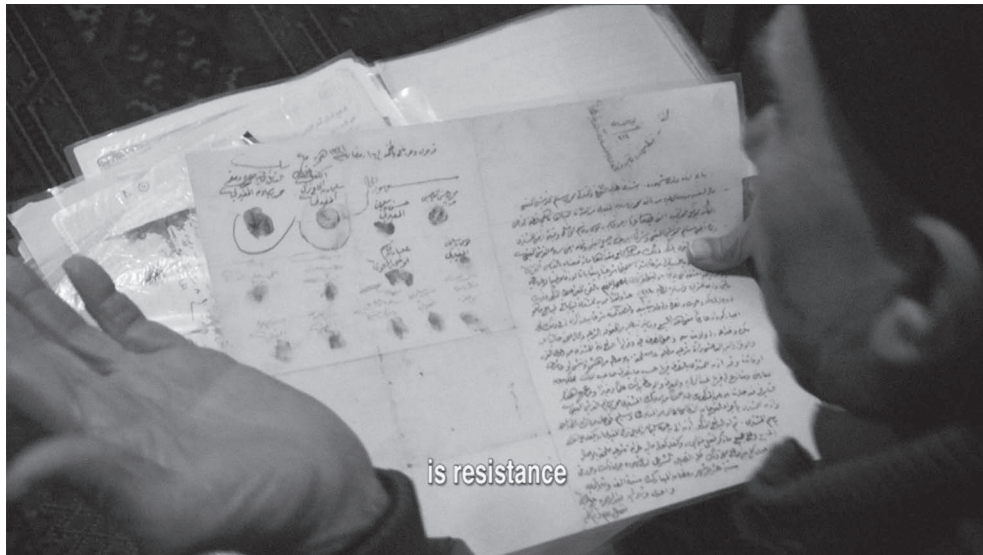
The combining of the different visual systems and processes undertaken in each of the original mosaics results in a reanimation of the Shellal, where familiar forms—such as the peacock, a common Byzantine motif—is rendered something more akin to a lyrebird, and other forms are also estranged. The Byzantine mosaic process proceeds through making an outline of a form and then following this line to fill the space between one form and another, producing what has been suggested earlier as a vast interlinking system. The Waller mosaic takes a more linear, unitary approach in which colour is mapped or plotted across the dome, gradating in intensity towards the central uttermost point. As Nicholson has observed, the single source of light and tight unitary system presented in the Waller gives way to the many folds of the Byzantine mosaic.<sup>18</sup> This involved laborious work to ensure that all the tiles that were taken from the Waller dome would find a place within the pictorial logic of Nicholson's Shellal, a process that involved treating the tiles like pixels and compiling, taking apart and recompiling a huge



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"the cement and concrete beneath were slowly removed



is resistance

data-set. As Nicholson observes in the voiceover to one of *Comparative Monument (Shellal)*'s videos, "I try to reconstitute the particles of an image."<sup>19</sup> (This is incidentally not dissimilar to what a data-analyst does in looking for equivalences and transferences between sets of data, patterns and codes. As suggested at the beginning of this essay, this brings into play a series of questions and equivalences concerning the human-machine interface. This could be connected into a discussion of animism or a digital animism, that might also reflect upon the original location of the Shellal mosaic on a hill that now lies between the hi-tech Israeli city of Be'er Sheva, and Gaza City.)

"This mosaic is repatriated."<sup>20</sup> The baldness of syntax in this statement, that begins the final chapter of *Comparative Monument (Shellal)*, echoes the lines of the Palestinian poet Mahmoud Darwish's *Jidariyya (Mural)* that also forms the title of the 2016 *Qalandiya International*, where *Comparative Monument (Shellal)* was first exhibited. Darwish's words, "This sea is mine"<sup>21</sup> are repeated throughout *Mural* as a statement, a form of incantation, and a claim. What happens to notions of presence and absence, or exile, if these two declarations are combined? "This mosaic is repatriated. This sea is mine." Both statements address the material and immaterial, fluid and stable, irrefutable and imaginative. More importantly, they speak to a continuity of belonging. By speaking to the impossibility of containment inherent in the popular image of the sea as fluid and uncontainable, and at the same time evoking a very particular attachment to that sea, Darwish un-fixes the notion of belonging from a simple factual contract (without denying its importance), aligning it with something much deeper and more temporally complex. "Mine is the ghost and the haunted one," he writes. "Mine is the temporal body, present, and absent."<sup>22</sup> Here again time is related to presence, to states of being-present—the material thickness of the body—and to absence as an immaterial presence that lingers *stubbornly*. The coupling of the lines "This mosaic is repatriated. This sea is mine" works itself into this tension. Within this equation, *Comparative Monument (Shellal)* is a tribute to the power of "*sumud*" as "steadfastness" and "continued presence" that goes beyond the physical, towards an uncontainable immaterial and timeless *presence*. In the video, *Fragments from conversations with Nuri el-Okbi*, the camera allows us to watch the setting sun with el-Okbi (and we cannot help but think of the corresponding golden orb at the centre of Waller's mosaic). The strong continuous presence of the sun is discussed in this scene with fulsome joy; it is a companion in "*sumud*". "It's better when it's sunrise. The sunrise is much better. There is optimism," el-Okbi states. This optimism is woven into the core of *Comparative Monument (Shellal)* through the entanglement of the world orders of the Waller and Shellal mosaics: one designed to be seen from a distance that makes a promise towards a transcendent future, the other, originally a floor mosaic designed to be stood upon, presenting a world that surrounds the viewer in its immanence. It is this knotting together of the (imagined) action of standing upon or *within* the floor mosaic, materially encountering it and entering into its world, that Nicholson orientates towards the future. This is a future that begins from the density of the 'presence-present' couplet. That is to say, it begins with the practice of "*sumud*", the steadfastness that calls forth a presence and belonging that extends from now into the future and beyond. It is a future that occurs "at an edge before imagining begins."<sup>23</sup>

*A glass surface to stand upon. A place to look out from. A viewing platform.*

*... This mosaic is a ground for this coming into view.*<sup>24</sup>

#### Notes

<sup>1</sup> Tom Nicholson, *Comparative Monument (Shellal)* (2014-17)

<sup>2</sup> The three bodies of work in the series are *Comparative Monument (Palestine)* (2012), *Comparative Monument (Ma'Man Allah)* (2012-14) and *Comparative Monument (Shellal)* (2014-17)

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<sup>3</sup> Nicholson, *Comparative Monument (Shellal)* (2014-17)

<sup>4</sup> Djon Mundine, 'An Assertion of Continued Presence', *di'van | A Journal of Accounts*, Issue 1, January 2016. Curator and activist, Mundine writes that, "This was when I thought about making that 'assertion of continued presence' rather than a memorial." There is of course a direct connection with the subjects addressed in Nicholson's work, which might also be understood as the assertion of the ongoing presence of Aboriginal Australians and their rights to their land. For example, Nicholson's *Towards a monument to Batman's Treaty* (2014), gathers the bricks from the site of the Corranderk Aboriginal Station which were are imagined to be distributed across present-day Healsville after Corranderk's dispersal

<sup>5</sup> See Marina Prusac, 'Presence and the Images Controversies in the Third and Fourth Centuries AD', in *Iconoclasm from Antiquity to Modernity*, Kristine Kolrud and Marina Prusac eds, Farnham, England and Burlington, USA: Ashgate, 2014, pp. 41-56. In her essay, Prusac observes that, "The metaphysical aspect of images is usually referred to as presence or prototype, and happens when images are perceived as matter animated by spirit", p. 41

<sup>6</sup> Tom Keenan, 'Or Are We Human Beings?', *e-flux architecture*; <https://www.e-flux.com/architecture/superhumanity/68719/or-are-we-human-beings/>; last accessed 8 May 2017

<sup>7</sup> A.D. Trendall, *The Shellal Mosaic and Other Classical Antiquities in the Australian War Memorial Canberra*, Canberra: Australian War Memorial, 1942, p. 9

<sup>8</sup> Trendall, *ibid.*, p. 17. Here describing the popularity of the grape vine in floor mosaics

<sup>9</sup> Trendall describes the design of the Shellal mosaic as a field surrounded by an ornate border and divided by "vine-trellis forming medallions or by varying geometric patterns into compartments" with animals, birds, fruit and flowers. *Ibid.*, p. 21

<sup>10</sup> The Southern Cross is one of the popular national symbols used by Waller in his mosaic; another example is the representation of the black swan, another uniquely Australian symbol

<sup>11</sup> Prusac, *op cit.*, pp. 41-56

<sup>12</sup> Here I refer to Heinrich Falk, 'On the belief in Avatars: what on earth have the aesthetics of the Byzantine icons to do with the avatar in social technologies?', *Digital Creativity*, Vol. 21, 2010, issue 1

<sup>13</sup> Prusac, *op cit.*, p. 42

<sup>14</sup> Australian anthropologist Micheal Taussig writes that "wildness is the death space of signification", which is relevant here as it signals to the animism of the image, to which I allude. See the reference to Taussig's work in Anselm Franke, 'Much Trouble in the Transportation of Souls, or the sudden disorganisations of boundaries', *Animism*, Anselm Franke (ed.), Berlin: Sternberg Press, 2010, p. 19. Franke also devotes a large section of a preceding passage to the discussion of the work of the nineteenth century anthropologist, Edward Taylor who observes that animism is the "primordial mistake of primitive people who attributed life and person-like qualities to objects in their environments." Franke, *ibid.*, p. 11

<sup>15</sup> It is widely understood the Byzantines considered painting as "living painting" and images or icons as embodied forms. See e.g. Glenn Peers, 'Real Living Painting: Quasi Objects and Dividuation in the Byzantine World', *Religion and the Arts*, 2012, pp. 433-460

<sup>16</sup> Conversation with the artist, 17 April 2017

<sup>17</sup> "In the orthodox worldview, 'man must always relate to the spiritual through the physical'." Hieromonk Auxentios, 'The Iconic and Symbolic in Orthodox iconography' quoted in Heinrich Falk, *op cit.*

<sup>18</sup> Paraphrasing a conversation with the artist, 17 April 2017

<sup>19</sup> Conversation with the artist, 17 April 2017

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>21</sup> Mahmoud Darwish, *Mural*, Rema Hammami and John Berger trans., London: Verso, 2009

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>23</sup> Tom Nicholson, *Comparative Monument (Shellal)* (2014-17)

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*