

Ali Cherri, *Of Men and Gods and Mud*, 2022

Three-channel video installation (color, sound); 18:30 mins

Courtesy of the artist and Galerie Imane Farès

Speaker 1 [English]: Somewhere, by the banks of a great river, in the shadow of a gargantuan dam, a man stands waist-deep in mud.

Speaker 2 [Arabic]: Somewhere, by the banks of a great river, a man stands waist-deep in mud, in the shadow of a gargantuan dam.

The man is almost indistinguishable from the mud from afar. His body is caked in mud, splatters of mud freckle his face.

Speaker 1: His body is caked in mud, splatters of mud freckle his face. His eyes are the rich, deep brown of mud, with iridescent glints like the silvery flick of a fish tail. From afar, this man could be the first man, the one the gods made with their own hands, in their own image.

Speaker 2: This man could be the first man, the one the gods made with their own hands, in their own image.

Even the wise Prometheus molded men out of water and earth and stole a gleam of fire from Mount Olympus, pouring its power upon them.

Speaker 1: The Inca, the Maori, the Babylonians, the Egyptians, the Chinese, the Hindus, the Yoruba, the Sumerians. Seas and mountains and years apart and yet they all told the same story: man out of mud.

And, indeed, We created man from an extract of clay. Out of mud we first made. Out of mud we dreamed we were made.

Then we forgot, or sought to forget, and declared ourselves the makers.

Speaker 2: Of mud the first life.

Where earth and water met and mingled, giving birth to the first single-celled organisms that would become every living breathing creature in the world:

flora

and fauna

and fungus.

Speaker 1: And the Lord God formed man of the dust of the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and man became a living soul.

Speaker 2: The man with iridescent eyes, standing waist-deep in mud, is one part in a system that works as a whole.

Speaker 1: The man with iridescent eyes has a recurring dream that returns to him without pattern or warning.

Speaker 2: There is the shush of palms and the rustling of grass and bulrush the flap of drying laundry, the cries of children and the warning shouts of mothers to stay away from the edge of the river. The ominous bass tone of alligators cutting their way through the undercurrent.

Speaker 1: In the epic of Gilgamesh, Gilgamesh, king of Uruk, sets off on a quest for eternal life, after watching his friend Enkidu, made of clay and water, die. As Enkidu lies dying, expiring from his wound, he tells his friend Gilgamesh this:

*“You will be left alone, unable to understand
In a world where nothing lives anymore
Nothing like yourself, everything like dead
Clay before the river makes the plants
Burst out along its beds, dead and...”*

The story of the Flood as world-maker is in fact the story of mud. Religion and Science converge in a place where earth and water meet.

If mud had its own memory, what might it deem worth remembering?

But something of the old awe remains, of mud’s mysterious force: not earth or water, but both and neither. The place where the two edges of the world meet. Neither liquid nor solid, it shifts perpetually beneath our feet. Thus the swamplands became dreaded, ghostly places, where mysterious lights flicker blue in the fog, luring men to their deaths.

Speaker 2: In the dream, a swollen, rushing river and the traces of waves that once were, and the broken shells and clams. It is water turned inside-out: a memory in the shape of the body of the sea.

The man with iridescent eyes sleeps in a wooden hut just far enough away so that he can no longer hear the sound of the river.

If the gods made us in their own image, then the gods, too, must have been made of mud.

**Arabic narration appears on screen in English translation*