

Collecting

Abigail Reynolds' Silk Road quest

The British artist talks about her journey charting the wilful destruction of libraries, ancient and modern



Abigail Reynolds with motorbikes at Ephesus, Turkey © Abigail Reynolds; BMW group

MARCH 17, 2017 by: **Gareth Harris**

Late last year, a young British artist zoomed into Xi'an, central China, on a motorbike. After removing her helmet and scouting out the surroundings, Abigail Reynolds sought out the Xianyang Palace, the library of China's first emperor, Qin Shi Huang. Reynolds' quest — to visit and chronicle 16 libraries lost over the centuries to political conflicts, looters and natural catastrophes — had begun. The fruits of her odyssey will go on show this week in the BMW Lounge at Art Basel Hong Kong, entitled "The Ruins of Time: Lost Libraries of the Silk Road".

Reynolds won the BMW Art Journey commission last year, a prize co-sponsored by Art Basel and BMW. She travelled the Silk Road from China to Italy, taking in Uzbekistan, Iran, Egypt and Turkey (conflict zones such as Iraq, Syria and Afghanistan were a no-go).

The arduous five-month excursion across Asia, Africa and Europe was split into three trips, covering sites such as ancient Nishapur in Iran (which was lost in 1154), the Hidden Libraries of Iran (lost 1979) and the Bibliotheca Ulpia in Rome (lost around 600). Her final stop was the library of the Serapeum in Alexandria.

It's clear Reynolds is obsessed with her subject matter: libraries informed her upbringing and continue to underpin her artistic practice. She was once a bibliographic citations assistant for the Oxford English Dictionary, and vents spleen about local authority funding cuts for [UK libraries \(https://www.ft.com/content/4aebf180-7997-11e5-a95a-27d368e1ddf7\)](https://www.ft.com/content/4aebf180-7997-11e5-a95a-27d368e1ddf7).

Standing outside the Radcliffe Camera — which houses part of the Bodleian Library's collection in Oxford — puts her in a reverie. “This waft of warm air comes out of a grill which smells of book stacks . . . that feeling of a library quivering with life, with voices, somewhere you can commune with the dead.”

These voices have been annulled in other parts of the world. “A library is a compendium of knowledge, a group identity,” she says. “I went to places where all that meaning has been voided, recently or in the distant past. Conflict plays a big part; a really quick way to undermine the identity of a group of people is by getting rid of their

books, by getting rid of their history.”



Roman library in Nysa, Turkey © Abigail Reynolds; BMW group

What quickly became apparent is that very little remains of some of these ancient sites except dirt and debris. The Xianyang Palace in Xi’an, which was destroyed around 206BC, is now a wasteland; the Chinese authorities try to keep the site under wraps, ushering people instead towards the Terracotta Army settlement near the site.

“It’s rumoured that when the Empire toppled, the library was burnt along with all its holdings. As for the people who used the library — the readers — they were buried alive,” Reynolds says, with her ability to summon up illuminating facts in an instant about the different libraries and legs of the journey. “Paper was not invented until the first century,” she explains, “so the earliest Chinese texts are recorded on bone and shell, wooden tablets or lengths of silk; we do not know what the books contained here.”

Some sites, however, do still contain significant remnants. Another of the journey’s memorable moments

was gaining access to a guarded “library cave” in Dunhuang in northwestern China, which Reynolds says was like going through a “cupboard door” to a miniature paradise for bibliophiles. The library contained scripts pertaining to numerous different religions and cultures, from Daoism to Buddhism and Confucianism. Such finds “pointed to a meaningful exchange between people and cultures”, she says.



The artist in the Mogao cave library, Dunhuang © Abigail Reynolds; BMW group

Documenting and condensing this odyssey for an art fair presentation was, Reynolds admits, daunting. At Art Basel Hong Kong, she is showing a selection of 16mm colour films displayed on library shelves behind sheets of textured glass which distort the footage. “For a project about loss, it can’t be so easy to see the films,” she says.

A freestanding screen references the numerous lattice-like screens and barriers she encountered on the road. Other floor-based works are named after the stone books, or *stelae* (slabs carved with Chinese characters) discovered in Xi’an.



Screen and stelae shown at Art Basel Miami Beach, 2016 © Abigail Reynolds

Such a complex journey, crossing borders and passing through danger zones, was not without its hazards. In Egypt, she was arrested by plain clothes police while filming near Tahrir Square in Cairo (Egyptian officials made her open the Bolex camera, releasing her after a few hours). In Turkey, she came off the bike while negotiating a series of hairpin bends.

“I could not have done this without major support, if you feel like you’ve got support you can take risks,” she says, referring to her commercial backers. “Sometimes the only voice, or presence or body in those places was mine. I was often one of the few people who even knew a library had been there.”

BMW Lounge, Art Basel Hong Kong, March 23-25;
artbasel.com/hong-kong (<http://artbasel.com/hong-kong>)

Photographs: Abigail Reynolds; BMW group