Screening Room no. 9: *An Ostentatious Paperweight That May Or May Not Be The Real Thing*
A conversation between artist Hiba Ismail and guest curator Cairo Clarke

Cairo Clarke
So firstly when I was invited by Alex and Giulia to contribute to the screening room, I was instantly thinking about your work because of the conversations that we have had last year about it. And just in general, there are moments of your practice that pop up. I feel like you've been developing a body of work over a long time, rather than just like showing a lot of work. So it's really nice when those moments spark up and then feels like they were really connecting with things that I was also thinking about, and have been developing myself in my writing and curatorial research, messy practice thing So yeah, it felt like a really nice opportunity to bring this work to this online context. And I'm wondering if you could just talk a little bit about the context that this work, in particular, was born out of?

Hiba Ismail
Yeah. And it does feel really nice to be talking to you in this moment, in this kind of way, because like you said, it is kind of a slow practice. This work started back in 2019. I guess that's when I started thinking about it, when Sudan was going through a revolution. And it started out as a way of untangling all the feelings of having experienced the revolution from, I guess, the diaspora.

Hiba Ismail
And so I'll start with the title. So you know when global events are unravelling, and it concerns you, you're in the kind of black hole of Twitter threads and articles and I think everyone can relate to that. And there was a gold rush happening as well. There's water shortages and like sketchy foreign investors, and, you know, all the fun stuff. Anyway, I'd come across this article detailing the relationship between the country's gold trade, and paramilitary, who are currently sitting at the top of this transitional government and kind of put themselves there through brute force, I guess, it's all really absurd.

Hiba Ismail
So anyway, there's this one quote in the article, which I'll link to you later, where the journalist Ruth Michaelson had gone into one of these offices of the Mining and Trading Corporation, which was linked with some militia. And I'll quote "behind the tinted windows of the office, a kilogram gold bar sat on a lacquered wooden desk among office stationery, an ostentatious paperweight that may be the real thing." I thought it was hilarious as I'd read it wrong the first time I'd read it, and that's what the title of the work is: an ostentatious paperweight that may or may not be the real thing. So that that kind of like sat dormant for a little while and it wasn't until a year or so later after I'd made the work, that I went back and thought that would be the title.

Hiba Ismail
Around that time I'd gone to Sudan and artisanal gold mining was what everyone was talking about, like my aunts and cousins, and everyone would be talking about so-and-so who went out to the hills a month ago and hasn't been back since. My uncle took me to one of the local sites and I was thinking about Reza Negarestani's Cyclonopedia, that speculative fiction novel that draws parallels between contemporary politics and archaeologies of the Middle East, and the Natural Histories of the earth and petroleum basins, and the war terror, the Middle East as a sentient entity, it's alive, all of that.

Hiba Ismail
Come to think of it now, it was really labour intensive, the whole process. I guess when I look at it now, and I think it's a really simple video of an object moving around. it doesn't look like the amount of physical work that went into it.

Hiba Ismail
So anyway I came back to the UK and COVID hit. And then I went back about a year later with these really big plans to go to all of these gold mines and do all of these really hands-on things. And one of them which I went to, was the Hassai Mine which is in the northeast of Sudan or somewhere around there. And I guess what I found out was as a young, single woman in Sudan, I thought I had to do a lot of convincing people of what my capabilities were, that I was legit, that I knew I was doing, that I'd be safe basically. And I had to have a family member

chaperone me around. And not only that, what I'd set out to do with the work wasn't just to describe these places or to document what I was seeing. And I couldn't see how I'd narrow this massive gaping chasm, or whatever, between the task of trying to grasp sentient geologies and material agency, and my own self, my own body. So then the approach felt really fraught with contradictions. I've got a quote from Leanne Simpson here, she writes: 'the act of extraction, removes all of the relationships that give whatever is being extracted meaning … the alternative with deep reciprocity.' And so at the time, I was living with my grandma. And we've got a big family, it was always people coming to the door, and I had this unrestricted access to conversations that centred around family remittances, and the price of gold and the passage of currency, all of that. But putting all of that aside, I felt like I paid heed and spent time with people and family, and there was a lucidity to that slowing down to the point of stopping, I guess. The bracelet belonged to my grandma, and then I used it as the subject of the video.

Cairo Clarke
You said the work doesn't show how much work was put into make it, but I would actually disagree... Like visually perhaps, you know, someone could say, okay, the work is a loop of a bracelet moving around the space. But all of this context within it feels really apparent, and even just how you did the 3d render of the bracelet - like it's super ornate. Even the work that goes into the visual - which maybe on one side might seem quite minimal - actually I feel like every detail of that encapsulates this really huge ecosystem or body of context and life that you were just talking about. So what was that process like, making that visual?

Hiba Ismail
Well, so it's amazing that you think it's a 3d visual, because it's actually a video recording.

Cairo Clarke
Oh, really? Wow.

Hiba Ismail

So a material that I really like to shoot with is black velvet, because it just kind of gobbles up the light and absorbs it, and it gives you this lovely flat background and is the kind of thing that speaks to museum displays - I'm thinking like the jewellery collection at the V&A.

Cairo Clarke
Yeah, it feels like that. It really reminded me of that kind of mode of display.

Hiba Ismail
Yeah. And so there's a photography studio just near my house, so I went to those guys with this piece of fabric. I was like, 'Hey, guys, I've got this this piece of black fabric and I've got this bracelet. Can you shoot it for me?' And they were like 'what for?', they were really confused because it was like essentially doing a jewellery-QVC-ad kind of thing. So we'd got this table, and it had like a motor on it, so was basically like a motorised turntable, and it just had the camera on it and that does give the sense of a 3D render. And because it's so slow, maybe.

Cairo Clarke
I love as well that even for me, like right now, that's new information that I'm learning about that work, which is interesting. Also in relation to some of the references that you said, I'm thinking of Glissant's Right to Opacity and things like that. Like in your portfolio it is described as a 4K video and the way in which this is moving - the way that it feels like it's on an axis, like orbiting in space, like defying gravity in some way - and the detail that was captured, I felt like this must be a digital rendering. That it's actually been physically shot is really exciting as well. And I think I was then thinking like, 'Okay, if this is digitally created, what is the value or the difference in values between the piece itself and the actual bracelet, but I think that still is a valid question within the context of this work. In the video, do you feel a sense of difference or distinction between this work and the object itself?

Hiba Ismail
So I'd like to think that they're the same, but... I haven't considered if they were to be different, what each one might do.

Hiba Ismail
Okay, so I've been thinking about perception and cognizance. Can I read you this Beckett quote from Murphy, and then kind of that will lead me on to where my thinking was. So the quote says: "Endon lay back and fixed his eyes on some object immeasurably remote, perhaps the famous ant on the sky of an airless world. Murphy kneeled beside the bed, which was a low one, took Mr. Endon's head in his hands and brought the eyes to bear on his, or rather his on them across a narrow gulf of air, the merest hand's-breadth of air." And to quote Chris Ackerley on his summary of this famous ant scenario, which I'm obsessed with, and just keep going back to it all the time. "If there were a vacuum and not air around us, the images from visible objects would reach the eye unblurred, and we'd report the exact form of the object, no matter how great the distance from which its image might come. As it is, however, the air takes the first copy of the object, and the eye receives it only in second hand. So the object moulding the air into visible forms, and hence the likeness of the copy to the original becomes more imperfect in proportion to the distance it has to travel."

Hiba Ismail
So I think by like suspending this object in a void-like space, it was an attempt at maybe narrowing that distance it had to travel to be perceived and leaving that down to whatever other factors were at play in the interpretation or misinterpretation of the object.

Cairo Clarke
Yeah, I guess like that defying gravity, there are these kind of celestial or object-in-orbit element to it, that feels like you're really concentrated in this space between it. Even watching the work on a screen I imagine, as well that the feeling of watching it in a physical space as well, you're really sucked into the motion if it and this choreography that feels really intentional and intimate - and there's no sound in the work - I think it really crafts a sense of intimacy that I wonder.. like hearing you talk about the context of it and the times you've with family whilst you've been in Sudan, and moving through different conversations of people moving through the house - the bracelet itself being a form of bodily intimacy shared between you and your grandmother. How does that relationship between

movement and intimacy, and sound or no sound, where do they sit for you when you're thinking about this work?

Hiba Ismail
Yeah. So throughout the process, I collected all of this data I guess you'd call it - sound and video and photographs and all of these things - and so throughout, I had to resist every urge that was telling me to add these accompanying things, because I felt like... you know going back to reproducing this object in a vacuum and attempt to create this perfect copy and maybe give the viewer a better chance of interpretation and all of that, those extra things would have been distraction, and I was trying to create this copy of this object. And I guess when we talk about the choreography of the bracelet, so in one of the videos it's rotating on the x axis and the other it's rotating on the Y, the object becomes that centrifugal force that everything orbits around. But not in the solipsistic 'the self only exists and no other realities are real' sense, in the same way as the Murphy reference that I gave you. But more in the way like you've said, in the kind of reorientation of themes around property and extraction, towards a new way of thinking through that.

Hiba Ismail
It's not a funny work. You know, there's no outright humour in it, but thinking of the Earth as a sentient being, I think it's a funny.. it's science fiction. And it was amazing to start looking and approaching it through this lens, like this Earth metal comes up out of the ground, and forged the human body. And this kind of ominous movement, slow movement, just around this rotating force felt right.

Cairo Clarke
Yeah, I think you've mentioned perception and time, and it really feels like time stretches or moves very differently within the work. And there is a humour in the sense of the power that the object has, but reorienting that into your own context, and not into this context that maybe would see say, in the V&A, or in some kind of archival context, or within even a luxury jewellery or gold or extractivist context. It's completely something different. And I guess asking people to look at the object in different ways, or choose to see differently, or how you can see differently. And I think that relates to one of the other research aspects that you

shared, which was Footnotes, cited from Legacy Russell. And yeah, so in a way, the work feels kind of like a footnote in itself, in some sense. Does it feel like a footnote to you?

Hiba Ismail
Yeah, so again, a question that I find difficult, because I do see it as a footnote, and then to what obviously, is the question? And I guess the main body of text would be the natural, or human history of the Earth, you know with an exclamation mark next to it! And maybe that's too imposing, but, there's an attempt to establish a speaking to my own truth, in a way that Kathryn Yusoff says that the planetary analytic has failed to do. You know, maybe that's kind of too big and too presumptive, to say that the work does that, but I do see the work as a footnote.

Hiba Ismail
We've been talking about Glissant, and the weaving fabrics and how that relates to the work; the first line of Poetic Intention is 'I build my language with rocks' and in that Legacy Russell talk she speaks about the footnote as this structurally cumulative thing, like how totems are in architecture. And so, individually, these fragments of works to me they're... it's almost cryptic, because it's like there's just this object that I've felt really drawn to, but I also think that that's okay, in a way to not completely have all the answers. It's just this is the work and I guess that's where the opacity thing comes in - I don't have to feel like I always have to fully explain something or have this complete idea or like being laid bare totally. It's just that there are these fragments that once collected together, form this lexicon, this grammar.

Cairo Clarke
Yeah. And I think that really speaks to the kind of pace and way in which you work in general, and this practice is slow but.. I really value a sense of slowness when developing a body of work. This quote is from a recent issue of the Funambulist, by Raphaëlle Red, when she says: 'Can you imagine to only with a word, to only with a nod, to swiftly break open solitude and acknowledge a shared condition without explaining what it is, to fill ourselves like wells, to dry out like them to, to be because we are, to be metaphorical, not to be afraid of it." And

I feel like that notion of being metaphorical and to not be afraid and to not have to explain everything.. like I think in an alternative setting the work wouldn't be a footnote, but there would be this really huge footnote to the work! And I actually really love that the work is playing with this positionality of being the footnote itself to something. And I think especially when we think about gold and value, it plays with this sense of value and what that is, by becoming the footnote within and amongst something else. Which suggests it is this world within itself, but it is part of many worlds and part of other things. And so this value of gold and the objects in the context of you and your family, and in the context of its material value.. it contains all these different things at once, which is really interesting to me.

Hiba Ismail
And I cried with joy when I read that quote, it's really beautiful. But yeah, like you said, the shifting values and the shifting currencies, and you know it's up to you where the value of things lies, and being able to take that into account and mould it and move it around. And I think with this work specifically for me.. it's been years since I've worked with sculpture and it's been a lull of just kind of watching, and listening and just generally embodying space and being present. But to end up focusing the piece around this physical form and this object, it, it spoke back to the days of sculpture, I guess. And I don't know, maybe in the future, that's something that I might consider going back to as well, that's definitely what this period of time has led me on to thinking that I might do.

Cairo Clarke
I really love this work. And I'm really interested to see how it's engaged with in the context of the screening room, and by Alex and Giulia. And as a final question, I'm interested to know, what you would in the context of the screening room and showing the work in this way, what do you hope for people to take away from it, or what kind of questions would you ask the viewers to consider when engaging with the work?

Hiba Ismail
Oh, that's a really good one. I don't think I've even considered it really in the kind of realm of the public view.

Hiba Ismail
And so, I'm not really sure. I think by virtue of what it is, it's this loop of just the same object moving really slowly, we've slowed it down so like one loop takes, I don't know, like seven minutes? I can't remember exactly. But seven minutes watching the same thing, essentially. So I guess it is the kind of asking people to sit and watch and look, and I don't know, that might be really simple. But I think that's kind of maybe too much to ask.

Cairo Clarke
Yeah, I think in its own way, it's a valid kind of thing to ask, and it's not too much. But I think also to actually do that, what does that actually mean to someone to sit and really watch something, you know? Yeah, I think that's a very thoughtful and generous and clearly accessible and understandable provocation for engaging with it.

Cairo Clarke
Thank you for chatting with me and maybe you can also send me some of the references that you shared and we can have them alongside this conversation.

Hiba Ismail
Yeah. A super long footnote. I've really enjoyed this. It's been really lovely, the way you've received it. I didn't expect upon making it, it would be received at all, so to be able to talk through it like this is really special. So thank you very much.

Cairo Clarke
Thank you.