

A “Real Allegory” of Manual Labour in *The Age of Global Capital*

Inspired by the historical and ongoing importance of maritime life to the development of the port cities of the Arabian Gulf, *The Stonebreakers* brought together three recent projects by artists that focused on a particular node within the modern shipping infrastructural network: the ship-breaking yard.¹ At these sites, decommissioned modern steel-hulled ships, the hulking vessels that incessantly circle the globe transporting the bulk of manufactured goods and raw materials, are dismantled and salvaged for scrap metal and reusable parts. Over the last two decades of the twentieth century, as the shipyards in Japan and South Korea pivoted from breaking to building and maintenance, South Asia took over as the primary location of the industry. Until a decade ago, the region’s yards still handled eighty percent of the world’s ships though, in recent years, competing facilities in Turkey and China have cut into this share.

Most of the work at these yards is done manually by migrant labour from the rural hinterland who are paid subsistence wages. The process begins with the ship being run aground during high tide; the demolition crews board the vessel and start work once the tide recedes.² Over many months, the humongous steel structures are slowly carved up into somewhat smaller sections using blowtorches, hammers, saws and other basic tools. The workers begin with the multi-story superstructure and then move on to the hull, working back from port to starboard. Grappling hooks, thick iron ropes and diesel-powered winches are used to pull these segments off the vessel and drag them onto the beach where they are broken down further and loaded onto trucks for distribution. The scrap metal, especially the large flattened sheets that make up the hull, is sent to nearby “re-rolling mills” where it is transformed into re-bar for use in the local construction industry. Anything else that can be salvaged and resold is wiring and plumbing, equipment and furniture, wood panelling used in ship interiors, and even the bathroom fixtures.

The dismantling process is both physically demanding and extremely hazardous for both the workers and the surrounding environment. The breaking crews are rarely provided with even basic safety equipment and accidents, disabling injuries, and even deaths on-site are frequent occurrences. As the decades-old ships are dismantled, toxic materials like asbestos, heavy metals and polychlorinated biphenyls (PCBs) embedded in their structures are released. Residual oil and trapped gas in supertankers can cause deadly fires and explosions when they encounter sparks from the blowtorches and saws. These toxins not only fill the air but also leach out onto the beach and into the surrounding waters polluting the local groundwater and devastating coastal ecosystems. It is prohibitively expensive for these decommissioned ships to be cleaned in the industrialised



countries where the companies that own them are based and so they are auctioned off as scrap to the highest bidder and sent to the global South for dismantling. Global shipping is a notoriously under-regulated industry; ship-breaking even more so. Though the international export of toxic material is prohibited, flags of convenience and frequent name changes are used to obscure a vessel's ownership, allowing companies to circumvent restrictions and abdicate their responsibility over the proper disposal of decommissioned ships. It is simply cheaper and easier to outsource the break down process to less developed countries where there is an abundance of low-cost unskilled labour and safety and environmental regulations are lax.

Over the past three decades, the abject working and living conditions and harmful environmental effects that characterise ship-breaking have attracted the attention of labour, human rights, environmental and anti-globalisation activists and NGOs based in the West.³ Photographs and films are a key part of such activist campaigns and are used to elicit outrage, garner support and advocate for better regulation and legislation. Their primary function is as evidence, revealing previously invisible or unknown injustices and bearing witness to the human suffering and the environmental destruction caused by the industry. Though this increased scrutiny and resulting media coverage has limited access to the yards, they continue to attract photographers and filmmakers and the industry's hypervisibility has resulted in a familiar and oft-repeated iconography. More recently, however, ship-breaking has begun to draw the attention of artists from South Asia itself. The industry and the yard are ideal case studies – like mining and sweatshops – for those interested in investigating and challenging the unjust geographic division of labour associated with globalisation which exploits the poverty of the global South and forces it to bear the brunt of the human and environmental costs that result. As Michael Crang has argued, images of ship-breaking serve as powerful “counterimages of globalisation,” revealing, through their focus on the waste it generates,

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globalisation's materially abject and morally questionable underbelly.⁴ A focus on the labour required to manage this waste also restores, to some degree, the cultural visibility of the worker, which the neoliberal ideologies and deregulated processes of globalisation have rendered invisible.⁵

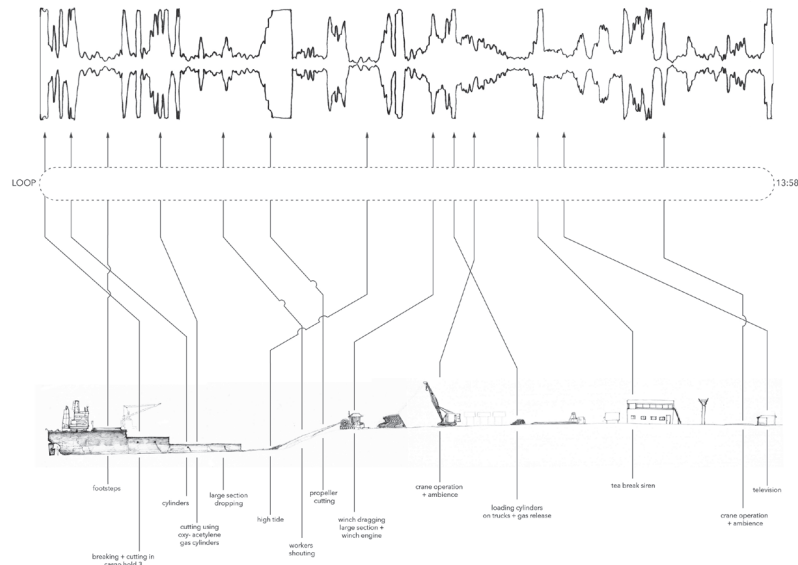
Each of the artists included in *The Stonebreakers* focuses their attention on the main sites in their respective countries: Shumon Ahmed on Chittagong in Bangladesh, Ranjit Kandlgaonkar on Alang in India, and Hira Nabi on Gadani in Pakistan. Acutely aware of the common representational tropes associated with ship-breaking, and its related networks and ecologies, these artists choose to experiment with new methodologies, forms and aesthetic registers. Though each uses a distinct medium, they all depart notably from the more direct reportage-style strategies commonly used, skeptical of unqualified mimesis as a valid approach given photography's capacity, shared with capitalism, to objectify the body at work. Instead, they follow the influential example of Allan Sekula, who chose to represent maritime labour through and as negation and absence.⁶ Like Sekula, they use self-reflexivity and autobiography to complicate the purported objectivity of the document itself, be it photographic, archival, acoustic or filmic. But they also use gestures of fiction and fantasy to nudge realism towards the surreal, a strategy comparable to what Saidiya Hartman has called "critical fabulation," which uses the speculative register to compensate for archival or evidential erasure or lack.⁷ The intimacies and unruly excesses of these gestures collapse the objective distance of conventional documentary practice, revealing and challenging the apparatus used to construct it, while also exploring the potential of affect to engage with and address social and political injustice. The diversity of their approaches is instructive, highlighting the multiplicity of possible ways in which a site of exploitative manual labor and ecological devastation may be represented.

MARITIME HAUNTS

Consisting of two discrete series, titled *Metal Graves* (2009) and *When Dead Ships Travel* (2015), Shumon Ahmed's photographs of the ship-breaking yards are more like fleeting impressions or half-remembered dreams than veracious documents of either the labouring body and/or the ruined landscape. Characterised by a painterly indeterminacy and blur, they are the product of Ahmed's willingness to experiment technically.⁸ He shot the images using a variety of analogue cameras – from standard equipment like a medium format Hasselblad or a Polaroid to more unconventional formats like the Diana plastic and pinhole cameras – and film stocks (Kodak 100 VS, Kodak 400 VC colour film, Agfa 100 to 400 ISO). Unconventional cross-processing and printing techniques added another level of unpredictability. Relinquishing total control over the outcome, Ahmed invited accident and embraced contingency; the resulting images are marked by uncertainty (visual blur and soft focus, temporal and perspectival multiplicity through multiple exposures) and a decidedly unreal palette (from sepia and other desaturated tones to intense moody blues) which together given the photographs a wistful otherworldly feel.

Among Ahmed's most conventional images, *When Dead Ships Travel 9* and *When Dead Ships Travel 10* are black and white studies in contrasting textures that juxtaposes a ship's crusty eroded hull against the glistening waterlogged beach. This attention to light, surface, texture and weight, an ethos of studied formalism that offsets the significant representational burden of his subject and site, animates all his photographs. *Metal Graves 20* is a closeup of the soft coastal sands, the sun reflecting off the gentle ridges left by the receding tide. An almost monochrome, its tarry slickness smuggles in the possibility of oil contamination. In many of the *Metal Graves* prints the ships and their fragments appear as "picturesque" timeless ruins. Their sepia tones give them an anachronistic look recalling

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Samuel Bourne’s famous nineteenth century photographs of ancient monuments across South Asia. Ahmed often includes a black border around the exposed image, with the film stock code and frame number clearly visible. Sometimes multiple shots are presented in a row, echoing the structure of both a contact sheet and a film strip. Such darkroom tricks reveal the otherwise obscured apparatus of photography. Similarly, his use of multiple exposures introduces indeterminacy—visual, perspectival and temporal—disrupting the singularity and clarity of the “decisive moment” so sought after by documentary photographers.

Ahmed oscillates productively between nature and the manmade, between panorama and closeup, the two visual devices that Sekula identifies as historically used to picture maritime space. This dichotomy of scale is apparent in Ahmed’s choice of presentation formats: he intersperses intimate Polaroids amongst his large-scale prints. However, he does not let size dictate subject. *Metal Graves 17* and *Metal Graves 18* feature details in the landscape—pits and squiggles on the beach, heads of washed up coral—presented sequentially in a large horizontally elongated frieze. Their tight framing and sepia tint extract them from their context, giving them the look of vintage natural history photographs. Centered within the intimate three-by-three-inch frame of a Polaroid, the sections and parts of dismantled ships that appear in them feel almost toy-like. This scalar play keeps the viewer engaged, forcing a constant calibration of the optimal viewing distance from which to best experience the work.

Human figures rarely appear in Ahmed’s photographs. When they do, their presence seems incidental and liminal, their spectral bodies literally haunting the margins of the frame. Though a man appears in the top left corner of *Metal Graves 9*, his face obscured by shadow; the image is essentially a black and white study of sunlight reflecting off the tidal sands. The ships are similarly elusive; their familiar silhouette dissolves into a mirage on the distant horizon through Ahmed’s use of multiple exposures and uncertain focus. In *Metal Graves 24*, a vessel’s imposing presence is merely intimated

through the ghostly shadow of its deck rail cast onto the surrounding mud or water. One could take Ahmed to task for merely aestheticising his subject, compromising critique in the name of beauty or style. However, by going against the technical mastery and precision fetishised by photojournalists and fine art photographers alike, Ahmed renders the photographic apparatus visible to his viewer, reminding them that the images before them are not unmediated records of reality.

The elegiac air that Ahmed produces through his technical play seems appropriate for an industry and a site defined by decay and death, a fate shared by both the ships and the workers. Ahmed translates this condition into visual liminality, endowing his subjects with a mobility beyond mimesis that allows them to migrate well beyond their specific material realities. Acknowledged in his title 'When Dead Ships Travel', this mobility is not only about journeys but also hauntings, about pasts and futures, about movement *and* memory. It gestures towards both their material and metaphoric afterlives, to the many social and political trajectories of exploitation, injustice and destruction left in their wake.⁹ In contrast to the documentary image, Ahmed's photographs do not simply rely on mimesis to solicit pity or empathy or to elicit outrage; they mobilise aesthetics to maximise affect, approaching truths that might otherwise elude the photographic image.

AGAINST REPRESENTATION

Ranjit Kandalgaonkar's practice is characterised by a principled refusal of conventional documentary approaches, rejecting the objectifying gaze of lens-based visual representation. Instead, he seeks out alternative methodologies and aesthetic registers—archival and field research, autobiography, sound recordings and sci-fi imagery—to hold the mimetic force of the documentary image at bay. Implicating the artist within the matrix of representation, autobiography collapses the objective distance expected of both academic research and documentary practice, while the sonic and the fantastic release his subject from its geographic and temporal locus. Kandalgaonkar's approach is also pragmatic. As the first major regional centre for ship-breaking, Alang was the focus of early media coverage and humanitarian and environmental protest.¹⁰ In response to the scrutiny, access to the yard has been severely curtailed, necessitating both dogged persistence and strategic pivots.

In Kandalgaonkar's view, the designation of ship-breaking as waste management allows the shipping industry to absolve itself of the human and environmental costs of disposal, a discursive separation that is enacted geographically through outsourcing to the global South. Mapping out the complex material and labor ecologies of modern shipping, Kandalgaonkar's multifaceted project, titled *Modelled Recycled Systems*, reintegrates breaking back into the network of maritime infrastructure, forcing the industry to acknowledge and reckon with the waste it generates. [*shipbreak_dossier*] (2019—) is a set of works on paper that engage with the industry's technical archive and processes. *basic design*, page 7 (2019) adds the cost of disassembly to an infographic estimating ship-building costs that appeared in a 1969 maritime engineering handbook. *week1week2month1month2* (2019) distills the approach used by yard supervisors to organise disassembly—usually improvised using the technical plan of a ship that is commonly found on its bridge—into a diagram that is both a measure of labor and time, or rather of labour as time. *Infect_shoreline_I-IV* (2019) abstracts both observed and speculated moments from the scrapping process using handmade paper of different colors and textures, embellished with delicate line drawing, to suggest alternatives to photographic representations. And the sheer breadth and depth of Kandalgaonkar's extensive and ongoing research is barely contained in *T-A-G-B-O-A-R-D* (2010—), a dense repository of research notes, photographs, diagrams and drawings that literally bursts beyond its frame.

The latest in a series entitled *In the Wake of Shipping Infrastructure*, the digital print *Cellular-II* (2020) juxtaposes archival material with the family album, specifically photographs of and taken by the artist’s captain father. The title refers to the mid-twentieth century shift to a cellular, and easily automated, system for loading, unloading and transporting cargo through the adoption of the standardised metal container. Containerisation dramatically increased the volume and speed of trade catalysing a shift from more modestly sized bulk carriers to the gigantic container ships and supertankers that dominate shipping today.¹¹ In the print, two vintage advertisements for steamship tourism are obscured by a technical diagram of a container, with all its parts diligently labelled, its logistical efficiency eclipsing the romance of early maritime travel. A photograph of Kandalgaonkar’s father in uniform appears twice, entangling the artist’s familial past with the annals of modern maritime history.

In *Shipbreak-I* (2016), Kandalgaonkar chooses to represent labour, both the actions and the bodies that enact them, as *sound work*, acoustically transcribing the yard and the activities that transpire there. The result is an eerie otherworldly sonic scape, filled with industrious taps, ominous clangs, grating saws and hissing blowtorches, and the dull thud and muffled scrape of sections of the hull being torn off and dragged onto the beach, interspersed with the gentle lapping of waves. What is both unexpected and uncanny is the absence of the sonic trace of the human, either as speech or the sounds of its bodily exertions. Untethered to imagery, the sounds become expansive and space-filling, tapping into the medium’s capacity to be both specific to a site and resonate beyond it. While the loop literally takes us into and then out of the cavernous hull of a ship as it is being broken down, it metaphorically opens up to the vastness of the open ocean or of outer space. A snippet of *filmi* music overheard on a television grounds the loop back in the time and place of its making, a refreshing burst of joy and leisure that, paradoxically, jolts us back to the drudgeries of the yard.

Kandalgaonkar’s *infra*structural drawings provide a speculative storyboard for this soundscape, illustrating and exaggerating its alien-ness. Initiated as a visual repository and a space for experimental drawing, a dystopic landscape unfurls across a seventy-foot long scroll of delicate yellow tracing paper, visualising a post-apocalyptic future filled with grotesque hybrids, ships fused together with antiquated machines, submarine landscapes and pelagic life forms. In a related series of small drawings, ships conjoin with destructive devices like a wrecking ball crane and a guillotine, resulting in self-consuming ouroboros-like units that, symbolically at least, restore the place of disassembly within a vessel’s lifespan. In *clam soup* and *mandeli fry* (both 2019) they meld together with marine life, specifically with key ingredients of Kandalgaonkar’s father’s signature recipes, illustrating an intimacy with the sea that is at once biological, autobiographical and culinary. Another set of small drawings draw parallels between ship-breaking and another problematic maritime industry: whaling. The two share a descriptive language because of shared scale: ships are beached before demolition begins, their dismantled structures are frequently referred to as carcasses. In these drawings, vessel and animal share a body: the process of tearing off sections of the hull is equated with the way a whale is butchered; a tail sticks out of pit, surrounded by a patchwork of bloodstained metal sheets, a reference to the *khaddas* used in the past to collect and sort non-steel scrap; a hybrid body, part whale part submarine, is drenched in sanguine strokes that suggest both blood and rust. Similarly, in a series of larger drawings made on sheets of paper meant to resemble a ship’s technical plan, a vessel midway through demolition is drawn to resemble the skeleton of a whale, flesh picked clean from its ribcage. Even in the throes of death, the ship morphs, visually, from an inanimate and now redundant object into a once vital body.



This body of work is notable for its approach to ship-breaking entirely through the imaginary, which allows it to escape the indexical limits of the lens-based image. On one hand, the corporeal horror of this imagery evokes the physical suffering and bodily harm endured by workers at the yard. It can also be read as a protest against the industrialisation of sea trade, a process Sekula links to a “suppression of smell,” the stink of bulk trade contained by the container’s corrugated steel walls.¹² Kandalgaonkar’s monstrous hybrids recall the sensorial intensities of the maritime past, of an embodied intimacy with the oceans and the abundance of life within; they are an exuberant return of the repressed, of the body at work made redundant by processes of automation and standardisation driven by global capitalism.

THE SHIP SPEAKS

Ship-breaking yards have inspired a number of notable films.¹³ In addition to the humanitarian and environmental concerns, conditions at the yard make for striking visuals: the ship’s gargantuan scale and the David versus Goliath size differential between it and the workers; the thick plumes of smoke, the polluting murk often intensifying the sublimity of changing light; the treacly gleam of leaking oil; the firework-like bursts of blowtorches, sparkling within the cavernous darkness of the hull; the gleaming white eyes of workers covered head-to-toe in soot and dirt; the quiet drama and sudden violence as sections are yanked off of a ship’s deck or frame, fall into the surrounding water and are dragged onshore; the easy camaraderie of the workers, working together to accomplish incomprehensible physical tasks. Made in collaboration with the Workers Union at Gadani, Hira Nabi’s *All That Perishes at the Edge of Land* (2019) opens with a dramatic shot that centres on the keel of a grounded ship. The camera slowly tilts up, both revealing and emphasising the vessel’s immensity, its presence looming over us. It is a powerful image, placing the viewer in the position of the workers as they approach a ship, conveying their awe at that first encounter when the incomprehensible immensity of the task ahead hits them. A large metal chain, which starts from the top right corner at the beginning of the sequence but moves down as the camera pivots up, loops through two holes near the very front of the ship. The workers often use such chains as makeshift

bridges to clamber onto the ship and, again, the shot’s compositional logic mimics the workers’ point of view, the chain leading our eye into the frame and towards the vessel. The chain is both a perspectival device and a visual metaphor, a universal symbol of bonded labor and exploitation.

Despite such strong and sensitive visuals, what really distinguishes Nabi’s film is her voiceover, which she reimagines as a tool for “critical fabulation”. It begins as one might expect, with ambient sync sounds of the yard, overlaid with snippets of the workers describing the hardships and injustices they endure working there, though they are almost never shown speaking. The soundtrack pivots dramatically about a third of the way in, as these testimonies begin to be intercut with a scripted monologue narrated by an anthropomorphised bulk carrier named *Ocean Master*, delivered in a solemn female voice, with the dramatic emphasis and measured pace of a seasoned storyteller. As the camera hovers around the ship, she recounts her life story, mourning not only her own obsolescence and demise but also lamenting the disastrous effects that her destruction has on those who break her down and the site where that act occurs. Alternating between fact and fiction, the film’s voiceover emphasises the storytelling aspect of testimony and posits fabulation as a viable political tool for speaking truth to power.

This voiceover is key to Nabi’s intersectional approach, functioning both as a dialectical and a self-reflexive device. Through it she is able to address antinomies related to gender and class that are important to but rarely enter into either the physical or representational space of ship-breaking. Like many industries reliant on migrant labor, the industry and yard are undeniably masculine, and the interjection of the ship’s female voice has a disruptive force. The workers at Gadani, mostly from the northern province of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, are forced to leave their families and villages in search of livelihood. Their wages at the yards, though meagre, are still more than they are able to earn at home. Nabi’s voiceover recasts the ship as an unlikely intimate and a beloved confidant, a wife or mother left behind. After the ship recalls her own dreams, some realised others abandoned, she prompts the workers to share theirs, asking, “What do your dreams tell you?” This back and forth between the ship and the workers transforms the latter’s testimonies into dialogues, enabling them to not only speak their truth but to also have it be heard. It allows the heartache of separation that they carry with them, voiced by so many of them, to become palpable as affect.

While clear class distinctions exist between the workers and yard owners, the subject is rarely addressed in representations of shipbreaking. Visual media predominantly focus on the workers’ plight, fetishising the toiling body; the owners’ perspective only seems to appear in textual accounts.¹⁴ Nabi’s voiceover broaches the question of class through differences in language, between the ship’s more formal and literary Urdu, associated with educated metropolitan elites, and the vernacular dialect the workers speak. It ventriloquises not just an otherwise inanimate ship but also the otherwise invisible filmmaker. Striving for objectivity and transparency, documentarians, especially those driven by activism, tend to minimise their presence and perspective. Instead, Nabi’s voiceover announces her presence, dramatising and amplifying other self-reflexive moments in the film. Near the beginning, as the workers’ playfully banter over a morning cup of tea they casually acknowledge the crew, demonstrating a grudging familiarity with media presence at the yard. The cameraman quickly admonishes them, requesting they not look directly into the camera so as maintain a fly-on-the-wall feel but the interaction has already broken the cinematic fourth wall. Like Ahmed’s technical experiments or Kandalgaonkar’s entanglement of autobiography and the industrial archive, such self-reflexive strategies render the documentary apparatus visible, acknowledging the filmmaker’s privileged subjectivity implicating both her and us in her film’s representational dilemmas.

Through the voiceover, Nabi establishes an opposition and a dialogue between a (now) animate thing and human beings reduced to objects, to the condition of bare life, by the rapacious machinations of global capital. The ship's unexpected agency seems to emphasise the workers' lack of it, questioning the efficacy of testimony, and a documentary practice anchored to it, as a tool for addressing injustice and enacting change. However, though the workers often speak of their desperation (encompassed by the repeated Urdu word *majboori*), a structural necessity borne of abject poverty that forces them into this type of work, they are far from disempowered.¹⁵ One of them speaks eloquently about how his fight for better working conditions and pay is not an individual but a collective struggle against systematised exploitation. His comments reveal a sophisticated understanding of class solidarity and a commitment to uplifting the condition of all workers, especially his younger comrades. A familiar strategy in recent art, the anthropomorphised ship forces a shift in perspective that displaces the human as the subject of history. Its animism enables the articulation of other conversations, statements and truths, broadening the film's subject beyond labor rights. Near the end, a worker relates how pollution from ship-breaking has transformed the coast, pushing marine life back into deeper waters and compelling him to abandon his ancestral trade as a fisherman and seek work at the yard, the industry's "slow violence" revealing the entangled vulnerabilities of labor and ecology.¹⁶ Finally, the success of Nabi's film lies in precisely this intersectionality, its ability to oscillate between different registers of truth – between labour and ecology, gender and class, testimony and fable, veracious image and scripted voiceover, politics and aesthetics – without ever really settling anywhere.

The Stonebreakers was conceived in response to its venue's location in Abu Dhabi's Mina Zayed neighborhood, situated between the city's modern container and old dhow ports. Though an integral part of the country's non-oil revenue, the modern container ports in the Emirates have received scant critical or artistic attention thus far.¹⁷ This can be partly attributed to the fact that though the majority of cargo continues to be transported by sea, the networks, economies and processes of maritime trade remain largely invisible, constituting what Sekula has called "the forgotten space" of modernity.¹⁸ Instead, air transport and information networks are more commonly heralded as the motors of globalisation. And security concerns (and general suspicions around photography), always heightened in the Gulf, limit physical access to the ports themselves. The works in *The Stonebreakers* were intended to provide local audiences with a portal into the world of global shipping, allowing them to better situate the port infrastructures that are an integral part of local cityscapes but remain inaccessible. Though dhow trade still remains active across the Arabian Gulf and the Indian Ocean, especially out of neighbouring Dubai and Sharjah, it is increasingly viewed as part of a pre-oil past and, as such, is commonly romanticised as heritage by the region's fast-growing museum and culture industry. This nostalgic lens can obscure troubling historical realities, minimising the hardships and inequities of the maritime past. *The Stonebreaker's* focus on the demolition of ships was intended as a counter measure to such hollow memorialisations of the past, which neither acknowledge its complexities nor properly mourn its passing. The exhibition's focus on exploitative labor practices within modern maritime economies functioned as an oblique reminder of the past horrors of the Indian Ocean slave trade.¹⁹

The key to understanding some of the other local resonances of *The Stonebreakers* lies in its somewhat enigmatic title, which I borrowed from a famous mid-nineteenth century Realist painting by Gustave Courbet.²⁰ The painting shows two peasants, a youth and an older man, dressed in tattered clothing, quarrying rocks in the French countryside. The youth’s body, shown from behind, twists awkwardly under the weight of a basket of stones, which he rests on his left knee for support. To his right, the older man, shown in profile but with his face obscured by the shadow cast by his wide brimmed hat, kneels on one knee, his raised right arm holding a pick and poised to strike. Painted in the aftermath of the 1848 Revolution, its unflinching portrayal of the rural poor, which showed in detail the impoverished conditions in which they worked, was a significant break from tradition. Presenting a subject previously considered unworthy of art it reveals Courbet’s political sympathies with the peasant and working classes. When first exhibited, the painting attracted both acclaim and criticism for its forthrightness and startling lack of sentiment. In the painting, the face, the portal for pity and empathy, is avoided; the focus is instead on the body at work, and specifically the contortions and exertions of manual labour.

Courbet’s painting inaugurated an important humanist tradition of socially conscious realism. As photography became more widespread it took over as the medium of choice for such subject matter, as exemplified in the Depression-era photographs of Lewis Hine and Dorothea Lange. This tradition, arguably, evolved over the course of the twentieth century into precisely the type of activist photojournalism and filmmaking that constitute the bulk of representations of the ship-breaking industry today. Influenced by post-structuralist and semiotic critiques of the politics of representation, artists like Sekula and Martha Rosler took a critical stance against such images, arguing that they simply reinforced the hierarchy between the privileged photographer/viewer and their destitute subjects, eliciting only pity and robbing their subjects of agency. Instead, they resisted objectifying the subaltern body through direct representation, revealing the photographic apparatus and supplementing their images with critical texts that acknowledged their privilege. While the self-reflexivity we see in the practices of Ahmed, Kandalgaonkar and Nabi is indebted to such critiques of documentary practice, the younger artists go a step further, putting the legibility of the documentary mode as evidence into question through a recourse to fiction.

The exhibition’s title was, firstly, a ruse, intended to momentarily deflect the expectations the viewer might bring to an exhibition about shipbreaking. The idea was to counter the hypervisibility of humanist, humanitarian and journalistic accounts of the industry and clear space for the artist’s novel approaches, ones that are cognisant of the complex politics of representation around ship-breaking. Secondly, the titular reference to Courbet’s painting was a provocation, extending the exhibition’s examination of these politics of representation beyond the specificities of ship-breaking to other instances and sites of manual labour. Both the title and the subject matter of the painting function as a metaphorical bridge—a “real allegory” to quote the subtitle of a slightly later Courbet painting—linking shipbreaking to the construction industry.²¹ There is, of course, a direct connection between the two industries: the steel salvaged from the ships feeds into the local construction industry, especially in Bangladesh, where the capacity to industrially produce it is limited. The exhibition’s title acknowledges this material connection between industries and economies of destruction and construction, emphasising that under globalisation specific industries cannot be adequately examined and critiqued in isolation as each is a node in a vast shifting interconnected network that spans the planet.



Like ship-breaking, construction in the Gulf relies heavily on low-cost migrant labour from South Asia and has similarly attracted the attention and ire of human rights and labour activists critical of exploitative labour laws and conditions within the industry. In 2011, a group of artists and other cultural practitioners initiated the Gulf Labor Boycott against the Western cultural institutions involved in the plans for the Saadiyat Island Cultural District, wielding the significant cultural capital they held as integral to the planned collections and programs of those institutions as leverage to advocate for labour reform.²² The reference to a French masterwork, which could easily have been on display at the nearby Louvre Abu Dhabi, was intended as a tongue-in-cheek reference to this history, a reminder that the heroic and unacknowledged efforts of manual labour are the foundation, literally and metaphorically, of all such cultural institutions. The eventual crackdown on the leaders of that boycott has made conversations around the status and value of manual labour and its cultural representations within the United Arab Emirates exceedingly difficult. *The Stonebreakers* proposed ship-breaking as a comparative case study, a “real allegory” through which one might begin to revive such important inquiries. Destroyed during World War II, Courbet’s lost masterpiece haunts the exhibition, casting a melancholic shadow back across and beyond the included works. It reminds us that despite its ideological erasure under regimes of globalised capital and its withdrawal from contemporary representations of labour, the body at work never comes to rest.

For Linda, to whom the work of bodies mattered.

Notes

¹ The exhibition opened on 7 March 2020 but was closed almost immediately due to the global pandemic. At the time of writing it is scheduled to reopen in September and run through to December 2020

² For an overview of the history of the global shipbreaking industry and a detailed account of its practice in India specifically, see William Langewiesche, ‘The Shipbreakers’, *The Atlantic Monthly* 286, No. 2, 2000, pp. 31-49

³ See Greenpeace, *Ships for Scrap VI—Steel and Toxic Wastes for Asia: Findings of a Greenpeace Visit to Darukhana Shipbreaking Yard in Mumbai, India*, Amsterdam: Greenpeace India and Greenpeace Netherlands, 2003 and Greenpeace, *End of Life Ships—The Human Cost of Breaking Ships* (A Greenpeace-FIDH International Federation of Human Rights report in cooperation with YPSA), Amsterdam: Greenpeace, 2005

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⁴ Mike Crang, ‘The Death of Great Ships: Photography, Politics, and Waste in the Global Imaginary’, *Environment and Planning A: Economy and Space* 42, 2010, pp. 1084-1102

⁵ Peter Hitchcock, *Labor in Culture, Or, Worker or the World(s)*, London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017, p. xi

⁶ Allan Sekula, ‘Conversation between Allan Sekula and Benjamin Buchloch’, *Performance Under Working Conditions*, Sabine Breitwieser (ed.), Vienna: Generali Foundation, 2003, p. 48

⁷ Saidya Hartman, ‘Venus in Two Acts’, *Small Axe* 26, vol. 12, no. 2, 2008, pp. 1-14

⁸ Shanay Jhaveri, ‘Shumon Ahmed’, *Frieze* 176, 2016, p. 157. Jhaveri ascribes a painterly quality to these images and Ahmed himself cites the painter Zainul Abedin as an important influence

⁹ Following Christina Sharpe, I use “wake” here for both its nautical and funerary meanings. See Christina Sharpe, *In the Wake: On Blackness and Being*, Durham: Duke University Press, 2016

¹⁰ Gary Cohn and Will Englund of *The Baltimore Sun* won a Pulitzer Prize in investigative reporting in 1998 for a series of articles that exposed the dangers posed to both workers and the environment by the unregulated ship-breaking industry, following a trail that took them from Baltimore to the yards at Alang and eventually resulted in the United States Navy ending its plans to export decommissioned ships for scrapping to the global South. Langewiesche provides a useful overview of the history of this coverage and the political attention it garnered in the United States as well as the Greenpeace campaigns that followed

¹¹ Container size is now the standardised unit for the capacity of container ships, which is measured in either twenty-foot (TEU) or forty-foot equivalent units (2-TEU)

¹² Allan Sekula, *Fish Story*, Düsseldorf: Richter Verlag, 1995, p. 12

¹³ Conventional documentaries include Shaheen Dill-Riaz’s *Iron Eaters* (2007) and Park Bong-Nam’s *Iron Crows* (2009) while Peter Hutton’s *At Sea* (2007) and Yasmine Kabir’s *The Last Rites* (2008) employ a more avant-garde approach

¹⁴ Langewiesche comprehensive account of shipbreaking at Alang is rare in its inclusion of the perspective of yard owners

¹⁵ Hira Nabi, ‘How to Dismantle a Ship in Nine Steps’, *Texte zur Kunst* 114, 2019, pp. 114-119

¹⁶ Rob Nixon, *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor*, Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2011

¹⁷ The notable exception is Stephen J. Ramos, *Dubai Amplified: The Engineering of a Port Geography*, Farnham; Burlington: Ashgate Press, 2010

¹⁸ Sekula, *Fish Story*, pp. 48-54. The quoted phrase is the title of Sekula’s famous 2010 film essay, made in collaboration with Noël Burch, which examines the symbolic and material networks of contemporary maritime trade and builds on his observations in *Fish Story*

¹⁹ The Indian Ocean slave trade and its role in pearling and maritime trade are still taboo subjects at the region’s cultural institutions. A notable recent exception was *Look for Me All Around You*, the Claire Tancons-curated section of the 14th Sharjah Biennial, which suggested parallels between the slave trade across the Atlantic and around the Indian Ocean littoral

²⁰ For discussions on Courbet’s painting and the socio-political context in which it was painted see Linda Nochlin, *Realism*, New York: Penguin Books, 1971, pp. 111-137, and Timothy J. Clark, *Image of the People: Gustave Courbet and the 1848 Revolution*, Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California, 1973, pp. 77-100

²¹ On the allegorical use of realism see Linda Nochlin, ‘Courbet’s Real Allegory: Rereading The Painter’s Studio’, *Courbet Reconsidered*, Sarah Faunce and Linda Nochlin eds, Brooklyn: The Brooklyn Museum; New Haven, Yale University Press, 1988, pp. 17-42

²² For more information about the boycott see Andrew Ross (ed.), *The Gulf: High Culture/Hard Labor*, New York: OR Books, 2015