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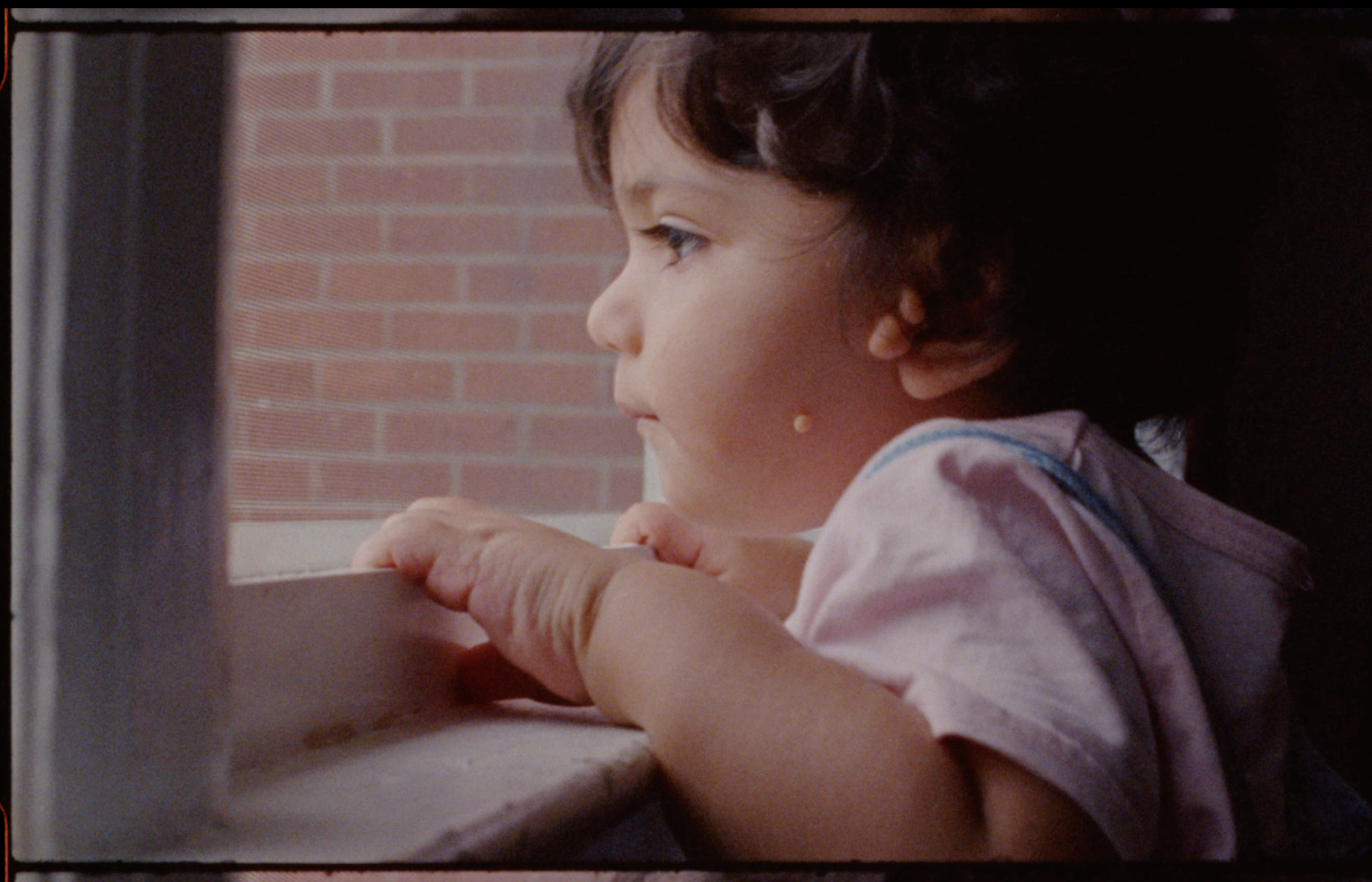
DISCUSSION GUIDE



A BROKEN HOUSE

a film by Jimmy Goldblum

www.pbs.org/pov



A BROKEN HOUSE

Mohamad Hafez received a one-way ticket to the United States. Missing his homeland, he decided to create a stand-in. A story of love, loss and creating pathways home.

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This guide is an invitation to dialogue. It is based on a belief in the power of human connection and designed for people who want to use *A Broken House* to engage family, friends, classmates, colleagues, and communities in conversation and understanding. In contrast to initiatives that foster debates in which participants try to convince others that they are right, this document envisions conversations undertaken in a spirit of openness in which people try to understand one another and expand their thinking by sharing viewpoints and actively listening.

The discussion prompts are intentionally crafted to help a wide range of audiences think more deeply about the issues in the film. Rather than attempting to address them all, choose one or two that best meet your needs and interests. And be sure to leave time to consider taking action. Planning next steps can help people leave the room feeling energized and optimistic, even in instances when conversations have been difficult.

For more detailed event planning and facilitation tips, visit <https://communitynetwork.amdoc.org/>.

To screen the film ahead of conversation you can stream it [here](#).

A LETTER FROM THE FILMMAKER, JIMMY GOLDBLUM

I originally wanted to tell a story about refugees that my wife could watch. I had noticed a disturbing trend in this genre of films: documentarians were increasingly relying on graphic violence as a way to build empathy for the victims of conflict. These images are devastating and re-traumatizing to viewers like my wife, who developed c-PTSD while reporting on drone attack survivors in her home country of Pakistan. I wondered, for her and immigrant audiences like her, who deserved to see their stories told on-screen, what would it look like to create a film about the aftermath of war with neither blood nor bodies in it; to instead focus on the other things lost in conflict: our connection to our families, our culture, our ways of being in the world?

Then I met the architect Mohamad Hafez. I saw so much of myself in him. We're both art and movie lovers, our parents shared similar professions; and we both grew up running around our neighborhoods with sketchbooks, living in the world of our doodles. The major difference between us is that Mohamad was born—according to George W. Bush and his NSEERS program—in the wrong type of country: Syria. For that reason, he was issued a single-entry visa to the United States and could no longer return home. He missed weddings, funerals, and births. He started to make miniatures as a way to soothe his homesickness; art therapy that he didn't know was art therapy.

Mohamad's lonely nostalgia turned to rage when the Syrian war broke out. He watched the thousand-year-old minarets, arches and porticoes that inspired him to become an architect—ancient doorways with their Hellenic, Roman, Byzantine, and Islamic influences—come crashing down. His world came crashing down with them: his family became refugees, fleeing to five countries amongst the six of them; and his parents eventually separated, unable to reconcile their competing attachments to Syria. And yet, Mohamad was one of the lucky ones: that, even as he endured the dissolution of the country he loved, he, along with his loved ones, survived.

I finished “A Broken House” a few months before the global pandemic forced us all inside for 18-months. As quarantine continued and we all missed weddings, funerals, and births, we experienced the slightest taste of Mohamad's tragedy. But unlike Mohamad, travel bans have never prevented me from returning home; and I still have a home to which I can return.

This film asks, for those who survive war and arrive on our shores, what gets left behind? For Mohamad, all he has left of Syria and his family are memories. Damascus is irreparably changed, and our immigration laws have made it so, in the nearly two decades since Mohamad arrived in the United States, his once close-knit family has not been together under a single roof.

Even though they survived war and the life of a refugee without becoming another casualty or bloody statistic, this reality is agonizing, untenable, and yes, violent, enough.

KEY PARTICIPANTS

Mohamed Hafez - Syrian artist and architect living in the United States who creates miniature landscapes that reflect the homes and lives in war-torn in Syria

KEY ISSUES

A Broken House is an excellent tool for outreach and will be of special interest to people who want to explore the following topics:

- Syrian War
- Art as Healing Practice
- Refugee Experiences
- Immigration
- Middle East/North African History and Politics
- Art as Activism
- Costs of War

BACKGROUND INFORMATION**ARAB SPRING**

In the Spring of 2011, an act of defiance by a Tunisian street vendor prompted the beginning of almost two years of political uprisings in the Middle East and North Africa. This period was labeled ‘Arab Spring’ in reference to the People’s Spring of 1848 when political uprisings spread across Europe. Protests and uprisings were rooted in the demand for more cultural and political freedom. Activists and protestors filled the streets to demand a voice in their governments. The impact of these uprisings varied. In Egypt, early success ousting authoritarian leaders was later followed by a controversial election, a coup and the installation of a new authoritarian regime. In Tunisia, uprisings brought some humanitarian advancements and created a fragile democracy.

In Syria, the uprisings came in response to the arrest of several young people in the small border town of Dara’a. After a long and difficult period of iron-fisted rule by Hafez al-Assad, the rise of his son Bashar al-Assad in 2000 brought with it hope of change. For the people of Dara’a, this hope evaporated with the installment of security chief Atef Najib. Najib was a controlling force in the region, inspiring unrest and discontent among Dara’a citizens. When graffiti messages defaming President Bashar al-Assad were found on a wall of a local high school, more than 15 teenagers were arrested, tortured and confined for more than a month. On March 15, 2011, protesters in Dara’a, Damascus and Aleppo filled the streets in response. Uprisings continued as efforts to suppress rebellion turned violent. By July military defectors had named themselves the Free Syrian Army, as the uprisings evolved into a Civil War.

THE SYRIAN CIVIL WAR

During the ten years of open conflict, control of Syria has remained divided with several different groups gaining and losing power at different times. Free Syrian Army took control of areas within Idlib in Northwest Syria. ISIL/ISIS took control of a large area from 2014 to 2019. They declared the creation of a “caliphate” or area of land lead by a politico-religious Muslim leader called a “caliph.” During their time in power, ISIL forces executed thousands, prompting many others to flee in search of safety. The Syrian government has taken and retaken control over large portions of Syria by force with the support of outside forces who have a vested interest in the region, primarily the United States of America, Russia and Iran.

Thousands have lost their lives in conflict or as casualties of war. Of those who are alive, millions have been displaced and millions more don’t have access to food and necessities. In cities of conflict, over 100,000 buildings have been destroyed. Several sacred and culturally significant spaces have been destroyed. These include: Temple of Bel, the Temple of Baal Shamin, the Arch of Triumph, and columns in the Valley of the Tombs.

THE CURRENT STATE OF SYRIA

After 10 years of armed conflict in Syria, 5.6 million refugees have been displaced outside Syria, with another 6 million displaced within Syria - the number of people who have been displaced is roughly half of Syria's total population. Outside intervention from the United States, Russia, Turkey and Iran continue to exacerbate the conflict with outside forces bringing in their own agendas and deepening the crisis in the region. Control in Syria remains split with large portions still functioning under Syrian government rule. President Bashar al-Assad continues in the role he inherited from his father. His rule is marked by violence against dissidents, the use of chemical weapons against his own people and the arrest, imprisonment and torture of thousands. Kurdish forces, Turkish forces and rebel factions control the rest of the country. The UN called Syria "the worst man-made disaster since World War II." Resources are scarce as prices for food and other necessities rise. 4.5 million children are hungry and a third of all refugees worldwide are from Syria.

ABOUT MOHAMED HAFEZ

Mohamed Hafez is a Syrian American artist and architect. Born in Damascus, Hafez was raised in Saudi Arabia and educated in the Midwestern United States. Hafez uses found objects, scrap metal and paint to create "surrealistic Middle Eastern streetscapes that are architectural in their appearance yet politically charged in their content" (mohamedhafez.com). He weaves recordings of street sounds, music and readings from the Qur'an into the landscape of the streetscapes to offer a multisensory experience of a city in crisis. Hafez's work challenges our tendency to turn away from the lost lives and cultural destruction of war in Syria and beyond. He is an artist-in-residence at the Keller Center of Harris School of Public Policy, University of Chicago. He has been profiled in The Guardian, The New York Times, The New Yorker and National Public Radio.

Source Referenced: <http://www.mohamadhafez.com/>

STARTING THE CONVERSATION

Immediately after the film, we suggest giving people a moment to stop and reflect. You could play some soft instrumental music or let people enjoy the silence. You could pose a general question (examples below) and give people some time to themselves to jot down or think about their answers before opening the discussion. Alternatively, you could ask participants to share their thoughts with a partner before starting a group discussion.

Warm up:

- What does 'home' mean to you? Has the feeling of 'home' evolved over the course of your lifetime? If so, what changed? If so, how have you been changed?
- What are your initial thoughts/feelings after watching the film?

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS**Impact:**

- How does proximity and shared experience define community or family?
- What do you do to establish a sense of home in a place where you work or live?
- What part of the film did you identify with most? Why?
- Which aspect of the film caused feelings of estrangement/discomfort? Why?
- Did any moment in the film inspire you? If so, which part?
- Did anything surprise you while watching the film?
- What was the most challenging part of the film to watch?
- Did this film make you think differently about the ideas of “home” and or “family?” If so, in what ways?

Going deeper:

- What impact does Hafez’s art work have on you when you see it?
- How did Hafez use art as a mode of processing and towards healing the personal impacts of war?
- How do you relate to Hafez’s use of artistic creation to process personal loss? In what ways have you used creativity to process difficult circumstances or emotions?
- How does creativity help Hafez heal? How does it help you?
- Describe a time when you “made home.”
- How did this film make you think differently about the impact of war?

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- This is a film about war that shows no violence against human beings. How does that affect how you experience the imagery of war? Does seeing violence make you feel more empathetic to the subject matter or less? Why?
- How did this film make you think differently about the importance of cultural memory? Of familial memory?
- In what ways do national border policies complicate the resettlement process for refugees fleeing persecution or war?
- Mohamed's urges his mother to leave Damascus and come to the United States to live. She refuses. Do you identify with Mohamed or his mother?
- How did this film invite you to reflect on assumptions you/we make about refugees and the lives they've lived? How does this film inspire you to resist assumptions about the lives of refugees, specifically about the lives they lived before becoming refugees?
- What can we do to create a sense of community when we are displaced or when we are welcoming someone who has been displaced?
- How do you hold onto a place when you leave? How would this change if you knew you couldn't return?
- What did you learn that you had not heard of before?
- Is there anything you're hoping to learn more about?
- In what ways, if any, does this film inspire you towards action?
- What does this film have to teach us about what all is lost in political conflict? What are the personal, cultural, emotional, spiritual, and familial costs of war?

KIMMOTHY COLE

Kimmothy Cole is an educator, activist, organizer and multi-disciplinary artist based in so-called Austin, TX. Their work has been featured in festivals, conferences, venues and events across the United States. Their use of deep community building and the development of shared culture serves them in the work of ritual activism. They currently work as the Director of Family Ministries for Servant Church Austin, working with families and staff in imagining intergenerational points of connection for spiritual growth. Their upcoming book *The Rooted Ritual* is a ritual resource for creating ritual in community and their latest ritual performance piece *The Sacrament of Fatness* (working title) is set to premier in late 2021 or early 2022.

CREDITS & ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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