

## The UP Podcast: Episode 1 - Shezad Dawood | The Terrarium Transcript

**Hettie Judah 0:03**

Okay, I'm under the sea with rocks and seaweed and loads of fish and jellyfish, and also these geometric forms scattered around which kind of look like crystal forms.

**Shezad Dawood 0:20**

So, you're in the little terrarium with a view to Dungeness, in the interior.

**Hettie Judah 0:27**

Oh, I have these kind of fleshy claws in front of me and tentacles?

**Shezad Dawood 0:33**

Yes, I'm afraid you're no longer just human, very much post human. And you are in the waiting room and about to be spawned into a reality 300 years into the future.

**Hettie Judah 0:47**

Am I just a hapless trawl in the game...Hello, and welcome to *The UP Podcast* with me Hettie Judah. That was the sound of the artist Shezad Dawood immersing me in his virtual reality artwork, *The Terrarium*. It's a dystopian underwater adventure, set 300 years in the future, in a world in which land masses between the Kent coast and Tallinn in Estonia have been consumed by the rising sea. Moving through this future world in a post human body, you experience first-hand the impact of climate change and unregulated coastal construction on sensitive marine ecosystems. *The Terrarium* is part of Shezad's ongoing project *Leviathan*, a vast collaborative enterprise that started in 2017 and already extends to a body of short films, VR works, essays and discussions. Set to run for many years yet, *Leviathan* explores connections between climate change, migration and mental health, described by the artist as three of the most urgent issues of our time.

Commissioned by UP Projects, *The Terrarium* was first presented at the Kai Art Centre in Estonia. It is currently showing as part of the Folkestone Triennial, the Festival of New Art on the Kent coast, which runs into the second of November 2021. *The UP Podcast* is brought to you by UP Projects, a public art organisation, that commissions contemporary art for public places to engage people with some of the most pressing issues of our time. In this episode, I'll be talking with Shezad about some of the ideas behind *The Terrarium*. We'll also be hearing from Marine ecologist Dr. Louise Firth, and composer Graham Fitkin about their contributions to the project. Shezad, how did this commission from UP Projects come about?

**Shezad Dawood 2:42**

Well, they approached me with a commission from Folkestone Triennial to make a work around using digital technology in relation to the oceans which, you know, suited me perfectly. I think I was fascinated by this particular stretch of water that the Baltic hits Kent, that for me, and that, you know, Sweden, Denmark, the Netherlands, just because of, you know, where they sit above sea level, very low - they're gone. I always sort of playfully sort of chuckled at the idea that we call it earth when you know, it's 70% water. But if it goes up to sort of 80% or 90% water, can we still cling to that title? And that opened up lots of other sort of pathways and abilities to go down, you know, speculative rabbit holes. So I was speaking, I was invited to interview one of the world's leading evolutionary geneticists at CPH:DOX, the film festival in Copenhagen a couple of years ago. And again, I think, you know, there were some bunnies in the headlights because the conversation just took this really wacky turn because I was really curious to know if in the future, I could have octopus colour change abilities. And obviously he turned around and went it's already possible - it's about social acceptability and then he went on to explain to me and the audience that if you look at the arc of plastic surgery, it's all about social acceptability and the fact that nowadays you know, somebody without any qualifications on your street corner can do botox or give you fillers or pumps you know, what you know gene splicing, give it you know, give it 50 - give it, if it follows a similar arc, 50 years?

**Hettie Judah 4:29**

Yeah, so a few years' time I'll be able to, by the time I'm quite elderly, you'll be able to go off and get some octopus colour changing abilities from...

**Shezad Dawood 4:36**

Or something else equally kind of desirable, but kind of a bit freaky.

**Hettie Judah 4:42**

It's just an amazing concept. You've used VR in this work, was that always part of the commission? What does VR bring to this as a project?

**Shezad Dawood 4:54**

VR for me has always been about this faultline between embodiment and disembodiment. So, it's always been about a philosophical trajectory. And I think with this one to put you in that reality, I mean, because we all sit there and look at a map and go: "oh, that's terrible - let me donate five quid and carry on with my life as it was previously". But to actually put you in the space of that, of that newfound sea; the possible genetic alterations that could happen, it suddenly makes it, you know, one of the key things I've been curious about is VR, being used as a kind of test case for empathy. And, you know, actually being in a space, I mean, one of the things I've used it for as well is to archive spaces that disappeared or vanished. But

this was an interesting way to sort of archive the future before it happens. And I think there's something about also putting you into a body that's no longer human. That visceral experience of literally, with my hands, you know, I am the octopus, for me, that's a sort of play, you know, radical play with subjectivity.

**Hettie Judah 6:02**

There's also this real kind of science fiction feeling to it. So, it is also quite playful that you feel you're in a kind of genre that you recognise, it's like being a futuristic film or in a video game or something, is that kind of genre something it's important to you did you want to also put in those references as well to something that's maybe related to kind of gaming or cinema?

**Shezad Dawood 6:24**

I think also it's for me, it's literary. So, you know, I'm a huge fan of Octavia Butler, equally of Donna Haraway. So, to think about not to say that Donna Haraway is fiction, but you know, but there's, that. For me, that speculative line between fiction and science is really, really exciting because it contains a number of possibilities, none of which actually ever turn out to be real. If we look at 19th century kind of illustrations of the future, there's some great things like they predict travelators, but little else, but at the same time, it becomes these visions of the future, that we then put our hopes, dreams, fears, you know, even our money behind in some cases. So that idea that you can actually, in a way, look...look kind of creatively and playfully into a future as a way also to reflect on the present. So, what is it we're getting so wrong now? And you know, some of the chats I've been having, you know, Louise Firth at the Marine Institute of Plymouth and I have had some great chats about sea level rise, and what are the different solutions that are happening in different parts of the world, whether it's entirely manmade, as a way to kind of mitigate, sea level rise, but also retained biodiversity. A lot of what isn't spoken of is everyone knows about sea level rising. But actually, incipient loss of biodiversity that comes with it?

**Dr Louise Firth 7:52**

It depresses me actually, purchasing an increasingly artificial world, both above the water and below the water.

**Hettie Judah 7:59**

So, I'm here with Dr. Louise Firth who is the Associate Professor of Marine Ecology at the University of Plymouth.

**Dr Louise Firth 8:05**

I was really excited to work with Shezad on the *Leviathan* project. And it was the first time that I had ever worked with an artist. And normally, you know, working in science, you ask a question, you test a hypothesis, and then you produce the paper

in a particular way, there's a very strict formula that you have to adhere to, to communicate the results. Shezad challenged me with giving me some concepts that he wanted me to bring out through science but linked to his exhibit. And it was the first time I'd ever done it and I loved it. I got such a kick out of it. And you can say and do different things that you can't normally do in a scientific presentation or to a scientific paper. I was able to speak a different language and for me, it was it was a real challenge, and it was really interesting.

### **Hettie Judah 8:51**

In *The Terrarium* we particularly look at this area near Folkestone and the kind of southeast coast of England. How do we see the impact of you know, human construction on the southeast coast of England because in the work, we encounter all kinds of different structures, there are kind of submerged bits of architecture? They're also I guess, floating island type structures? And there's this very transformed undersea realm which isn't what you think of as traditional coral reef. We're looking kind of in the present and then in into the future and centuries ahead, what kind of transformations are we looking at?

### **Dr Louise Firth 9:25**

By replacing some natural habitat with an artificial one, no matter how good the artificial one is, it's never going to be as good as what was there previously. So, this replacement of our natural habitats with hard engineered structures is we're seeing basically a simplification of our environment both above and below the water. And if you erode the natural topographic complexity, so you know, if we're talking about sub millimetre scale, all the way up to metre scale, there's very few organisms that will be able to live in these artificial environments. To take a concrete seawall - if you look at a concrete seawall anywhere along the coast, anywhere in the world, there's very little living on it - and there's lots of reasons for that, it's too smooth, it doesn't have the roughness and the micro habitats, that allows organisms to escape from either drying out or from predators. And that leads to a simplification of the marine life that will live in those habitats. And the same is true on land, you know, urbanisation has the exact same effect. If we replace natural habitats with hard engineered structures, very little life can actually live there.

### **Hettie Judah 10:36**

And in terms of this science fiction that Shezad's created in which there's this continual submerged system stretching all the way from Folkestone and up to the Baltic. Does that kind of fit into the kind of future mapping that you and your colleagues imagine? I mean, is it one of many projected scenarios? Is it a kind of concept that's something that we should be seriously concerned about?

**Dr Louise Firth 11:00**

I would be - with climate change, we're seeing a lot, we're seeing rising sea levels, for sure. So, if we're going to be living in an increasingly, marine world, in the future, coupled with that, humans are not just going to migrate away from their coasts, they're not just going to flee into the hills, they're going to protect, they're going to hold the line. And through that, they're going to build an increasing number of artificial structures in coastal and marine environments to protect their assets and their infrastructure, their cities, their homes, all of that is going to lead to increased homogenization of these environments, coupled with global shipping, an increased marine environment and an increased artificial environment. We're going to see what this biotic homogenization just happening on a on a much wider scale, I would say. So you know, if you like looking at particular organisms, in the UK, for instance, expect to see them if you go to Australia or New Zealand, expect to see them, if you go to Japan, we're seeing the same species turning up all over the globe now, and we're eroding native biodiversity. There are winners with all of this, and the winners are those species that are able to be basically the invasive species, organisms that are able to withstand a wide range of environmental conditions and can live in artificial environments. These guys are going to win, and they're gonna be everywhere.

**Hettie Judah 12:28**

I know you do an enormous amount of research on all of your projects. And I think for the years, you've been talking to scientists and experts on climate change, and mental health for some of your other projects, what kinds of discipline were you looking into when you were researching *The Terrarium*? Who were the experts that really contributed big ideas to this?

**Shezad Dawood 12:52**

So, in a way, apart from Martin Ziegler, who in a way was the inspiration for it by showing me what would be underwater? Then Professor Eske Willerslev in terms of the hybrid genetics. And then also, when we actually got going with it, it was thinking about what the species would be, you know, if sea levels are rising, if waters are warming, what would that future Baltic look like as a makeup of species? So, we actually work with Jonas Plan a marine biologist based in Tallinn to kind of workshop species and things like, the pike that would still occur, but it became suddenly possible that a sunfish could make its way into the Baltic, which wouldn't have been able to before because it wouldn't have had the passage given its size. So it was this, what happens? And it's, never as simple as anyone would like, like it to be, you know, people always want to sort of binary like, it's going to be like this. And it's like, well, you know, yes, biodiversity will reduce, but it will also expand in other areas, you will have some species grow bigger, some grow smaller, some will, become apex predators, some will die out. It's not just a straight line.

And I think, for me, it was all those conversations, help to kind of tease out the nuance.

**Hettie Judah 14:14**

Were you talking to experts specifically about the geographies around Folkestone in and around Tallinn as well?

**Shezad Dawood 14:22**

Absolutely. So, it was really given that when I saw the map, what really stuck out was Kent, Tallinn. And then very bizarrely, in a very short space of time, within a year, I'd been approached by both Folkestone via UP Projects, and then separately, the new Kai Art Centre in Tallinn had approached me, both of them wanting me to do something digital around the oceans. And it was like, "oh, that's, handy because I've been kind of obsessed with this, axis". So I sort of put them together and *The Terrarium* was born.

**Hettie Judah 14:59**

So in the show, there are various different stages that we, I should say, swim through, or there's sometimes it's not quite as gentle as swimming. Can you talk me a little bit about the different kinds of environments that we're encountering, and the kinds of thought processes you're hoping you might stimulate with the work as we proceed through this possible future world?

**Shezad Dawood 15:22**

I mean, there was quite a lot of things I was trying to do simultaneously. So there's this sort of building this sort of future ocean, but then it does veer off into kind of space opera. And you've almost, you're abducted by these space pirates who are, if you are a kind of marine human hybrid, they are more mammalian human hybrids. I'm not too, you know, too big to kind of have a bit of fun with taking, the scientific into this sort of almost observed space, opera terrain and I think that was also part of this journey of storytelling. So how do you take the science and also just sort of enjoy a really wacky story arc? And I think I was interested in this idea as well. If it's about empathy, how do you make that empathy, more radical? I'm an octopus, great, you start to think of, you know, maybe your next time you go to a seafood restaurant, you might think slightly differently all the fish counter. But what happens when you get to one of the endpoints? You know, what sort of empathy does that trigger?

**Hettie Judah 16:22**

You've chosen to have two different endpoints in this world? Why did you create that? I mean, it's not exactly a choice, because that say neither end is particularly pleasant. [Laughter] I mean, they're beautiful. But why did you decide to create two different endings for this?

## **Shezad Dawood 16:38**

I was very interested. I mean, with every sort of VR work I do, I'm very interested in agency, the agency of the audience, and with this one we'd made because the rest of the world it was creating was so rich, we actually made it more of a sort of passive experience that you're sort of swimming or otherwise through these different sort of worlds or what universe so I wanted to kind of bring that agency back at the end of the experience that you've passively gone through all these quite intense experiences. So, I wanted to give at least the kind of limited agency to choose your fate. And you know, at least one of the endings I thought, if I if I were to go out that way, as an octopus freezing in space to one of my favourite arias, that would be okay, there's worse ways to go out - as sushi? [Laughter]

## **Hettie Judah 17:28**

You mentioned the music that accompanies one of the endings that sound is incredibly important to this work as well. And it's actually as you said, it's very mesmerising, and in many ways quite kind of soothing, soundtrack in part. Can you talk me through the way that sound works because it was collaborative aspect of this work as well wasn't it the sound?

## **Shezad Dawood 17:49**

Absolutely. And you know, sound is really important to me in all my films. VR, you know, I'm often collaborating with musicians, composers, improv performers. For this work, it was I collaborated with Graham Fitkin, the contemporary British composer, but he's been working on shifting baseline syndrome in the ocean for years, which I don't know if you know about shifting baseline syndrome. So basically, it's all our sort of media or all sort of reporting around how the oceans are being affected by human impacts are actually based on recent records. So, we're looking at, also with the oceans for the longest time, they were so poorly documented or poorly studied, especially, the twilight or the midnight zone, we've didn't have any data from till relatively recently. And so, a lot of our data goes back, a handful of decades. And so, when if we're saying, "oh, it's got so bad since 1999, but how bad is it got since 1929?" Through human impact, and you know, one of the one of the other papers we commissioned through leviathan was looking at munition dumping in the Mediterranean and the Adriatic. I don't know if you know, but like, after the, NATO Yugoslavian campaign a lot of the bombing raids if they if the bombers weren't able to drop their payloads because of you know weather conditions being unclear you know a bit of haze bit of mist they certain types of bombers cannot land with their payload intact so they would just jettison it over the middle of the Adriatic and so you've got in both the Mediterranean and the Adriatic you've got a sort of ticking time bomb dating back to World War One when mass munition dumpings began. And if you think about some of the things that were being dumped in World War One from mustard gas and other things and what are the casings that the mustard gas was sealed in work according to the

technology of the day so you've got this idea that that things are bad based on the timescale we're looking at but if we were to sort of actually more accurately plot how bad things have got over time you know it's frightening...

**[Background Audio] 20:22**

If the bucket can catch fish, and it's now so absurd that you could catch fish in the bucket, that we tend to think we exaggerate exactly. The same thing that happened to us. Each generation tends to reset the clock, reset, reset the counter.

**Hettie Judah 20:48**

Sound is a crucial aspect of *The Terrarium*. It adds to the sense of being submerged in a changed world, and transforms, subtly moving us through the action. I spoke with the composer Graham Fitkin who shares many common interests with Shezad and who provided *The Terrarium's* immersive soundtrack. I began by asking him what exactly is shifting baseline syndrome?

**Graham Fitkin 21:10**

It's a term which most people aren't familiar with and yet, it's an experience which most of us deal with, in the sense that we notice things throughout our life. You, me, everybody, from our conscious, our early conscious wakings, we notice what's going on there, that is our norm, that is what we grow up in and we get used to and over the course of one's lifetime, you become a grumpy old person at the end of it and say what it's not like it was in my day. The so you might have something happening at some point in time, let's call it a good thing. Let's go to the biodiversity, or the greenness of a of a planet. And over time that becomes degraded perhaps and the people who are experiencing at a certain point of time, will experience what they experience during their lifetimes. And then the next set of people - their offspring, their next generation - will also notice it from their perspective. Now more recently we have computer data, but for most of our years of existence we've not had computer data, we have stories, anecdotes and those aren't trusted. So we get lots of people saying, "oh, we need to save the whale", or "we need to save this" or "we need to save that" or "we need to preserve the environment." But at what point what is what are we trying to preserve? Is it important for us to go either go back to or remain at? And why is that more important than any other point on this on this never-ending shifting baselines? So, this idea is with me, and constantly in my work, and whilst it's largely thought of as something to do with the environment, or ecology, I think it can very easily be transferred to culture and behaviour, all sorts of other things like that incentives. I'm talking about a generational amnesia; we forget about the past.

**Hettie Judah 22:59**

Now I'm fascinated by how these ideas then feed into a musical composition because, obviously, we talk about a baseline of music as well, would it be overly

reductive to imagine there's any correspondence in the way that you play with these ideas at all in in composing?

**Graham Fitkin 23:16**

No, not with the baseline. Not with baselines in music, I mean, I am portraying this sort of shift. So, in some of the work which I've been doing, there will be incremental change within the piece. It could be harmonic, it could be melodic, it could be rhythmic. And you may or you may not notice it, but in fact, there has been an incremental shift. So that sort of thing comes into play - not all the time. Some of the tracks I've actually recorded various people in the traffic terrarium. I recorded Professor Pauly - interviewed him and some his words are in the piece which you hear I've also used the sounds of scallop dredging, deep sea dredging, that I mean it's a noisy place it really is under the water generally through human intervention. So, there are sonars going off there have a security devices at ports which actually would kill you if you went and swam into them. The amount of dredging which goes on and completely destroys the environment and marine biodiversity underwater is completely dwindling. So, I try and get that into the music in some form.

**Hettie Judah 24:21**

So, in *The Terrarium* we go through a number of different stages in this VR. So, we start off in this in literally in a terrarium, then go into the very altered underwater realm. And then a number of things happen and there are obviously, there are the two different endings. Are there also phases or movements that we can talk about in the composition that accompany these transformations?

**Graham Fitkin 24:49**

I produced a number of different audio files for different things that you might experience underwater. So it could be that fish, that mermaid that's wandering past you, it could be some other thing, which is there. And it's more than just a sound effect. It has a sort of resonance with other music which is going on, either going on under headphones when you're in the VR, or when you take the VR off, and you're within - your back in, in the space in the room where you are also hearing my music. So, there are references going throughout. I have to say that I wasn't the person who decided where all of these went, Shezad and Shezad's team decided where some of these went, and they made such brilliant decisions. So, there's one point if you look up when you're in the VR you see the sort of potential reflection of maybe a vessel of some sort on top of the water or a boat possibly, probably. And there is this sort of, sort of when you go under the water and you see this thing there is this there is a part of the creaking of a boat, which I'd recorded which happens to go to go with that. So that so the team made a really good series of choices. There are certain things which are obvious, but I think they may they did well on their choices of what things go where.

**Hettie Judah 26:05**

So, the sounds responsive to one's movements within the VR to an extent as well? So, it's a kind of living soundscape?

**Graham Fitkin 26:14**

Yes, yeah. Yeah, it is, but there are certain things which happened at certain places as well, I found it fascinating, the whole thing, and I thought it worked. For me, it worked really well, I sort of had an idea of what to expect now when I finally got to Folkestone. But it was still a really, really great, great experience. I just wanted it to go on and on and on...

**[Background noise] 26:37**

**Hettie Judah 26:43**

There's also another aspect to this commission from UP Projects, which is *AnthropoPangaea* which is a digital interactive map. And it's a map of the world, but it's not a map of the world as we know it today. The continents have kind of shifted around a little kind of mega continent happening and then we can dive into that and meet these extraordinary creatures. What's going on with the map in that?

**Shezad Dawood 27:12**

I wanted to kind of mess with the map, you know, because I think as human beings we're so resistant to change, or to sort of evolving our paradigm shifting, you know, shifting our paradigm to accurately reflect reality. We're not good with reality, hence sort of playing with systems like VR to play with haptics and embodiment. But in terms of the map, I was interested to kind of, again, map deep times if Pangea was a sort of was a pre-continent, where there was just mostly one large landmass before the continents broke up. I think just to get people to think about, you know, how we are really a blip in the planet's lifecycle. And, and then to sort of make people aware of that, but then make them aware of all these sorts of more strange inhabitants of our oceans that some of whom we've only got to know about, again, in the last, couple of decades, just because we hadn't been able to sort of go that deep. I mean, literally, our zoological knowledge is about 300% what it was. So, there's this odd thing where we were encountering more and newer species, even as we're losing species, it's sort of both tragic but, but sort of oddly contradictory.

**Hettie Judah 28:25**

And there are some amazing species in the map as well. So, there is the sea mouse, which is hermaphroditic and iridescent, there's also a fish that can swallow things larger than itself. So going into terrarium, is like going into a fabulous video game in many ways. And I think you could potentially just go into this work and enjoy it

for the beautiful world that you've set up, and the fabulous creatures that you encounter. But if someone was to go in and take away one thought, or one question, what would you kind of hope it might be?

**Shezad Dawood 28:57**

What is our role on this planet? I think that often we just go blindly through life and don't really take responsibility for our impact, environmentally. I hope it just sort of makes people think differently about our role, and our relation to the natural environment and the oceans, and not take them for granted.

**Hettie Judah 29:22**

So, *The Terrarium* fits somewhat tangentially into a much larger body of work that you've been engaged in for a number of years now, which fits broadly under the title of *Leviathan*. How do you see the relationship between *Leviathan* and *The Terrarium*? How does this fit into the larger scheme of things with your concerns at the moment in the big themes you're engaging with?

**Shezad Dawood 29:44**

Well I think *The Terrarium* is very much part of the *Leviathan* universe and comes from that, you know, all the conversations that have informed it are related to the *Leviathan* project. And, you know, it's just moving further and further into the future. In fact, an earlier working title was "Leviathan Legacy: Part Two", and then we just decided it, you know, rather than always having to brand everything with *Leviathan*, you know, *The Terrarium* was actually a really catchy and appropriate title for this and that it could almost sort of be a standalone work, but it's so obvious, you know, so obviously interrelated and interconnected.

**Hettie Judah 30:22**

Do you see the other themes coming into it at all or is this more a kind of, sub-branch of...?

**Shezad Dawood 30:29**

No, I think, even just in terms of discussing what species might be present in a new, expanded Baltic, you're in migration. I think sometimes we always assume migration has to be about the human, I really don't feel it has to be at all, I think, you know, some of the greatest migrations on this planet are non-human. The greatest nightly migration is from the twilight zone of the ocean to the surface and actually has a greater carbon capture function in the whole Amazon rainforest. You know, the biomass that inhabit the twilight zone, so the second deepest tier of the ocean. So, you know, migration. I think it's also, we really need to get past this enlightenment idea of siloed compartmentalised knowledge, it hasn't - it's not fit for purpose, and it hasn't been for a long time, unless we start to sort of understand the disciplines are intimately interconnected. You know, we don't really

stand much of a chance in dealing with what's coming. In the mental health one, I think, you know, if you're, you know, environmental catastrophe and breakdown, I mean, it's going to impact your physical and mental health, especially if you get served up for dinner.

[Background noise] 31:45

Hettie Judah 31:50

Thank you for listening to the first episode of *The UP Podcast* with me Hettie Judah. And thank you to Shezad Dawood, Louise Firth and Graham Fitkin for all of your insights. If you have the chance to visit Folkestone and want to experience *The Terrarium*, it's open and free to visit until the 2nd November 2021. Go to [www.upprojects.com](http://www.upprojects.com) for details of how to book. For more behind the scenes content, you can also find UP Projects on Instagram at @up\_projects and on Twitter at @upprojects. For a deeper dive into Shezad's *Leviathan* project, you can get the story so far at [www.leviathan-cycle.com](http://www.leviathan-cycle.com). *The UP Podcast* is brought to you by UP Projects, the public arts organisation that Commission's contemporary art for public places, engaging audiences with some of the most pressing issues of our time. UP Projects works collaboratively with artists, communities and partners to make new work that has social relevance, encourages learning and enriches the public sphere. Keep an ear out for our next episode coming soon. When I'll be speaking to the artist Jasleen Kaur about a multimedia project *Gut Feelings Meri Jaan* commissioned by UP Projects and Touchstones Rochdale. *The UP Podcast* was presented by Hettie Judah and generously supported by the Arts Council England. audio production and editing is by Arsalan Mohammad. This podcast was creatively produced by UP Projects and the podcast graphics by Studio workshop. Thank you for listening and goodbye for now.