

Basma Alsharif

Press Package

Imane Farès

41 rue Mazarine, 75006 Paris
+ 33 (0)1 46 33 13 13 – contact@imane fares.com
www.imane fares.com

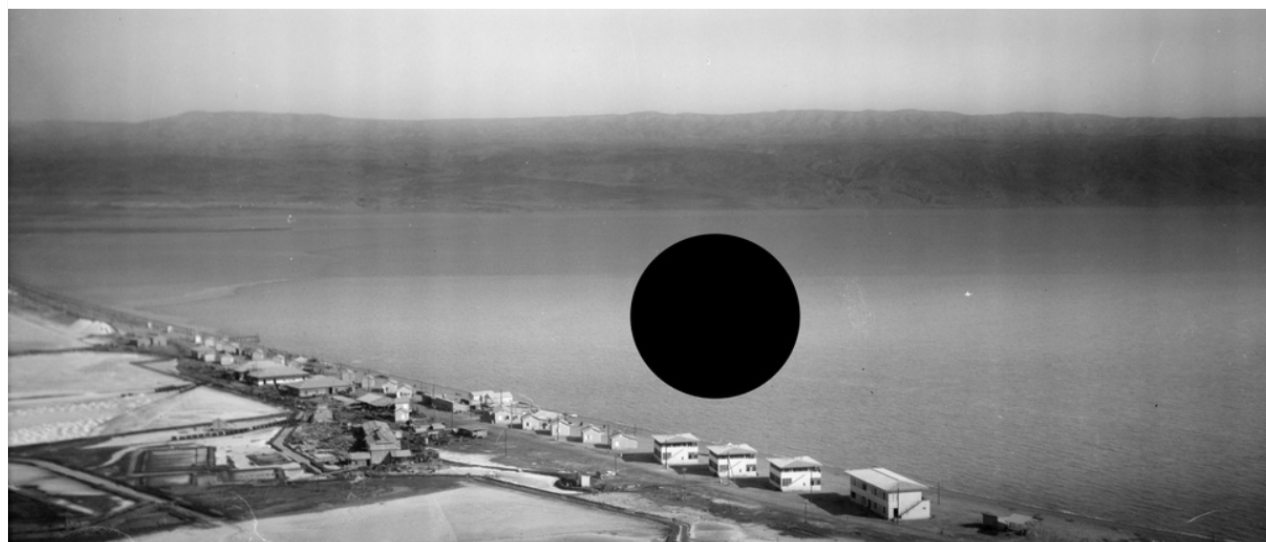
Dibb Katie,
"Artist Basma Alsharif Reimagines the Middle East",
The Skinny, November 1st,
2019

THE SKINNY
INDEPENDENT CULTURAL JOURNALISM

Artist Basma Alsharif Reimagines the Middle East

Artist Basma alSharif's new exhibition in CCA centres on a novella that is in parts sci-fi fantasy, historical fiction and erotica. Titled A Philistine, it undoes political borders in the Middle East, and reimagines possible pasts and futures

Feature by Katie Dibb | 01 Nov 2019



The Skinny: What can we expect from your upcoming show at CCA?

Basma alSharif: I had been thinking for a long time that I really wanted to do a work centred around a text that I wrote, and that the exhibition itself would be a reading space for this book essentially. Whenever I say book, I feel a little uncomfortable because it's not something I would publish officially but something that really is an artwork that exists in a gallery, that doesn't leave.

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I decided to make a text about a fictional journey. It goes along trainlines that used to exist in the Middle East, that became discontinued when Palestine was occupied. So I reconstructed those trainlines – there are certain connections that never existed, some which were actually train stops. The story moves backwards in time, so it starts in the present day Lebanon, to Palestine in 1935 and winds up in Egypt's Late Dynasty, roughly 1150 BC.

The book itself is filled with a lot of allegories that we find ourselves in today like how heavily present borders are which didn't used to exist. It does some work to undo them, to undo these physical borders. It also brings up sociopolitical issues that are present – what if that hadn't happened, what if the Middle East hadn't been colonised? What if Palestine was never occupied?

So, inherently through this fictional story I was wanting to deal with things becoming obsolete that we imagine are irreversible. For me that tied into making this book and having it be a physical object, something that's not digital, that can't be shared. Something that you really have to hold and read, because I also feel a separate agenda of the work is that I feel like the act of reading a book is becoming antiquated practice.

The text is written in English and Arabic. It is a vernacular Arabic, so it's not an official written language but the way that people speak, because there's a very big split between the way people speak and how people write Arabic. There is classical Arabic which is very formal, then there is the colloquial vernacular Arabic which differs region to region. It is written in a Palestinian vernacular and we are going to have a voiceover of someone reading an excerpt from the book.

Your use of science fiction and erotica styles is particularly intriguing, what artistic freedoms did that allow you?

I wanted it to be kept in three different genres. One was history, one was science fiction and fantasy, and the last, erotica. Having this leniency to imagine things in these landscapes that didn't exist and to portray the history of what actually happened.

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[I] force the reader to imagine something other than what is present or past and also to push the language. Especially with the erotica section, [I] insist that the text needed to be written in a vernacular language because classical Arabic doesn't have a lot of erotic terms. There are a lot of people who just don't believe that vernacular Arabic should ever be written, that the only form of Arabic is classical Arabic.

You talked about using archival footage – how much do you use archives and what is your experience of approaching these places as an artist?

I have used archives a lot. It is often a mix with my own work. Especially when it is regarding colonial [photographs] that were taken in Palestine by foreigners or colonisers essentially. I feel like there is something [of interest] about bluntly reappropriating these images and getting to decide how they function, regardless of whether or not it is right or legal. Because to me what happened previously is neither right or legal. We can't maybe outwardly call it a political act but an insistence by using many of these images that are not mine to varying degrees of copyright infringement.

Have you had much resistance to your work or perhaps incessant questioning? What is the emotional labour of having to explain yourself like?

There hasn't been much resistance. But I think what does happen quite often, and I think maybe more and more now when spaces are trying to be more inclusive of non-Western artists, is that in seeing my work, you become a representative. Your work becomes a statement of the entire region, which I find really absurd and frankly really problematic. It's surprising also because I grew up in the West. I speak English and I was educated in the United States, and I feel like a lot of my references are unfortunately primarily coming from Western culture. So it's very strange to have my work be contextualised and be [representative of] a kind of Middle Eastern perspective, which it is trying not to do.

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If anything I am trying to make my work perspective-less, a multi-perspective. [I'm] taking into account different cultural contexts and languages and not speaking to or from anything in particular. Although obviously a lot of it is my connection and background to Palestine. But I often feel like it gets boiled down to "you're an Arab artist, you're a Palestinian artist, you're speaking on behalf of something."

What is the art scene like in Cairo? Is that where you're based right now?

As far as my experience anyway from 10-15 years ago to now, I feel like there are more spaces for contemporary art and film, and there's definitely more artists, but at the same time it's a very difficult place to organise things.

It's difficult to organise even a public opening, because there are no protest laws. So any kind of gathering is forbidden and art space funding is difficult. It wasn't an easy decision to come and live here. Sometimes I question it. But I think these things exist in one way or another, and here you are really confronted with it and there's something to not being able to ignore the reality of how fucked up the state is. It is really important and makes you think about how are you going to make a piece and exist as a person and how do you create a community?

It is not worth sugar-coating the fact that it is difficult but the very fact that people want to put on shows or have screenings is really meaningful. It feels really good to be close to that and it is important to be present here when a lot of people are trying to leave. They have given up for good reason. But if you have the privilege of having a passport that allows you to leave whenever you can it's actually worth trying to be here and engaging with whatever cultural scene is present.

A Philistine, Centre for Contemporary Arts, Glasgow, until 15 Dec

Glessing Jill,
"Basma Alsharif's Portrait
of Domesticity and Dislo-
cation in the Palestinian
Diaspora",
Frieze, March 6, 2019

Reviews /

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BY JILL GLESSING
26 MAR 2019

Basma Alsharif's Portrait of Domesticity and Dislocation in the Palestinian Diaspora

In her show at MOCA Toronto, the artist's imaginative narratives unravel official histories of patriarchy and colonization

During my visit to Basma Alsharif's exhibition at MOCA Toronto, a young man sat on the carpeted floor intently piecing together a jigsaw puzzle, seemingly oblivious to the video playing behind him. Eventually he gave up and disassembled what he'd finished, returning it to its box. This seemed a useful metaphor for Alsharif's concerns and process: her fragmented Palestinian diasporic identity, the splintered forms and styles she employs to explore that experience, and the painstaking, if futile, attempt to piece together more truthful representations of the world.



Basma Alsharif, 2019, installation view. Courtesy: Museum of Contemporary Art, Toronto; photograph: Tom Arban Photography Inc.

In addition to the puzzle, videos, photographs, drawings, text, books, furniture and plants are assembled across four installations on the museum's sprawling third floor, demarcated only by long ovals of carpet, wood flooring and faux lawn. Slightly worn furniture adds theatricality to the exhibition while more practically offering places to sit for the extended time needed to register its many meticulous details. The image of the unfinished puzzle, meanwhile, invokes a dysfunctional geopolitical landscape.

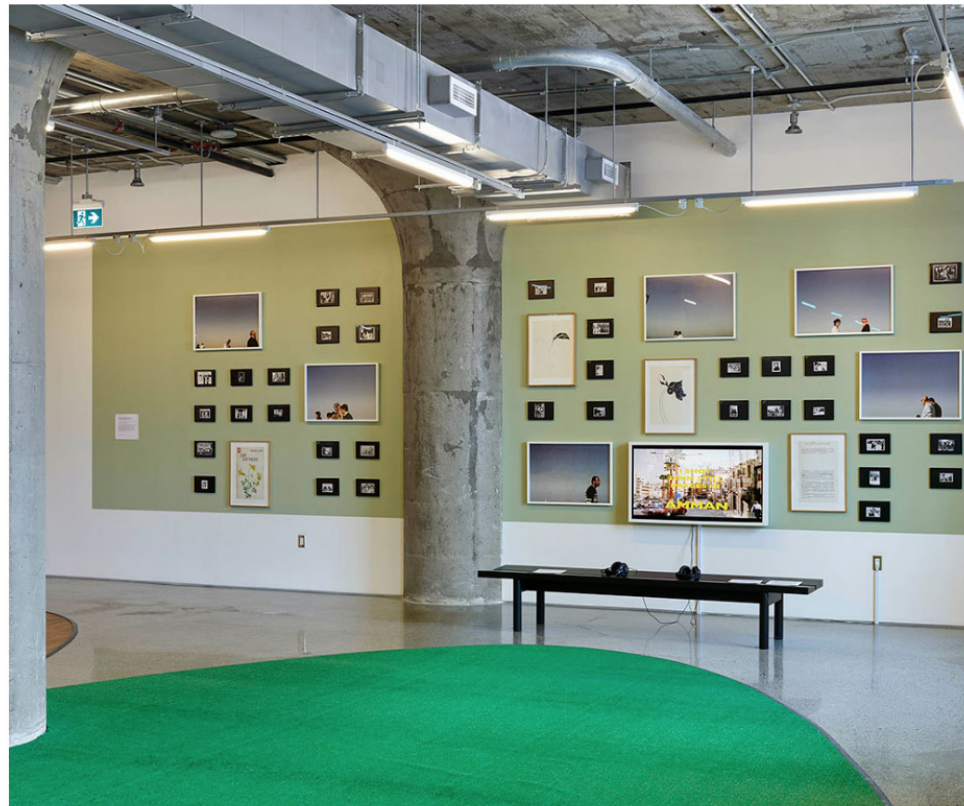
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Basma Alsharif, *A Philistine*
(detail), 2018. Courtesy: Museum
of Contemporary Art, Toronto and
the Library of Congress

The installation *Trompe l'oeil* (2016) registers multiple levels of reality, as its title suggests: the contents of the artist's California living room – a television monitor, a coffee table and stack of boxed games, a divan and chair, house plants – are cornered by two photographic wall murals depicting the original interior. Another wall holds 38 small, framed reproductions of archival images illustrating various colonial engagements – ethnography, slavery, cartography, botany – hung salon-style like family portraits. The spectre of colonialism darkens even the most private domestic sphere. The living room window in the mural looks out onto Matera, Italy – the location that Pier Paolo Pasolini selected for his film *The Gospel According to St. Matthew* (1964), over historically authentic Palestinian sites the director deemed 'too wretched'. Three photographs of slaves from the collection of archeologist T.E. Lawrence have been taped to the wall; a didactic notes that the slaves were Arab-owned and that these images, archived in London's Imperial War Museum, are displayed here without permission. An 8-minute looped video mixes short choppy segments showing the artist engaged in domestic activities – making tea, sitting on a toilet, embracing her lover – as well as reworking archival images, such as an encounter between an explorer and an indigenous person. Images of partially open doors and handles recall Edward Said's text about another artist of Palestinian descent, *Mona Hatoum: The Entire World as a Foreign Land* (2000), in which Hatoum's unwelcoming domestic installations, 'designed to recall and disturb at the same time' are said to register the 'silent catastrophe' of diasporic dislocation. A shot of the artist's hand starting and stopping a vinyl recording of cinematic sound effects provides a jarring soundtrack of circus music, bells and a baby's cries.

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Basma Alsharif, *The Story of Milk and Honey*, 2011, installation view.

Courtesy: Museum of Contemporary Art, Toronto;
photograph: Tom Arban Photography Inc.

The imaginative narratives of Alsharif's work unravel official histories of patriarchy and colonization. In the video *Girls Only* (2014), a young woman sits in the Athenian Panathenaic stadium playing a nonsensical rhyming game, undercutting the male prowess promoted in a series of five Olympic Games posters that hang alongside the monitor. At the center of *A Philistine* (2019), comfortable chairs invite visitors to sit and read a novella co-written by the artist, several copies of which sit in a packing crate between them; these chairs also figure in the story itself, which begins in a Cairo furniture store, winds back through time and space - through France, Beirut, 1935 Gaza, and settling in Ancient Egypt - to reimagine a borderless terrain, before its fragmentation by Israeli walls.

Rejecting more polemical forms of art, such as the militant cinema of the Palestinian Film Unit, Alsharif employs different strategies, such as montage and imaginative narratives, to deconstruct the binary between oppressor and victim. Tireless in her imaginative process, she sorts through the debris of the past in order to envision an existence unfettered by barriers.

Main Image: Basma Alsharif, *Trompe l'Oeil*, 2016, installation view. Courtesy: Museum of Contemporary Art, Toronto;
photograph: Tom Arban Photography Inc.

JILL GLESSING

Jill Glessing is a writer and lecturer in the History of Photography, Art History, and Visual Art Theory at Ryerson University, Ontario.

Ling Steffanie,
"Alsharif Basma, Museum
of Contemporary Art
Toronto",
ARTFORUM, critic's picks,
March 2019

ARTFORUM



View of "Basma Alsharif," 2019.

Basma Alsharif

MUSEUM OF CONTEMPORARY ART
TORONTO

February 14–April 14

Basma Alsharif's exhibition in Toronto presents four installations with film and video that weave shades of imperialism into repetitive, quotidian activities. In *Girls Only*, 2014, a woman seated in an empty stadium

performs a rhyming exercise. Her image is montaged with interludes of heroic, cinematic music, to the tune of celebratory nationalism. These themes extend to *Trompe l'oeil*, 2016, which is set up as a living room, complete with a carpet, divan, sofa chair, and flat-screen television that shows people performing everyday activities. Within the installation are two large-scale prints of actual living rooms, one of which includes three reproduced photographs of Arab slaves from the collection of T. E. Lawrence (of the 1916 Arab Revolt and the 1962 film *Lawrence of Arabia*) tacked over the divan. This visual interruption in the domestic scene conveys how cyclical, violent histories are preserved in social memory, especially among the oppressed.

In *The Story of Milk and Honey*, 2011, the protagonist describes his desire to write a fictional love story set in the Middle East but "devoid of political context." Toward this end, he compiles Arab love songs and reads an article about Italian cinema. The other photographs and texts in the exhibition can then be viewed as the results of his unwritten story. *A Philistine*, 2018, is a novella in five movements; twenty-five reading copies are available in the gallery alongside ten related prints. Presented in both English and a Palestinian dialect, the work shares the radical qualities of Pier Paolo Pasolini's novel *A Dream of Something* (1962), which, like many of his texts, he wrote in Friulian to preserve the dialect during Mussolini's Italy. Beginning with a failed romance between a furniture store clerk and an ineffective political agitator with literary aspirations in Cairo, Alsharif's story keeps the political context intact.

— Steffanie Ling

Heng Lu Henry,
"Basma Alsharif",
web review, AsiaArtPacific



Installation view of **BASMA ALSHARIF**'s solo exhibition at the Museum of Contemporary Art, Toronto, 2019. All images courtesy the Museum of Contemporary Art, Toronto.

BASMA ALSHARIF

[WEB REVIEW](#) BY HENRY HENG LU
MUSEUM OF CONTEMPORARY ART

[KUWAIT](#) [CANADA](#)

Taking over the third floor of the Museum of Contemporary Art, Toronto, Basma Alsharif's solo exhibition consisted of four bodies of work, three of which merged into one interlocked installation. Through mise-en-scène that renders a welcoming ambience, these works immerse viewers in a setting where they can sit, stand, watch, read or simply take their time to process their environs. By spreading out multilayered visual information throughout the space, the exhibition eschewed fixed, linear experiences of the works in favor of serendipitous encounters, enabling multiple configurations of stories to emerge. Poetically conveying the limitations of storytelling through such rearranged narratives and timelines, the display annotates and challenges how stories are told, and further, who gets to tell them.



Partial installation view of **BASMA ALSHARIF's** *Girls Only*, 2014, HD video loop from super 8mm film: 2 min 28 sec, 5 inkjet prints of various sizes from color negatives with applied India ink, with accompanying mise-en-scène, at the Museum of Contemporary Art, Toronto, 2019. Photo by Tom Arban Photography Inc.

Trompe l'Oeil (2016) similarly functions at the crossroads of past and present. The work features several approximately life-size mural prints of a Los Angeles apartment's interiors and a television playing a video of mundane activities like walking and chopping onions. Hung salon-style on adjacent walls and varying in size, a selection of images, acquired with and without permission from The British Library and the Imperial War Museum Archives in the United Kingdom, eagerly speaks to the fraught colonial history of the Middle East. By virtue of contrast, the non-placeness of what resembles a small part of a living room and the video's quotidian details, vis-à-vis the dark historical backdrop, give weight to what these photographs represent: indelible evidence of colonial violence and political entitlement.

In dialogue with this work, *The Story of Milk and Honey* (2011) weaves together a tale of a man's failure to write a love story set in Beirut—essentially, to recreate a history that cannot be divided from that specific history. On a wall, nestled within various photographs of plants and family portraits, a screen plays a video narrated by the man, who tells of how he found these photographs, and the difficulty of writing a story “devoid of political context.” Lacking such a context itself, the installation alludes to wavering attempts at defining “national identity,” a term that appears in the video. At this point, what is not being told or written forms a new subject position.

Heng Lu Henry,
"Basma Alsharif",
web review, AsiaArtPacific



Partial installation view of **BASMA ALSHARIF's** *A Philistine*, 2018, 25 books, 10 vinyl banner prints of various sizes, with accompanying mise-en-scène, at the Museum of Contemporary Art, Toronto, 2019. Photo by Costabile Carpinelli.

The newly commissioned *A Philistine* (2018) takes the form of an open reading area, complete with four comfy chairs in which visitors may read a text recalling a theater script, written in both English and vernacular Arabic. The story follows the journey of Loza, a woman who proceeds toward the past from the future, discovering borders and their counterpoints, and simultaneously examining episodes of specific histories that become entangled with waves of human emotions as the plot progresses. Anchored by photographs taken from and on a train throughout the former Yugoslavia, the mise-en-scène initially appears uncannily artificial, albeit innocuously so. After spending time reading the novel inside the installation, however, one finds that it transitions into a relational aesthetic structure signifying the act of moving while embodying a sense of space-holding.

The significance of the lessons learned from collective memories of fraught political histories cannot be hastily encapsulated. Alsharif's work brilliantly condenses the complexities of colonial pasts into personal stories that are irreconcilable with grand narratives, utilizing a multiplicity of approaches to investigate the aftershocks and uncertainties of history, and their human expressions. The artist's installations do not try to expound violence in detail to you; they ask you to be a part of the physical and mental space that she has constructed and give you time to think it through.

Basma Alsharif's solo exhibition is on view at the Museum of Contemporary Art Toronto, until April 14, 2019.

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"Interview with Suzy Hala-
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in *Of Other Spaces*, The
Abraaj Group Art Prize
2018, 10th Edition, Ed. Kalei-
doscope, Milan,

BASMA ALSHARIF

INTERVIEW BY
SUZY HALAJIAN

SH

There appears to be a dissolving of time and an evasiveness of space in your works, which experiment with film, photography, installation and performance. The past, present and future are often blurred and reimagined, as space is simultaneously deconstructed. Language and images are also very slippery in your works. Viewers are often disoriented when confronted with personal stories and political histories narrated in reverse order, at times in multiple languages, by narrators who are not easily identifiable.

BA

It has been an approach for a while now, to make works that exist "outside of time." I think it's linked both to wanting to jar any sense of a fixed perspective—mine, the viewers'—and to create a new space in which to reconsider history in the present. I don't think we understand the world, our environments, even our interactions as fixed, and I guess I try to recreate a visceral, visual experience of that sensibility.

SH

This slipperiness allows you to delve into enigmatic spaces where history is intangible, all while humans are contending with real traumas and catastrophes that cannot possibly be categorized. Your practice asks critical questions about the human condition

and addresses how "life goes on" even when faced with extremely challenging conditions. Such perseverance is taken up in your 2013 documentary-style video, *Home Movies Gaza*. Partially filmed from the window of a moving car heading south, the work offers an entry into Gaza's changing landscape and its daily occurrences, heavily manipulated through reversals, layering, loops and special effects—strategies commonly employed in your films. How do these tactics allow you to more readily explore occupation in zones of unceasing conflict?

BA

By the time I completed *Home Movies Gaza*, I had made several works that dealt with various aspects of the occupation of Palestine from other sites: Chicago with *Everywhere Was The Same* (2007), Cairo with *We Began By Measuring Distance* (2009), Amman with *Turkish Delight* (2010), Beirut with *The Story of Milk and Honey* (2011) and Sharjah with *Farther Than The Eye Can See* (2012). *Home Movies Gaza* was the first work I made inside of Palestine, and I recognized immediately that I needed to change my strategy because the situation was too close, too real. I went for a visit after a ten-year absence, just in time for a large-scale military attack on Gaza by Israel. It made me realize that the event in war is not the attack itself, but the time before and after, when everyone just has to go on with their day. After having made several works that engaged with representation of the territory and its history in relation to our subjective experience of the world, it all collapsed on me when I tried to make a work in Gaza. It was as though the lens was not enough of a moderator between myself and the subject. So the work came about by simply recording as much as possible (a lot of which happened be-

fore the war and was of the everyday, the mundane) and then manipulating it in ways that created an experience for viewers that don't have access to the territory, because even for me, it's hard to really understand what I experienced and the significant aspects were really much more in the mundane, in the everyday. But, you can't (or I didn't want) to show just the everyday. I wanted to provide a way to access that everyday in ways that were tied to image production and how recording footage doesn't necessarily describe a place, but rather evokes a feeling.

SH

In your dreamlike 2014 film *Deep Sleep*, you appear as your double, as you guide your viewer into ambiguous ruins placed within a modern civilization in Athens, then to Malta, and the Gaza Strip, inviting us to consider Gaza from these three different locations. For this work, you underwent yearlong autohypnosis sessions, and filmed while in a trance state. What possibilities do hypnotic, or even ecstatic states allow for the development of your narratives and for insisting on an active viewership? Also, how does your own bodily presence, or body-double, function in your work, not only in *Deep Sleep*, but also in earlier films such as *O*, *Perse-cuted* (2014) and *Father Than The Eye Can See* (2012)? In what ways does it grant you agency as a filmmaker?

BA

I try as much as possible to make work that draws its audience into an environment, or a kind of experience, however minimal. It doesn't just happen with film in my own viewing experience of other work—even just following a narrative that is created through a series of photographs can create a kind of visceral experience. With *Deep Sleep*, I wanted to be more deliberate about it. I want-

ed to be clear that the film was actively manipulating the viewer's sense of perception and memory, to transcend borders and linear time in order to collapse sites and histories into one another. As far as using myself in my work, I treat it as any other material, like a sound or a piece of text. What I signify is another layer of information in the work; often I am thinking of myself as a device or vehicle that moves an image forward. I don't buy the idea that agency towards subject matter is based on proximity to the material through something physical or cultural or experiential, or through inheritance. I believe we have to decide how much agency we give ourselves towards our subjects, regardless of whether we're behind or in front of the camera.

SH

Your approach to documentary filmmaking is placed in relation to your experimentation with fictionalized autobiography, as your works often imagine a future not necessarily tied to its past. In *Farther Than The Eye Can See*, we are confronted with a woman's voice giving an account of her birth in Jerusalem in 1938, and her family's escape to Egypt when Israel was established as a state. Overlaid on top is a male voice recounting this same story, although told in reverse order, while the film unsettles the viewer even further by a rapid recycling of seductive images layered with text. What claims does your practice make by rejecting a fixed Palestinian identity and placing the body in constant movement, positioned in multiples places at the same moment and operating at various speeds and registers?

BA

Probably some very naive hope or attempt to extract the human condition out of socio-political borders and nationalism—which is not to say that

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those conditions don't exist, but rather questioning how we might carve out a space where we regain agency outside of them. I think it can be regressive to imagine that there is such a thing as a fixed identity of any kind, and in the case of Palestine, it's a political identity, one born out of the occupation by Israel, which I see as a disadvantage to us as Palestinians. So in my work, I try to connect Palestine to other sites, other histories, and I try to disrupt perception, which is connected to how we think we understand the world.

SH
There exists an ever-present feeling of both nostalgia and melancholy in your experimental investigations, while you remain committed to reinterpreting past events in order reveal the difficulties in grasping or representing histories, situations, places and the people who inhabit them. As landscapes often collapse and merge with others, and images blur within poetic and textual spaces, your explorations of sound and light only highlight the inevitable failure at capturing reality, or perhaps some small version of a political truth. At the same time, there seems to be an overarching optimism and even pleasure you are able to convey within this inherent failure. Can you speak about this ongoing tension?

BA
I think I try to make work that I myself would want to see. Also, I know that I respond to work that takes the experience of the viewer as much into account as my own desires. I think there is a certain amount of using pleasure as a manipulative tactic—as a way to seduce a viewer into a narrative or an image or sound that is familiar or comforting while still engaging more complicated issues or disturbing material. I think that tension already exists in

the world; I'm just collecting the bits of it that I'm drawn to and trying to represent it through some other frame so that the viewer has an active role in deciding how it functions.

SH
For the Abraaj Group Art Prize, you are exhibiting *Trompe l'Oeil*, an installation from 2016, which includes three of Lawrence of Arabia's photographs selected from the Imperial War Museum Archives' online library that are then rephotographed, although only one could be reproduced given copyright protection. As such, the single image of the girl on the horse is reproduced and displayed within framed photographed works and drawings hung on the wall. The installation also includes mural photographs and a video which shows you carrying out mundane everyday actions such as boiling water, chopping onions, burning incense, sketching and leisurely lounging at home, all set within a larger installation capturing a lush domestic scene. What was your intention behind selecting these photographs, and how does their display interrogate issues around access and rights of reproduction? Also, how do ideas around leisure, and even banality, play out within the work?

BA
I think there's a fine line between boredom and leisure, and I think that boredom really does produce evil. The work has a lot going on in it but is pared down to a series of gestures I imagined as *trompe l'oeils*, as tricks of the eye, where we think we see something but aren't quite sure. So I constructed a domestic scene with various kinds of representations, and within it are these Lawrence of Arabia images. Some are made by him, others just under his collection in the Imperial War Museum. The ones I was interested in were those

of Arabs with their Arab slaves. It's not evident that that's what those images are, but I think that's what attracts me to them. The violence that is captured in that single image, which includes the person who has captured the image, are all banalized, domesticated. I think we live with horrors in our every day and we find pleasure regardless—which is both a testament to our survival as human beings and also evidence of our self-destructiveness.

SH
You recently completed your first feature-length film, *Ouroboros* (2017), shot in numerous places: Gaza, Los Angeles and the Mojave Desert in California, as well as locations in Italy and Brittany. The title of the work points to regeneration and destruction simultaneously, as it refers to the snake consuming its own tail, referencing notions around progress and violent upheavals that are embedded within ideas of change. Characters and their intentions once again remain unclear, and any notion of the real is contested, as fact and fiction collapse throughout. Here, we also witness the main character searching for, while conceivably leaving or reuniting with, a past lover, once again suggesting a need to forgo ones past in order to move forward through heartbreak and loss. Like your previous films, *Ouroboros* contemplates the complexities of attempting to speak about a return to a place that one cannot access or doesn't exist anymore. Can you comment on this, and how the distinct landscapes function within the work to connect histories of violence?

BA
It's exactly that! I ask the different sites, with vastly different histories, to be connected within the film, to be considered as potentially linked through the time and space of cinema. There is vague

notion of Native American history and of Hollywood, the colonization of the United States and the current erasure of the Palestinian people, and a very subtle weaving in of the history of fascism in Italy, the cultural traditions tied to Brittany, France, all forced into the same space so as to remove Gaza from its isolation—to declare the cyclical nature of our existence on this earth and to ask whether it is how we survive or how we destroy ourselves.

SH
I read in a recent interview that the long journey of completing *Ouroboros* has allowed you to somehow close a chapter on projects which consider and access Gaza as a territory that's fundamentally defined by its ongoing surveillance and occupation, and which also point to the subjective experience of statelessness and pervasive colonialism. Was the film quite arduous to finish? Was your decision not to film Gaza in person and rather use drone cameras and steady cams tied to your need to be physically removed from a place that is perpetually imagined?

BA
The film definitely came out of a personal need to say goodbye to a place that has already been destroyed, and to acknowledge that Gaza falls into a long lineage of destruction that may very well continue on. It was difficult on many levels to make this film, both logistically, emotionally: filming Gaza remotely, trying to find ways to communicate so many different stories and histories and ideas without the intention of providing any kind of tangible information, but rather to speak to how we see these sites today and understand their histories. You're absolutely right that in order to make an image of Gaza that was not about a past, I had to extract myself from it, to treat it as an

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image. I had to create an experience of the space that wasn't about my own experience of that place.

SH

I would be curious to hear about how you've personally negotiated filming (and in some cases, living) in these various locations, and whether navigating through these distinct locales has reshuffled your own constructions of place and placelessness.

BA

I've been essentially "placeless" my entire life, so after I finished my MFA, I just spent the next ten years trying to understand how to make a "perspectiveless" position within my work. I can adapt to wherever I live quite easily, and it becomes almost like the work of an anthropologist making a work—but an anthropologist within the specific worlds I create for each piece, filled with a mix of fact and fiction and real and imagined and pleasure and pain. Negotiating what I make in a site is part of my own process of negotiating my existence in each site; it is often precarious and tainted by my perspective. What's important to me is how to make that perspective a vehicle through which the viewer can experience an idea or a site in a new way.

SH

How has California, and Los Angeles in particular, where you've been based since 2014, played into your practice? Personally, what invigorates me the most about this vast city is its infectious energy and the opportunity to interact with artists, practitioners, spaces and projects spread all over, with unexpected run-ins happening constantly. At the same time, it feels as though there is the necessary time and space to retreat and reflect, to potentially think over one's engagement with a place

that is constantly being represented and reimagined through both images and writing.

BA

I think Los Angeles has some weird connection—though it's a stretch—with Gaza in the hyper over-representation of a city through images. There is the idea of Los Angeles and then the reality of Los Angeles, which reminds me a bit of Gaza. With both, there is the media image versus the city and its people. LA is a really complicated place, with layers and layers of different histories, cultures, landscapes and economies. It's not an easy or obvious city to navigate; it resists being explored through the more commonplace "walking around and discovering a city," so it creates black holes in the imagination. It has forced me to turn inward more and to try to understand my place in it, as opposed to other places that might confront you and ask you to participate in its culture. It has also provided a space for reflection about my connection to this country, and in many ways has fostered some hope for the future. The situation is so dire in America, in terms of social welfare, gun laws, police brutality, and the cost of education and healthcare leaving its most vulnerable citizens in conditions that should warrant a humanitarian crisis. But with such a violent history that is constantly on the cusp of being dragged out, reconciled, or at least reckoned with, it has actually provided me with a space for hope to keep picking at this stuff, to continue to record images, write stories, and produce experiences with the things I take interest in with my time on this earth.

Wychowanok Thibaut,
"Moyen-Orient : ces artistes
qui bousculent la scène
artistique",
Numéro, August 31, 2018

Art

OASIS ARTISTIQUES

Chaque année, la foire Art Dubai est l'occasion d'une plongée revigorante au cœur de la scène artistique du Moyen-Orient et de l'Afrique du Nord. Visite guidée, entre légendes encore méconnues en Occident et nouvelles générations.

Par Thibaut Wychowanok

On le sait bien, Dubai est une source inépuisable de mystères. Et pas sûr que la foire d'art qui s'y tient chaque année ne lève un quelconque voile. L'événement qui réunit quelque 105 galeries issues de 48 pays a réussi à s'imposer comme une plateforme artistique incontournable du Moyen-Orient. Une aura grandissante qui n'est pas sans lien avec la proximité du Louvre-Abu Dhabi et de l'excellente Fondation Sharjah... Rien de mystérieux jusque-là. Pourtant, Art Dubai a aussi ses énigmes. Et la présence, dans la section moderne de la foire, des encres sur papier d'Hamed Abdalla n'est pas la moindre. Par quel mystère ses dessins à la sexualité vibrante sont-ils tolérés dans un émirat ? La galerie Mark Hachem (Beyrouth/Paris/New York) ne se prive pas, en effet, d'offrir un vaste panel des plaisirs de la chair à travers

plusieurs dizaines de dessins de l'Égyptien. Des corps représentés par de voluptueuses traces abstraites s'enfilent les uns les autres, par derrière ou par devant, aucun orifice ne boudant son orgasme. Rien de pornographique. La délicatesse des couleurs et l'élégance des mouvements élèvent ces échanges corporels extatiques vers des hauteurs spirituelles. Une sublime communion des âmes. Ces œuvres, créées en 1961, portent le plus beau des noms : *Le monde qui crée*. Né en 1917 au Caire, Hamed Abdalla s'est éteint en 1985 à Paris. Ce grand défenseur de la culture arabe, engagé politique jusqu'à l'exil, transformait avec génie les lettres arabes pour en faire des formes magnifiques, des êtres à part entière. Plusieurs de ces chefs-d'œuvre, qu'on rapproche de Picasso ou du Greco, étaient aussi visibles sur la foire.

A Land Without a People (2018),
de Basma Alsharif.
Image extraite d'une série de
dix photographies. Impression
jet d'encre à partir de scans
de négatifs couleur de 120 mm,
60,5 x 60,5 cm (chacun).
Œuvre unique.

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41 rue Mazarine, 75006 Paris
+ 33 (0)1 46 33 13 13 – contact@imane fares.com
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Wychowanok Thibaut,
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Courtesy de l'artiste et galerie Imane Farès

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Art – Art Dubai



Le corps, il en était encore question sur le très beau stand de la galerie de Téhéran Dastan's Basement avec quelques pièces de Fereydoun Ave, le parrain de l'art contemporain iranien. L'artiste, né en 1945, a réalisé tout un corpus d'œuvres autour de Rostam, un lutteur préislamique dont l'épopée fut décrite par le poète Ferdowsi. Mais c'est bien à travers les traits d'un combattant contemporain que le héros mythique apparaît. Une vidéo hallucinée, à la limite du psychédélique, le montre aux prises avec son adversaire. Une belle allégorie, sensuelle et charnelle, des combats politiques. Une belle démonstration que le corps, plus que jamais, est l'enjeu politique majeur de notre époque.

Le corps et le politique, toujours, avec le lauréat du prix Abraaj remis lors de la dernière édition d'Art Dubai. Lawrence Abu Hamdan est né en Jordanie en 1985 et vit aujourd'hui entre Beyrouth et Berlin. Il est sans conteste l'un des artistes les plus passionnants, et pertinents, de sa génération. Le corps, chez lui, s'incarne

dans la voix et le son dont il a fait ses sujets de prédilection. Représenté à Paris par la galerie Mor Charpentier, il y présentait récemment sa série *Disputed Utterance*. Une "*disputed utterance*" forme le moment dans un procès où la culpabilité d'un prévenu est suspendue à la manière d'interpréter une phrase ou un mot énoncé par un témoin. Lawrence Abu Hamdan en offre plusieurs exemples à l'ironie cinglante. Comme l'histoire de ce médecin américain qui aurait dit à un drogué, de manière totalement irresponsable, qu'il "*pouvait s'injecter ces choses*" ["*you can*"]. Or, comme le démontrera l'enquête, le médecin parlait l'anglais avec un accent grec qui, à l'oral, effaçait la négative "*vous ne pouvez pas*" ["*you can't*"]. Chacune de ces anecdotes dignes d'un roman de Jonathan Franzen se voit accompagnée de dessins au charbon et de photographies qui reproduisent le processus de la palatographie. Une technique qui permet d'identifier quelle part de la bouche est utilisée selon les différents sons émis. Ou quand le corps, par la bouche et la parole,

Détail de l'ensemble
de 30 pièces *The World That
Creates* (1961) d'Hamed Abdalla.
Encre sur papier.

Courtesy de l'artiste et galerie Imane Farès

Wychowanok Thibaut,
"Moyen-Orient : ces artistes
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Art – Art Dubai



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devient une scène de crime. Avec Abu Hamdan, la voix se dévoile comme un matériau à haute teneur politique et sociale, puissance capable d'influer sur le réel (la culpabilité d'un homme) tout comme de révéler la personne que l'on est (une origine géographique ou sociale).

Lawrence Abu Hamdan n'est pas le seul trésor d'Art Dubai à trouver un écho en France. Dignement représenté sur la foire et au prix Abraaj (deux de ses artistes y concourraient), la galerie Imane Farès est installée rue Mazarine, à Paris. Depuis 2010, Imane Farès défend avec véhémence et goût des artistes issus du Moyen-Orient et du continent africain. Et pas des moindres. Ali Cherri, par exemple, sélectionné pour le prix Abraaj. Depuis plusieurs années, l'artiste d'origine libanaise se concentre sur la place de l'objet archéologique dans la construction de récits historiques. Des objets archéologiques, vases ou sculptures, qu'Ali Cherri achète notamment en maisons de vente, puis recompose et réassemble. Geste paradoxal qui désacralise l'objet ancien et le décontextualise pour en

questionner la valeur. Pourquoi valorise-t-on tel objet ? Que dit cette valorisation de l'objet archéologique, d'une époque ancienne, sur notre époque ? À quelle construction d'une histoire nationale participe-t-il ? Comme toujours chez Ali Cherri, le contexte passé se confronte au contexte présent pour mieux le révéler. Autre très bonne artiste de la galerie Imane Farès, également sélectionnée pour le prix Abraaj, Basma Alsharif présentait sur le stand de Dubai sa série de dix photographies *A Land Without a People*. L'artiste d'origine palestinienne fait bien sûr référence à la célèbre formule associée au mouvement sioniste : *"Une terre sans peuple pour un peuple sans terre."* Mais ici, la terre vide (le "empty" inscrit sur la photographie) n'est autre que la nature californienne. Une terre du Grand Ouest conquise par les colons américains... Une terre hollywoodienne, creuset d'une colonisation mondiale des esprits. De la Californie à la Palestine en passant par Dubai, le désert est décidément une terre fertile pour les artistes.

Détail de *Disputed Utterance*, (2018) de Lawrence Abu Hamdan. Impression numérique.

La prochaine foire Art Dubai se tiendra du 20 au 23 mars 2019.

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Courtesy de l'artiste et galerie Imane Farès

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Basma Alsharif, *Ouroboros*, 2017

Feature film, 77 minutes

Co-production of Momentol, IDAIDA, Idioms Film, Luna Blue Film, Galerie Imane Farès

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CONTRIBUTOR:

HELEN MACKREATH

ONLINE EXCLUSIVE

June 2018

SHARE



INTERVIEW WITH BASMA ALSHARIF

Basma Alsharif has never called a geographical space home. Her short video works, feature length films and lecture performances – made in Chicago, Cairo, Beirut, Amman, Paris, Gaza, Sharjah and Los Angeles – offer deliberately contorted experiences of time and place. For the past ten years her work has encouraged viewers to engage critically with the thorny question of hope in relation to Palestine.

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Her short film *O, PERSECUTED* (2014) overlays a restored version of Kassem Hawal's 1974 Palestinian militant film *OUR SMALL HOUSES* with photographs of hedonistic Israeli beach parties – colliding contemporary Israel with a nostalgic historical record of Palestine, neither of which give 'complete' documentations. In her 2014 lecture performance *DOPPELGÄNGING* she attempted to hypnotise the audience into imagining a different form of physical existence – that of being two people at the same time, or occupying two different spaces simultaneously.

Her latest exhibition, *THE GAP BETWEEN US* at The Mosaic Rooms in London in early 2018, included the premier of *OUROBOROS* (2017), a feature length film about the Gaza Strip. Her work – whether directly or indirectly about Palestine – attempts to break from the confines of one particular perspective or retelling of history in order to reflect on the nature of representation itself. Her efforts to understand a future beyond what is remembered as history or defined by geography, and her reflections on the broader human condition, are grounded in a realism which questions the cycle of renewal and destruction intrinsic to the ouroboros – a symbol of a snake eating its own tail.

We initially conducted our interview via email between Istanbul and Los Angeles before meeting by chance in Cairo several months later, where we sat down for a longer conversation. The following interview is a compilation of both exchanges. The nature of the two geographically and temporally fragmented interactions seemed appropriate to discuss topics of splintered identities and distorted time frames.

Q THE WHITE REVIEW — How would you describe your relationship with Palestine?

A BASMA ALSHARIF — My parents are Palestinians who met in Egypt, gave birth to me in Kuwait, moved to France, and after eight years were denied citizenship and eventually immigrated to the US. So I grew up without a national identity, even though I was lucky enough to keep visiting Gaza – where my mother's family was living until 2009 – throughout my childhood into adulthood. I would say this lack of a national identity is part of the 'Palestinian Identity' but it's also just my personal biography – the path my parents took, the complications and privileges they had. Gaza, more than Palestine, continues to be a part of my life because it was somehow the only place I kept returning to, the only place that felt like home. Although, in reality, I am as much a foreigner there as I was in France or perhaps even the US. And, as long as I have been alive, the situation there has only grown worse. It's hard to ignore a place that you have a connection to that you see suffer in such public, violent and wilfully destructive ways.

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Q THE WHITE REVIEW — How did you make
OUROBOROS? Could you talk through the process
behind it?

Q THE WHITE REVIEW — Can you tell me about
the different locations that feature in the film?

A BASMA ALSHARIF — I developed the film around the concept
of the 'eternal return', the idea that life is a cycle of recurrences, as seen
in the symbol of the snake eating its own tail – an ouroboros. I used this
to explore whether we are necessarily doomed to repeat our mistakes or
if the only way to survive is to forget. This is something I saw happening
in Gaza – that the only way to move forward and survive the atrocities
that are happening there is to forget the past. But equally I wanted to
explore whether this means we are driving toward our own self-
destruction. I tried to link what is happening to Gaza to other sites,
other histories and other landscapes that have had various levels of
upheavals or oppressions, or have been able to preserve their heritage –
to make it un-unique in a way.

A BASMA ALSHARIF — Three landscapes appear in the film –
the Mahabi Desert in Southern California, a thirteenth century castle in
Brittany, and Matera in Italy. Matera is where Pasolini shot *IL*
VANGELO SECONDO MATTEO (1964) and
SOPRALLUOGHI IN PALESTINE (1965). It then became
significant as a site of fascism. An anti-fascist writer called Carlo Levi
wrote a memoir about it, this forgotten village on the margins where
he'd been exiled from Turin to live for a year. It was released in 1945
under the title *CRISTO SI È FERMATO A EBOLI* (Christ
Stopped at Eboli), and when I read his description of this place I
thought, 'you could be talking about present-day Gaza'.

We've reached a point in Gaza which is very hopeless. There have been
three wars. People won't remember which war happened when, or how
long it lasted. It's become so everyday that it's part of life, even though it
is affecting everyone in very devastating ways and is constantly opening
fresh wounds. This film opens up a lot of questions. It's a way of saying
goodbye – for me in a very personal way, to the Gaza Strip – or to any
hope or justice in that territory, and to force it into conversation with
other sites and people.

I was really trying to make a film which resists being easily read, as a
protest against the accumulation of information on the occupation in
Palestine. It's not helping us prevent future crimes. The film is not one
single idea, but a collapsing of histories; a way of asking what it means
for us, as a civilisation – as witnesses to what is obviously a wilful
extermination of a population in the present day.

Mackreath Helen,
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Q THE WHITE REVIEW — When producing the film were you aware of imposing your own narrative on other people's situations?

A BASMA ALSHARIF — This is the point. My work deals with the fact that our reading of anything is subjective, particularly in terms of political history. It is totally impossible to separate my experience and my vantage point.

One of the reasons why the sites in the film were chosen was because of the people involved. Either they were connected to friends, or they became a friend. It became a way for me to encourage them to shape the film with their own experiences of the sites. I wanted to allow the people in the film to determine what the film was.

In the case of the castle in France, I had met a woman randomly in Paris. She'd been studying in Estonia and had also happened to travel to Palestine, and had also lived here (in Cairo). Her family inherited a castle in Brittany, this giant palace that was built in the thirteenth century. She said this line when I met her: 'When I sit in the house, I don't have a sense of anything that's going on in the world. I could just forget that I exist myself. That's a really unsettling feeling. She was this weird Peter Pan character.

Visually speaking it was interesting not only to show the bourgeoisie, but also to show the vestiges of history and lineages and aristocracy. Why does a thirteenth century castle get to stay standing when in Gaza they're bombing rubble? Ruins that have been ruined and keep getting ruined. I was thinking of Europe's history and the question of why things are not getting destroyed there. You take advantage of other countries, you colonise, you rob people's wealth. Of course your castle is maintained and stays for century after century after century. These things are not unconnected. I felt like visually it was interesting to put those two things next to each other.

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Q THE WHITE REVIEW — Can you talk through the problems you had making the film? I heard that you were blocked from accessing Gaza.

Q THE WHITE REVIEW — His death adds another layer of reflection and tragedy to the work.

Q THE WHITE REVIEW — Through Yaser, you had the clinical and detached eye of the drone while you were also able to add your own directions and emotional input.

A BASMA ALSHARIF — This wasn't actually the case. At the time of making it, I definitely could have entered Gaza. But I knew that if I was there the film would be entirely different. I needed a kind of pristine, sanitised, cold, emotionless gaze on the territory, but also someone to shoot it who would understand the tragic beauty of that place. We arranged with my Palestinian producer to work with a young cameraman, Yaser Murtaja, who had co-founded his own production company, *AIN MEDIA*, and who had his own drone cameras. I would remotely direct – tell him what I wanted shot, and how long for. The guy was really great to work with and produced some incredible images. He was just recently killed by Israeli soldiers, while wearing a press jacket, when covering the Gaza border protests. (*Yaser Murtaja, aged 30, was shot dead by Israeli security forces on 6 April 2018 while covering the Gaza border protests as a photojournalist. Since late March, 119 Palestinians have been killed, according to Reuters, by Israeli forces while protesting on the border.*)

A BASMA ALSHARIF — This is the ironic thing. Yaser is someone who had never left Gaza. The week before he died he'd just turned thirty. I think when people, myself included, deal with art they deal with it as a cognitive conceptual thing. The reality is that we're still dying – in very brutal and very unjust ways. Making Israel accountable for such things is paramount.

A BASMA ALSHARIF — There's a scene of a shot over my family's house of a woman who's been guarding the house, making it look inhabited, ever since 2009 when my family left. This helps prevent Israel from targeting homes. When they claim there is weapon-storage happening in empty homes they use it as legitimate reason to attack them. She's basically saved our lives. This is a very personal part of the film, and I really wanted to film her making a circle inside the house. Because it looks abandoned but lived in at the same time, and because it's clear that it's not her home. It's illuminating a lot of power issues and so on. I knew that if I was there for something like that it would be impossible to film emotionally, so Yaser shot it with steady-cam.

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Q THE WHITE REVIEW — I can see a parallel between the Gazan woman taking care of the house and the French woman taking care of the castle. But the Gazan woman is also in an interesting position of trying to create a home with no guarantee of it ever 'being a home' again. She's going through the motions, partaking in a collective performance of domesticity played out for the Israeli eye.

Q THE WHITE REVIEW — In an interview with *BOMB MAGAZINE* in 2015, you said of the people of Gaza that you found their continuation to live in dire circumstances, 'less to do with hope and more about being really clever in finding ways to move past a failed civilisation'. Could you elaborate more on your idea of hope and whether it has evolved over the course of your work as an artist?

Q THE WHITE REVIEW — You have been described as a 'Post-Palestine' artist by Israeli filmmaker and scholar Eyal Sivan. What does this term mean to you? Is it a term you agree with?

A BASMA ALSHARIF — Absolutely. And it has been a psychological battle. The idea that we should just not go back. But it's not like voluntarily moving, or moving a job from one city to another. There are so many political implications in deciding not to go back because it's exactly what Israel wants. They'll make it so hard for you, not impossible, but so hard to go back that you'll be disgusted. And it works. Anyone who has any way to get out gets out. So it's a kind of resistance. Psychologically it's strange to establish your life somewhere else but always feel like you've left something behind.

A BASMA ALSHARIF — I think hope is there regardless and always, even when we are hopeless. We continue to imagine and strive for something better, for things to change, even when we know it won't happen, when we are completely doomed. And the weight of that, that imagination, is far heavier than the denial of living with a false hope. It's not to say we shouldn't face the facts, but that a certain amount of naivety can and will help to change things and keeps the world moving forward. My own sense of hope has indeed changed. I was far more naive, and it wasn't until three wars happened in Gaza in the last ten years that it dawned on me that the state of Israel really does want to erase the Palestinian population. And so my hope shifted away from Palestine, because I have this luxury in the diaspora, and towards connecting it to other histories I saw Palestine reflected in.

A BASMA ALSHARIF — I think the term came from a connection with a certain kind of Palestinian who is diasporic, and not a refugee or displaced internally but part of a bourgeoisie and who therefore has a removed perspective from the cause. Sivan wasn't necessarily saying this negatively, he was just saying there was a difference in the way that I was making work in comparison to other Palestinians who are maybe living inside Palestine.

I took the term and started exploring it for myself, wondering what it means. A lot of people look at it as 'beyond caring about Palestine', or not caring about the occupation. It's absolutely not that, and I don't think that's the way he meant it. It's about the way that the occupation has fractured us so badly that there are really different experiences of what it means to be Palestinian. More and more I come across '48 Palestinians (those who were living in Israel when the state was founded in 1948, and who remained after the Nakba) who have a more similar perspective to me than, let's say, people from Gaza and the West Bank

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Q THE WHITE REVIEW — Can you speak about the position of the '48 Palestinians?

Q THE WHITE REVIEW — Can your own position also be described as radical? The way you're trying to reframe concepts of geographical space and time, for instance, and your subversion or contestation of 'given' concepts like 'hope', 'resistance' and 'progress'.

Q THE WHITE REVIEW — Your work *DOPPELGÄNGING* is a cinematic hypnotic lecture which imagines a different form of physical existence. Can you talk about the process behind it?

A BASMA ALSHARIF — We definitely can't speak of them as a whole. There are some who have maybe given up on the cause, and there are some living in Israel who are almost more radical than those living in the West Bank since they're really living with the internal politics of the oppressor – learning the language, being educated in their schools – and are not afforded full rights. Maybe it's more about a realistic versus a romantic position, or a realistic versus a more radical revolutionary position.

A BASMA ALSHARIF — The mass media image of the Palestinian is often of the victim, the iconic face of the struggle. And for myself, for my family, for people I know, and maybe among the '48 Palestinians, that representation isn't as predominant as it is in the media. There has been this idea of Palestine being ghettoised, somewhere full of militant fighters. There is a danger in maintaining that as the forefront image of the occupation because it means that we're trapped in this disenfranchised state, purely victims of the situation. I don't think that's true. We have writers and corrupt politicians and poets and thieves and all manner of human characters and complexities... Those nuances sometimes get lost in the political activist model of work made about Palestine.

A BASMA ALSHARIF — It started off as a brief art lecture which came out of a work for which I was learning to hypnotise myself. I was in Gaza and was trying to make something where I would transcend the borders of the territory. I decided that rather than talk about the work I would try to hypnotise the audience during my lecture. I got really positive responses and somebody suggested I turn it into a longer lecture.

The lecture maps out the geopolitical landscape in Palestine through my family's history. It moves into cinematic images showing how the double is implemented within narrative cinema as a trope to indicate the battle between good and evil. It argues against this binary and asks, 'what if there are multiple selves and multiple goods and evils within a singular character?' That then turns into talking about the territory and how it is multiple places, how it's 'beyond Palestine', and to propose this idea of doppelgänger, of being ourselves in multiple places – and to propose a form of utopian possibility within cinema.

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Q THE WHITE REVIEW — Did the hypnosis work?

Q THE WHITE REVIEW — By reflecting on the nature of representation you also try and complicate how we understand collective memory. How can a collective memory be reconciled with the problems of power dynamics inherent in representation?

The lecture ends with my film *DEEP SLEEP* (2014), which is shot between Gaza, Athens and Malta. Part of the lecture was this intense attempt to hypnotise the audience before they watch the film so that they would experience it in a hypnotic state that really alters your memory and sense of time.

A BASMA ALSHARIF — You can never really tell, and it wasn't a proper hypnosis session. But I've had people say that it does alter the way they see the film. I think it just lulls you into a space for watching the film, into a kind of trance.

A BASMA ALSHARIF — I like to think that if collective memory can be passed down, then it can be voluntarily created. I think images, or more generally art, can help us to change our minds about how we have understood something. In the case of Palestine, there have been so many images confirming the struggle but no change for the better, so I try to create work that moves us beyond Palestine, that tries to consider Palestine as part of a larger human problem, a microcosm, a way of looking at other pasts, of considering different futures. Rather than relying on a past, on a collective memory that often serves to reaffirm our position as victims, I am attempting to create a voluntary collective memory that is empowering and that gives us the agency to move forward.

With any population or people who have suffered losses or who have been oppressed, they take on that history, it becomes an actual memory. I wasn't in the exodus but it's somehow part of my memory, and that's strange because it's very hard to remove even though it wasn't my personal experience. I was thinking about how so much of our understanding of the future is based on things that we don't actually experience, but which we have a memory of and which we share as an identity. Through art I think we can create a collective experience, and that can become something like a collective memory, but it's voluntary in a way. I'm trying to reconstruct history not as knowledge that is passed down, but as an experience which is viscerally happening.

Bailey Stephanie,
"The Bilocations of Basma
Alsharif",
Art Papers, Summer 2017,
p. 54-60

HERE, THERE,



TOGETHER, NOW

Bailey Stephanie,
"The Bilocations of Basma
Alsharif",
Art Papers, Summer 2017,
p. 54–60

by Stephanie Bailey

In 2016 Basma Alsharif performed *Doppelgänger* as part of Tarek Abou El Fetouh's expansive curatorial project, *The Time is Out of Joint*. The exhibition was organized by the Sharjah Art Foundation, UAE, and the Asia Culture Center in Gwangju, South Korea, and adopted two exhibition histories and one exhibition future as a conceptual frame: the First Arab Arts Biennale in Baghdad in 1974; the 1989 China Avant/Garde exhibition; and the Equator Conference, scheduled for 2022 in Yogyakarta. Through this overlapping—inspired by Ibn Arabi's notion of "time as a fluid place and place as a frozen time"—the curator sought to challenge fixed definitions of both concepts "by suggesting leaps across temporal and geographic boundaries."¹

The Bilocations of Basma Alsharif

Staged at the Berlin Documentary Forum 3 in 2014, *Doppelgänger*—part lecture, part autobiographical story, part hypnosis session—was the perfect work to elaborate on the concept of being everywhere and nowhere at once. Described by the artist as "an invitation to an experiment in voluntary collective memory," the performance expresses the condition of bilocation—of being in two or more places concurrently—that Alsharif has consistently expanded upon in her work. Take *DEEP SLEEP* (2014), a film that is shown as part of *Doppelgänger*, and that originated from the artist's idea to record the sounds of Gaza so that she might aurally project herself there whenever she is away. (The work records the artist's relationship with Gaza via the included perspectives of Malta and Athens, through which Gaza is seen to replicate in places where civilization has not quite met its "total end.")² Or consider *we began by measuring distance* (2009), a film that charts the kilometers between various places, such as Gaza and Jerusalem, or Oslo and Sharm El Sheikh, and the time between given years, for instance between 1917 (when the Balfour Declaration was signed) and 2008 (when Hamas and Fatah signed the Sana'a Declaration, and the Gaza War commenced). Thus, *we began by measuring distance* focuses on the gap between an event's time and place in recorded history, and its experience by both firsthand witnesses and ones at some remove. For Alsharif, born in Kuwait to Palestinian parents (her mother is from Gaza and her father is from the West Bank), this perspective is inescapably personal. As one voiceover observes, following a recording of a young girl screaming for her father after losing her entire family to a presumptive Israeli attack during a 2006 walk along the shore: "our homeland truly is a history we cannot reach."³

Perhaps as a result of this inherited displacement, Alsharif's practice seems motivated by a desire to transcend the limitations of time and place, characterized as it is by films that use the framework of distance to instill a sense of fluidity in concepts, such as history and identity, that are often understood as fixed. This framework is explored as an embodiment of bilocation in *Doppelgänger*, whose title relates to the notion that for every person on this planet a duplicate exists. This embodiment is also rooted in grounded experience: the artist has changed her nationality three times in 30 years, having spent her childhood in France until she was deported, and having landed in the United States after that.⁴ This personal movement has invariably fed into Alsharif's work, which interrogates the subjective experience of statelessness by members of the diaspora—a position that the artist in turn uses as "a method for exploring the human condition."⁵

This capacity for extension is realized in *Doppelgänger*, in which Alsharif expands the compositional logic and intensity she normally reserves for film into the space of the cinema itself. For the 2016 iteration of *Doppelgänger* in Sharjah, for example, Alsharif performed in a large theater, where the artist narrated a series of stories, spinning them together before a backdrop of images, some taken from her own films, some harvested from other works—including Stanley Kubrick's *The Shining*, and Maya Deren and Alexander Hammid's 1943 film, *Meshe of the Afternoon*. The performance was staged in a context designed to transcend any typical regional or temporal framework. *The Time is Out of Joint* indirectly considered questions surrounding bilocation as a mechanism through which the constrictions of time and the contradictions of experience are embraced and reconciled into a multiplicity

Basma Alsharif, Production Manifesta 8 Region of Murcia, *Deep Sleep* (still), 2014, HD video transfer of super 8mm film, 12:37 minutes [courtesy of the artist and Galerie Imane Farès, Paris]

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of existences, concepts, places, things—at the same time, and in the same "place" (bearing in mind that "place" is unstable, multiple, and expansive).

The artist begins *Doppelgänger* by recounting a "semi-fictional" tale of her parents' search for a place to settle back in the 1980s, when it became clear that returning to Palestine would not be an option (they became American citizens in 1996). In the script, Alsharif describes their journey as one that "involves circumstance, history, and the present, all colliding together to fit into the collective memory of exile."⁶ Every step in the journey points to a different event that has shaped Palestine's recent past, including the Second Intifada, which began in 2000. Shortly after this narration begins, the script shifts its focus further back in time, to one particular historical event: the massacre of Deir Yassin, which "helped trigger the 1948 Palestinian exodus."⁷ After detailing its atrocities, Alsharif apologizes for having digressed, and promises to move on. After all, the occupation of Palestine, she tells the audience, "is not so much defined by its injustice," as it is by its "insistence that Palestinians must not forget that they do not belong in Israel."⁸

This violent memory of not belonging is precisely what Alsharif challenges, not by refuting it outright but by expanding on, and in many ways inhabiting, the implications behind its construction and preservation. But Alsharif's approach is never one-sided; rather than casting light on binaries, her work seeks to nuance her multifaceted position in relation to the equally multifaceted position of those who belong to the other side of the story that has gripped Palestine since the Nakba of 1948. The artist's 2014 film *O, Persecuted* documents the process of restoring Kassem Hawal's 1974 Palestinian militant film, *Our Small Houses*. Alsharif replays Hawal's work in reverse, at 2.5 times its normal speed, accompanying it with the voice of a narrator speaking in Arabic, and with English subtitles. "Hawal's film is unique," Alsharif explains in an interview in *Bomb*, "in

that it alludes to addressing both Palestinians and Israelis as persecuted people who are thrown together into a merciless battle." In the end, both sides are locked in a violent stalemate—"persecuted and faced with the same fate: to kill or be killed."⁹ (In one segment, the narrator talks about those who will be made to put on a uniform, carry a rifle, and enter "the furnace of war.")

Alsharif finds Hawal's proposal particularly urgent today, "as history moves in slow motion and the future is speeding toward us."¹⁰ This motion is visually articulated in the conclusion of *O, Persecuted*, which tacks footage of contemporary "spring break"-inspired Israeli club life onto the archival study. This visceral intervention serves to "enact a frustration with history," the artist says, by colliding "a particularly nostalgic part of Palestinian history" with "a contemporary Israeli reality."¹¹ The gesture is not an attack on either side—no one, she observes, is represented in a "positive light"—but rather serves to reject the idea perpetuated in both fictional and nonfictional narratives that there must always be a hero in history.¹² Alsharif redistributes responsibility more evenly, as opposed to it being shouldered by one side or the other, in a conflict that no one actually wins and in which everyone is complicit.

To illustrate the complex and complicit positions within a conflict that has continuously eluded resolution, Alsharif reimagines historical trauma as a horror story: "Every time we drag an irreconcilable history out of the ground it is as though we are dragging a corpse buried long ago and confronting it with the present," reads the script for *Doppelgänger*, "pretending that, if the others would just acknowledge that the corpse could come back to life, then it might actually happen." ("It" here being a reconciliation or closure, which in the case of Palestine would be the fulfilment of an elusive Return.) In *Doppelgänger*'s script, willing the dead back to life is a bad idea—a classic "be careful what you wish for" device in scary movies. In this



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Above: Basma Alsharif, *We began by measuring distance* (still), 2009, single-channel SD video, 19:00 minutes [courtesy of the artist and Galerie Imane Farès, Paris] / Left: Ouroboros symbol, Cleopatra the Alchemist, early alchemical ouroboros illustration. Codex Marcanus (circa 10th–11th century)

scenario, however, it is especially irrational, says Alsharif, as "the protagonists don't yet know that they are ghosts."¹³ This idea of multiple and contradictory roles, sometimes unwittingly inhabited and performed, permeates *Doppelgänger*. At one point, Alsharif asks outright what Palestine is: "Is it Syrian? Is it Roman? Is it Canaanite?" Such questions speak to the histories and violent divisions that continue to both shatter and define the region in which Palestine is located, and the world at large. But most importantly, they show how ownership of territories and regions has changed over time, thus destabilizing the concept by stretching it out.

Alsharif has said that she is interested in confronting the fact that Palestine might never be returned, and in exploring where to go from that point of realization. This position is what led Israeli filmmaker Eyal Sivan to describe Alsharif's work as "post-Palestinian," and not "necessarily activist," as Alsharif put it in one interview, because it deals with place, conflict, and identity "with the luxury of distance and a kind of imagination about the future that isn't tied to the past."¹⁴ This untethering of the future from the past is exactly what *Doppelgänger* sets out to do by exploring how historical events—whether experienced, recounted, or learned—create images in our minds as both individual and collective memories. In the images these memories create, that is, within the space of representation, Alsharif identifies "a void" where space and time collapse, and where both the viewer and the represented subject cease to exist. In the performance she likens this void to cinematic space—not only of the screen, but also of the theater—and views it as a site

of collective yet fluid presence, where an audience enters into a shared experience with the people sitting beside them.

To elaborate on this place of encounter, *Doppelgänger* directly references a series of narrative films, which the artist uses in part to explain the reasoning behind her work's construction. They include Brian De Palma's 1973 *Sisters*, a psychological thriller focused on conjoined twins separated at birth; Ingmar Bergman's 1966 *Persona*, in which a nurse and an actress slowly become one person; and Stanley Kubrick's 1980 *The Shining*, in which a family is driven mad by a haunted hotel built on a Native American Indian burial ground. As Alsharif notes in her performance, the family in *The Shining* will escape the horrific history that haunts them only if they accept it as their own—that is, if they acknowledge the existence of and their connection with the specters of the past that continue to haunt the present day. This reckoning fulfills the bond that Alsharif suggests is facilitated by a space such as a cinema—where what is happening on each side of a screen fuses into a complete and bloody picture.

In this Godardian approach to film, the screen becomes a two-way mirror, always reflecting a "here" that exists opposite an "elsewhere," and confining the viewer's gaze to one side of a much larger story. Breaking through this duality is the essence of Alsharif's performance: *Doppelgänger* seeks the construction of a many-faceted mirror that does more than to reflect or invert a one-sided gaze and project it back at itself. It intermingles a variety of such private experiences within a common frame, diffusing the violence of the divide through a prism

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of complexity. This abstraction subverts the trope of narrative cinema, in which dichotomous notions such as "us and them" or "good and evil" are used, in Alsharif's words, "to signify an inner turmoil, a personal struggle, a conflict that the protagonist must resolve by the end of the film ..."¹⁵ For Alsharif, this dichotomy must be challenged not only in cases whose history has become calcified or stuck, but also wherever past connections have been severed, leaving the resulting wounds to fester in the present as a result.

There is work to be done, Alsharif has said, to repair our collective failure—a failure that "has nothing to do with nationalism/statehood," and everything to do with our humanity.¹⁶ This idea is key to understanding the meaning behind *Doppelgänger's* interweaving of references, and its construction as an image through which we do not "identify with each other as a group but rather ... *dis-associate* from ourselves, our bodies, in order to come back to each other again, in an entirely new space that we'll create together."¹⁷ This new space is perhaps what Alsharif seeks to realize in her latest film, the feature-length *Ouroboros*, which made its debut as part of the 2017 Whitney Biennial. There, the ideas of *Doppelgänger* coalesce into a narrative hinged on the artist's stated desire for Palestine to "become everywhere, every place" by shedding its identity as a singular conflict, and exploring it as "a phenomenon of the human condition"—the darker sides of which, she has found, coexist with our capacity to persevere, and to hope "beyond hope."¹⁸

Ouroboros, named for the ancient symbol of a snake eating its own tail, considers the role of memory in the context of eternal return. Forgetting, in an eternally recurring universe, is both the "key to survival" and "the cause for the demise of humanity," says Alsharif.¹⁹ The film explores this function of memory—and its loss—by telling an allegorical story of heartbreak that pays homage to the Gaza Strip as a place where "history" both began and has ended, reflecting this landscape onto other sites, primarily in the West: a castle in Brittany; the ancient city of Matera, where Pasolini filmed *The Gospel According to St. Matthew*; and California, where footage of Hollywood and the Mojave desert "bring a loose narrative back to its point of origin: a land robbed from a people, an end as a beginning."²⁰ Together, these contexts form a single, cyclical loop through which the film's lovelorn protagonist moves, with the journey finishing as it begins: in the ruins of civilization, where humanity has met its end, and yet (to paraphrase Samuel Beckett) still goes on.²⁴ The will to live is what we all share in common, no matter where, when, or in which reality we find ourselves. ♦

Above: Basma Alsharif, *Momentol*, IDA, IDA, Idioms Film, Luna Blue Film, *Ouroboros* (still), 2017, 77:00 minutes
[courtesy of the artist and Galerie Imane Farès, Paris]

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BASMA ALSHARIF IN CONVERSATION WITH ANDRÉA PICARD

More than a decade ago, Susan Sontag had already addressed the onslaught of horrific images in her book *Regarding the Pain of Others*, proclaiming that "people don't become inured to what they are shown—if that's the right way to describe what happens—because of the quantity of images dumped on them. It is passivity that dulls feeling. The states described as apathy, moral or emotional anesthesia, are full of feelings; the feelings are rage and frustration." So, then, how do the near-constant catastrophes of others register, disturb, impel, devastate, and motivate in an age of disaster fatigue and purported cultural sensitivity, or in what many have deemed a state of perpetual aftermath?

In her first feature film, acclaimed artist Basma Alsharif (born in Kuwait to Palestinian parents, and currently based in Los Angeles) continues her focus on the Gaza Strip and delves further into queries that may seem grandiloquent on the surface—in philosophical and conceptual terms—but are, in reality, inherent to many people's daily lives, even if once removed. The title, *Ouroboros*, refers to the symbol of the snake eating its tail, inferring a cycle of death and regeneration. With its experimental narrative—whose central character embarks on a journey to shed his pain, only to experience it anew through an undetermined time-space continuum that is alternatively lush and beautiful, haunting and despairing, fraught with physical and historical ruin and uncertain predicaments—the film adheres to a fragmentary, dreamily desultory, aesthetically immersive structure. It is a heady mix of essayistic musings, stunning landscape studies, and a kaleidoscopic, dislocated love story, in which displacement finds multiple, compelling voices, and the rhythms clash and jostle us out of expectation. With hot pink English onscreen text that has been translated into Chinook, a North American indigenous language spoken by fellow artist-filmmaker Sky Hopinka, bookending archival surveillance footage of destruction in Gaza (providing an eerie panoptic gaze), sumptuous 16-millimeter footage (with an extended passage in reverse) and fictional vignettes that nevertheless blur the boundaries of being and acting, *Ouroboros* exhumes trauma caused by territorial occupation and steadfastly refuses the idea of stasis. If it is a film about the future, as Alsharif has stated, it is one that posits a future riddled by destruction, yet whose residual scars have not stunted the capacity for growth, renewal, desire, curiosity, and furtive moments of human pleasure, intimacy and collectivity. Alsharif generously spoke to us following the premiere of *Ouroboros* at the Whitney Biennial in New York.

Who can bear to look at the news any longer? An endless stream of unfathomable events, outlandish "alternative facts," worldwide traumas, dimwitted and dangerous responses, veritable nuclear threats, and when the mundane makes an inevitable appearance, it is difficult not to be offended by the seeming crassness of its innocence and banality.

Basma Alsharif is an artist/filmmaker born in Kuwait to Palestinian parents. Since receiving a Master of Fine Arts in 2007 from the University of Illinois at Chicago, she has developed her practice nomadically between Chicago, Cairo, Beirut, Sharjah, Amman, the Gaza Strip and Paris. Alsharif's work centers on the human condition in relation to shifting geopolitical landscapes and natural environments. Her work has been exhibited at The Whitney Biennial, les Rencontres d'Arles, the Palais de Tokyo, the New Museum, the Jerusalem Show, Yamagata Documentary Film Festival, the Berlinale, the Sharjah Biennial, Videobrasil, and Manifesta 8. Alsharif is represented by Galerie Imane Farès in Paris, distributed by Video Data Bank and Arsenal, and is now based in Los Angeles.

Andréa Picard is an independent curator and writer based in Toronto and Paris. She has overseen the Toronto International Film Festival's Wavelengths section (named for Michael Snow) for the past decade and most recently curated Adam Pendleton's *My Education: A Portrait of David Hillard* for the Ryerson Image Centre. Her writing can be found in numerous publications, including *Cinema Scope* magazine and Ben Rivers' monograph, *Ways of Worldmaking*. Currently, she is the Artistic Director of the Cinéma du réel festival in Paris at le Centre Pompidou.

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Ouroboros (stills), 2017. Courtesy: the artist and Galerie Imane Farès, Paris

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Ouroboros (still), 2017. Courtesy: the artist and
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The title evokes the ancient symbol of a serpent (sometimes a dragon) biting its own tail, often used to signify life's perpetual generative and destructive cycles. How does this apply to the film in both symbolic and more pragmatic terms, and did this inspiration stem from any specific reference or encounter?

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I drove through a Native American reservation yesterday, here in Southern California, and almost every time this happens I think about the State of Israel and how the Palestinian camps and villages will eventually turn into something similar to the reservations, and the diaspora and refugees will join the ranks of the peoples from stateless nations.

For the majority of my life I believed that there would come a day where justice would be had for the Palestinian people. Naively, I imagined that the state that boasts a militarized population, whose citizenship is based on religious affiliation, would be obvious to politicians and ordinary citizens alike as nothing short of fascist—and would never survive the modern era. But now we have Trump, and we heave a collective sigh of relief that a centrist former investment banker has been elected President of the French Republic. We have tallies of mass shootings and of exonerated cops in clearly documented cases of police brutality. We see footage of refugees denied safety in the very same countries that have pillaged their resources and destroyed their infrastructures.

Yet still, the violence we see today does not compare to the first two hundred years of the founding of the United States, or to Nazi Germany, or the atrocities in the Congo, and so on. We could also reach back to the beginning of civilization and say that our cycle as human beings is one based on regeneration, and thus on forgetting.

Going to Gaza and bearing witness to a situation that has only grown worse over time, it occurred to me that with a return to life (basic survival, how to secure food, shelter, and medicine), Gaza may actually be reaching towards a future in which the Gazans have learned to survive despite the failure of humanity or democracy or politicians or aid to rescue them from their crisis. No history books or news report or mass protest has ever prematurely ended Israel's expansion of settlements or military operations in the occupied territory and it seems to me like the population in Gaza has stopped waiting to be rescued. They are beginning to move on. This is all to say that it's not a specific occurrence that led me to the ouroboros, but a slow process over the years, of living nominally, returning to Gaza and seeing it destroyed, surviving a war there myself, and then watching more war ensue that became the reason and the drive to make the film: to pay homage to this place that has been a part of me and my practice and my experience on this earth, and to connect it to other landscapes in order to collapse geographies and histories into one another.

The ouroboros became like a conceptual gesture, as well as a structure for the film, which mimics the movement of the ouroboros: as time in the film passes and the central character moves forward, he also moves backwards and returns to the beginning of the film. Regeneration is not always a process of forward momentum.

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AP While obviously more ambitious and extensive in scope, *Ouroboros* shares many characteristics with your previous works: peripatetic passages, bi-locational experiences, the mining of memory—collective, subjective, imagined—surreal formal cinematic impulses, the study of violence and trauma without resorting to violent imagery, the skillful and disconcerting use of sound. There is a sense that fragments and a personal archive (image bank, sound clips, etc.) are constantly accrued and deployed within a constellation of projects, like a summation of sorts.

BA There was a moment during the editing, just as the film was beginning to take its final shape, when I was horrified to realize that I had repeated images, gestures, and ideas from my previous work. There was footage that I had repeated but was not aware of until I saw some of my previous work in a screening I presented in Boulder, Colorado that fell right in the middle of editing the film. The screening felt like a survey of examples of what *Ouroboros* would be. I felt like crying and wanted to throw my hard drive out of a window! I'm not sure why I had such a violent reaction, because over time I remembered and was excited by the fact that I could see how this project has bled into others, and others into this one, much the way that I develop a project by having a set of interests—stories I read, people I meet, conversations I have, music I listen to—that start to shape an idea, and that idea eventually begins to communicate through a medium, and that medium produces an object and it's impossible to know where the beginning or end of the idea is within that object—moving or still. So it's only natural that ideas, techniques, gestures would be found in other works, and sometimes evolve into better strategies for materializing into newer works. Usually, it takes me several works until I am through with an idea and can move on.

I felt a strange and heavy depression when I finished *Ouroboros* as I knew I was saying goodbye to Gaza. I think that I've been trying to understand this place that has been so much a part of my life and work, and trying to make sense of it in the world. And this film was perhaps a way of saying goodbye. I'm moving forward with Gaza always inside of me but maybe less present in my work (and I'm taking a step in a very different direction: I'm going back to drawing, and am maybe writing some erotic fiction—and my next feature will be a collaboration with the filmmaker Fern Silva, called *The End of Men*).

AP When I saw your film at the Whitney, I happened to be reading Maggie Nelson's *The Art of Cruelty*, which, in some ways, updates Susan Sontag's *Regarding the Pain of Others*. Both address images of atrocity and violence in the media and culture and bravely delve into the murkiness of an ethics of empathy, unafraid to call into question its impossibilities in certain circumstances. I recalled Sontag's assertion that "there is simply too much injustice in the world. And too much remembering (of ancient grievances: Serbs, Irish) embitters. To make peace is to forget. To reconcile, it is necessary that memory be faulty and limited." You mentioned something similar about the need to move on from catastrophe, to envision a future with an avowal that willful amnesia has a cost. My references here are perhaps reductively North American. Are there Middle Eastern writers or thinkers who were influential to your reflecting upon the atrocities in Gaza, and colonial violence there and elsewhere?



David O'Reilly, *Everything*, 2017.
Photo: David O'Reilly / Double Fine



BA I don't actually identify as Arab. It took a very long time for me to realize that. I spent way too much time trying to figure out whether I was a Palestinian, or an American, or whether or not the time I spent in France as a child and later as an adult somehow influenced my identity. Eventually I understood that I have no identity. Trying to identify with any of the above identities was an attempt to identify with nations/nationhood, and I hadn't spent enough time in any to feel as though I belonged "authentically" to a definition like "Arab" or "American" or even "Arab-American." These terms always served to make me aware that I was always lacking something. The concept of "identity" itself is a very modern one that we don't quite understand. This is all to explain why I don't rely on Eastern writing/thinking for

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anything in particular, nor Western writing/thinking above all else: my references are very mixed. I am more attracted by how an idea is expressed than by where that idea originates or who it represents. I also read way more fiction because fact doesn't ever feel real to me and truth seems to be subjective. I like this statement from Alan Watts that I recently came across in David O'Reilly's preview of a video game called *Everything*, that "the definition of a person is where you look from." I am drawn to fantasy and fiction, to an alternate world that is drawn from our own but reimagines it. I have spent so much time looking straight on at a conflict that does not seem to want to end that I find more reliable answers through fiction. That said, James Baldwin is perhaps my favorite writer.

The Susan Sontag text was hugely important to me. It helped me to understand why I was certain about not wanting to look at violent images myself. It also explained why violent images would not move a society or individuals to action, and finally it validated my desires to produce violence without relying on violent imagery.

AP Can you discuss the locations in the film? Though geographically very different and spread out, there is a mirroring effect among them (both lush and ruinous).



Pier Paolo Pasolini, *Location Hunting in Palestine* (stills), 1963

BA The landscapes are: the Gaza Strip in Occupied Palestine, Los Angeles and the Mojave Desert in California, Matera and Martina Franca in Italy, and Trohanet Château in Brittany, France.

Gaza was the starting point. The place where I wanted to suggest that civilization was ending and beginning again, but the other sites came through research, people I met, the people who participated in the film all influenced the locations. I know very well why each is important and was chosen in the end, but I also know that it could have been Gaza plus three other sites: Athens, Bogotá, and... Brasilia? My initial interest in Matera came because it was the site where Pasolini shot *The Gospel According to St. Matthew* after location scouting in Palestine left him unconvinced—it was both too modern and too ruined by occupation—so he decided to return to his native Italy. I wasn't so much looking to make a statement by shooting in Matera myself. I wanted to acknowledge that when we choose a site to film in, we are inherently exploiting the landscape and the population there. We are creating an image of a place for our own use, to make a point or suggest an idea, or even as a stand-in for something else. Often (especially with fiction filmmaking), we show up with just a few days to get what we want. It strikes me now that as filmmaking is still a male-dominated field, location scouting really mirrors the colonial explorer's search. This must be a really obvious link I'm making.

Anyways, the filmmaker arrives at a place and is looking at it for the kind of "image" it will make, and what I wanted to do is what Pasolini did with Palestine: to look at Matera as an image, what it symbolizes in regards to its history and what it represents today: the serene pastoral landscapes, the preserved ancient city. And then I put a restless, lonely character in the middle of it, whose energy is subdued, whose movements are controlled—with nearly half the sequences in Matera moving in reverse. The irony is that Pasolini became less important to me as I began research on Matera. I stumbled across Carlo Levi's *Cristo si è fermato a Eboli* (Christ Stopped at Eboli). A memoir written by Levi in the year he spent in Matera after being internally exiled from Turin by Mussolini for his anti-fascist writing against the war in Abyssinia (Ethiopia). I was completely floored by Levi's descriptions of the villagers in the southern Italian town: it was as though he were describing Gaza today.

So, without revealing the very particular reasons for having arrived at each site—which ends up getting lost in the film anyways—I am interested in what the sites reveal to us and what connections an audience will bring with their own set of references. I think image-making is about producing codes to be read by bringing ideas together, which means that we don't always know what extra meanings will be produced from what we make.

What I can say is that I was looking at sites that were being destroyed, had been erased, or forgotten, or places where we are still clinging onto the relics of an ancient civilization to prove our own value. To weave these sites together was to say that nothing exists in a void, the demise of Gaza has not happened in a vacuum.

AP A number of other artists have collaborated on the film. Can you talk about the nature of your collaboration, and about making work with friends and colleagues?

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BA Yes! I've actually never truly collaborated with anyone. I think previously my process has been a bit insular with ideas difficult to communicate to anyone but myself, and making this film forced me to open up quite a bit. Now that I've finished: ALL I WANT TO DO IS COLLABORATE.

This was the first time I didn't shoot any footage myself for a film. It's also the first time I worked with people as "characters," the first time I had a sound recordist, color grader or sound mixer. I had to learn to let go of a lot, to adapt, and maybe the hardest but most valuable lesson was learning to give room to the people I worked with to determine what this film would be. All of the people who worked on the film are artists in their own right, whose work I respect immensely. And, in a way, they were all participating in atypical ways: Ben Russell, who is the cinematographer, doesn't normally shoot film for others. His own work intelligently grapples with questions of representation and the possibility for cinema to create a new language. He does this through formal and structural choices that do not sacrifice aesthetics to make their point. It was a complicated decision we both took on to work together because he and I have very different ways of working and because of our relationship. I realized there was no one else I would trust to make the images I envisioned for this film, or who I would feel as comfortable working through the ideas I had in front of.

The main character, Diego Marcon, is an old friend whose own work satisfies everything I look for in a piece. His aesthetics are unique, he invents ways of communicating a gesture that always take me by surprise, and perhaps my favorite thing is that his work sits between beauty, ugliness, discomfort, and humor. He is not an actor and I asked him to participate for much the same reason I asked Ben: I knew he trusted me. I also felt that his presence on screen would be hard to decipher, that his way of being in his body and in various landscapes would make us aware of other humans and how they inhabit spaces in the film.

I met Sky Hopinka right around the time I first moved to L.A. and was beginning to develop the idea of shooting a section of the film in Southern California that would somehow involve Native American history. I was weary of my own desire to do this, weary of cannibalizing the violent history of another people to make a point about the Palestinian future. The more Sky and I spoke, the more I realized there were uncanny similarities in the use of language and landscapes, in referencing a history in the present or future in both of our works. The language Sky translated the text into is Chinook, an indigenous language that was driven to extinction and then revived. Sky recorded the translation and I embedded it into the sections of the film that were shot in Gaza, the parts that deal with an irreconcilable loss.

In Gaza, my grandmother was the collaborator. We filmed in her home, and she arranged for a very old family friend and caretaker of the house to be in the film. This woman, Neemah Abu Ghenas, was born and raised in Gaza, and watched over the family home after everyone left, following the first of Israel's brutal attacks on the Gaza Strip. Neemah ensured that the house would never seem abandoned, or uninhabited. As it turns out, this is what kept the house intact, protecting it from being bombed in the wars that followed, as Israel

Ouroboros (still), 2017. Courtesy: the artist and
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Top - Behind the scenes of *Ouraboros*, Mojave Desert, 2016. © Lauren Strom-Berg
Bottom - *Ouraboros* (still), 2017. Courtesy: the artist and Galerie Imane Farès, Paris

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often targets homes whose inhabitants leave for a few months of reprieve from the situation (with only a small privileged fraction of the population allowed to leave) under the pretext (sometimes true, oftentimes false) that the homes are being used by Hamas to store weapons.

There were many other important collaborators: Claire de Pimodan, a disillusioned young French artist whose family inherited the thirteenth century chateau in Brittany where we filmed. Yann Gourdon, hurdy-gurdy player, composer and sound artist, reinterprets traditional music that considers music's relationship to space, architecture and trance. A character who we see briefly in the L.A. section of the film, singing Dixieland, is a former professional athlete turned artist Coleman Collins, who I had numerous conversations with about returning to live in America as the political landscape was changing. And Nour Mobarak, Ella Andersson, and Mona Varichon who form Rouge Iniki, artists pushing the boundaries of their mediums based in L.A. and working between video, film, and performance.

I was humbled by the experience of depending on friends to contribute as extras, PAs, still photographers, and whose faces and names now appear as a kind of record of this particular moment in time. The record of an instant that has passed will transform and become something else—solely because of time. I wonder what this record will say ten, twenty, or thirty years from now?

AP The film takes the shape of a fragmented, kaleidoscopic love story. Can love provide an answer to "what does it mean to be human when humanity has failed"—a question that was posed in one of descriptions you used for the film?



BA Humanity—defined as the inherent compassion of human beings towards one another—has failed. Our existence is as meaningful and mysterious as the mayfly whose lifespan is twenty-four hours. We should accept our flaws, our ugliness, the mystery of how we came to be, where we are today and that we may no longer exist in the future. We should accept that our time on this earth is a sliver belonging to a larger continuum and that the stuff we torment ourselves with is our own invention. The presence of "Love" that I vaguely used in the film is a force that drives us forward. Love is something we can fall into with full knowledge of the potential for heartbreak. And heartbreak is something we suffer, knowing full well that one day, we will have totally forgotten the pain we suffer.

We willfully ignore what we know is inevitable. There's hope in that for me.



Top - *Ouroboros* (still), 2017. Courtesy: the artist and Galerie Imane Farès, Paris

Bottom - Behind the scenes of *Ouroboros*, Martina Franca, 2015. Courtesy: the artist

Halajian Suzy,
"Basma Alsharif: Under the
Influence",
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Basma Alsharif, "We Began by Measuring Distance", (Video Still), 2012

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Basma Alsharif: Under the Influence

By Suzy Halajian (<https://arteeast.org/author/shalajian/>)

"On a day as any other day, all of our memories would become significant only in retrospect, our first memory was marked by the day setting off to start with the worst of all evils."—*We Began by Measuring Distance* (2009)

I read while standing in front of *We Began by Measuring Distance*, a video work by artist and filmmaker Basma Alsharif presented at the New Museum's *Here and Elsewhere* exhibition— a contentious and comprehensive survey of contemporary art from the Arab world.^[1]

I watched the video twice in one sitting that day. The work opens with various seductive images of rapidly shifting skies to a soundtrack of the muffled voice of a woman in the distance crying and screaming, "Father, father, father, my father, shoot him." An image of veiled women and barefoot children sitting on an unidentified city street follows. Images are overlaid with text spoken by a deep-voiced, authorial narrator who reveals that the title of the work refers to a game of measurements invented by an unidentified group of people in order to fill up their time and fight boredom. Measurements of shapes and objects such as circles and apples add up to distances between two points, and then, to distances between cities, like Rome and Geneva, and Gaza and Jerusalem, a number which is hauntingly repeated many times over.

An inescapable feeling of nostalgia rises to the surface of Alsharif's explorations with poetic and textual spaces, which reveals that it might be more productive to propose questions rather than make statements. The artist's work can't be associated with a specific time and place; it engages with complex and evasive spaces where stories can't quite be grasped, where history is subjective and intangible, images are not transparent, characters remain anonymous, and any notion of the real is simultaneously charged and contested. As the distances within shapes and political landscapes collapse and merge, the viewer is left with eerie sounds and long film cuts that reveal a persistent longing. Alsharif's experimental documentary format dissects reality rather than straightforwardly represents it. It provides space for the political as a site of investigation that does not resemble the more

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defined parameters of candid documentary reproductions. As Alsharif clarified, she is not interested in making political works engaged only in conflict, nor in being identified as an activist Palestinian artist.^[2] She is known as a maker who deals with the human condition in relation to both place and non-place.

Alsharif is invested in the experience of reinterpreting traumatic events repeatedly to reveal things that can't be communicated, following the logic of philosopher Gilles Deleuze who restates, “one ousts because one repeats,” meaning that repetition in fact allows for new meanings to be created by eliminating what is retained in one's memory.^[3] Repetition is not used to bring the story forward, but rather it is employed because the story is too harrowing to be communicated otherwise. Time and again, Alsharif's considered tales of exile question the role of memory in defining the historical and personal event and in negotiating relations between reality and constructed truth. In fixating on the passage and dissolution of time and placing the body in constant movement, the artist's works distance the viewer from understanding any concept of a single locale. The moment any specificity is revealed, Alsharif makes sure it is vacated; she desires to immerse herself and others within a trance composed of a perpetual oscillation of time, and defined by a lack of any marked temporal or spatial sense as well as the absence of a reliable narrator. Any form of understanding or revelation happens only when under the influence.



We Began by Measuring Distance, Video Still, 2012

Soon after I found out that Alsharif had relocated to Los Angeles where I had also recently returned to after living in Beirut, she and I started working together on several projects. The artist's multidisciplinary practice, which engages in fictionalized autobiography through film, photography, sound, and text, is indeed driven by her nomadic lifestyle and the many places she's lived in, worked, and passed through, including Amman, Sharjah, Palestine, Beirut, Cairo, Paris, and, most recently, Los Angeles. As a Kuwaiti-born Palestinian artist, however, she is most connected to Palestine. The documentary-style video work *Home Movies Gaza* (2013), partially filmed from the window of a fast-moving car heading south, is a candid depiction of Gaza's changing landscape and its everyday happenings, heavily manipulated through reversals, loops, layering, and special effects — strategies commonly employed in Alsharif's practice. Although we never see the artist, the camera serves as a witness to pixelated televisions left on in empty homes, radio reports of Gaza's declining health conditions, and animals surviving in abandoned, hyperreal environments manipulated by the artist. The repercussions of the war and ongoing violence are reflected in the blurred landscape and everyday scenes. Where does one look for visual traces to construct some kind of historical truth?

“The first rhythm that they became used to was the slow swing from dawn to quick dusk. They accepted the pleasure of morning, the bright sun, the whelming sea, and sweet air, as a time when play was good and life so full that hope was necessary and therefore forgotten...” —*Home Movies Gaza* (2013)

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Alsharif is more interested in the possibilities of overcoming conflict than in the definition of conflict. Carefully listening to the rhythms and sounds, and studying the contours and crevices of spaces that exist in the face of catastrophic conflicts, Alsharif slows down and speeds up the filmic action. She also focuses on domestic stillness to depict certain truths: time passes and lives still go on, even while the strife continues. She takes into account the violence from all angles and speeds to consider how things might *look differently* and *perform differently* when they materialize at different registers, and to allow viewers to see and make sense of the moving images themselves. Hyperreality is engaged with as an alternative to a social consciousness that cannot be penetrated because of its media-saturated landscapes and realities. It is within these spaces that she invites her audience to ask, how can we go on? More specifically, she considers how individuals and society can keep moving forward in the wake of disaster.

Deep Sleep, Alsharif’s 2014 dreamlike video reflects on Gaza from three different locations. Filmed in the abandoned and ruinous sites of Malta, Athens, and Gaza, the work connects the three locations and attempts to convey the experience of being in Gaza from these monumental sites. Colorful flickering lights, sun, earth, stone, rock, sky, and water inundate the scenes, and the rhythmic sounds of waves, chimes, howls, and footsteps remain. Alsharif appears in the work in the form of her subconscious. Simultaneously playing performer, documentarian, and producer, as well as artist and archeologist, she calls attention to the elements of the film and how it began. The artist, who underwent yearlong autohypnosis sessions, filmed this work while in a trance state. Appearing in the video as her own double, dressed in a haunting all-white outfit, she traverses carefully through indistinct ruins, holding a recording device that captures her every movement. Later we see the artist holding her finger up to the scene, urging us to look even closer. Void of text, the meditative shots inveigle the viewer into these multiple and mythical sites and temporalities, where time and context dissolve.

Affected by her own familial and personal relationship to Palestine, Alsharif attempts to maneuver and sensorially divert viewers to remotely engage them in Gaza. Considering bilocation strategies for immersive spectatorship, she creates room for others to occupy her own position and reflect on trauma. At the same time, by appearing as the only performer in *Deep Sleep* and by destabilizing any notion of time and place, Alsharif reminds them that it is not their own position, and that they have not experienced it firsthand. The viewer is ushered to the ambiguous spaces between hypnosis, fantasy, and reality. Gaza is imagined and reimagined, and chronological history is thrown into question, as the past, present, and future are never made certain. Many things have simultaneously unraveled, including the artist’s and viewer’s subjectivity, and a struggle to uncover certain realities. As the moving image arrests our attention, it simultaneously grants the opportunity to consider how civilizations form and endure and how they are destroyed over time. The work asks: What remains after the dissolution? What does it say about the human state of affairs when information is malleable and those in power are allowed to represent and write history? Furthermore, where does one civilization end and the next begin, and what kind of future imaginaries are possible even after the destruction? Those watching Alsharif’s works may even be left with the awareness that within the political and economic turmoil of prolonged wars, crashes, and global disasters, increased uncertainty is determinedly yet to come.

Alsharif’s works are neither here nor there; they evoke a longing for a home that might never be resolved or might have never existed. Simultaneously, the works traverse far and wide to better grasp how one can arrive at an understanding of a complicated place embroiled with political upheaval and invent ways to exist there. The cinematic experience grants the space to immerse in Alsharif’s narratives, as she invites her audience to engage with her and to see differently. Works portray a constant state of movement in both a local context and a non-place, one that is indecipherable and ever-shifting, conveying the artist’s complicated relationship to speaking about a place that is eternally unreachable. Along the way, everyday occurrences—games, passages, dreams, references, and stories of displacement—are captured and manipulated in order to challenge how we perceive what we know, what we don’t know, what we don’t want to know, and what we can’t yet quite see.

[1] *Here and Elsewhere* was on view at the New Museum from July 16–September 28, 2014.

[2] Conversation with the artist, May 2016.

[3] Gilles Deleuze, *Difference and Repetition* (1968, trans. Paul Patton, New York: Columbia University Press 1994, p. 15).

Basma Alsharif is an artist/filmmaker born in Kuwait to Palestinian parents, raised between France and the US. Since receiving a Master of Fine Arts in 2007 from the University of Illinois at Chicago, she developed her practice nomadically between Chicago, Cairo, Beirut, Sharjah, Amman, the Gaza Strip and Paris. Basma’s work centers on the human condition in relation to shifting geopolitical landscapes, natural environments, and history. Interested in what cannot ever be proven or explained, she uses photography, film, video, sound, language and performance to reveal the fallibility of our perception and of history.

Major exhibitions include: Le Prix Découverte des Rencontres d’Arles, les Module at the Palais de Tokyo, Here and Elsewhere at the New Museum, the Jerusalem Show, Yamagata Documentary Film Festival, the Berlinale, the Sharjah Biennial, Videobrasil, and Manifesta 8. She received a jury prize at the Sharjah Biennial 9, the Marion MacMahon award at Images, and was awarded the Marcelino Botin Visual Arts grant. Basma is represented by Galerie Imane Farès in Paris, distributed by Video Data Bank and Arsenal, and is now based in Los Angeles.

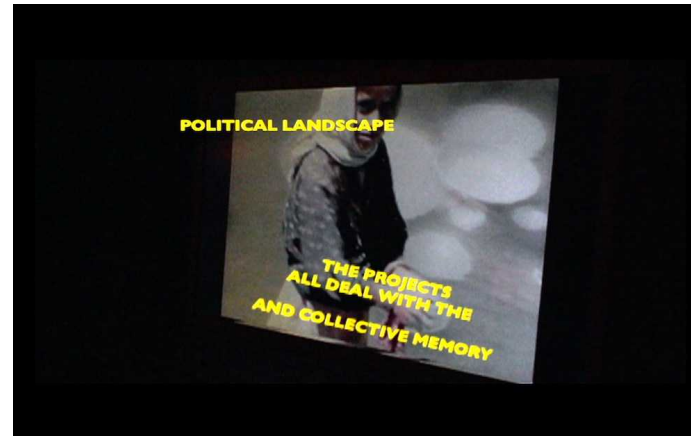
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Basma Alsharif by Aily Nash

Working with, and through, conflict.



Still from *The Story of Milk and Honey*, 2011. Courtesy of the artist.

Basma Alsharif's work implores us to experience beyond the delineations of place, language, story, image, and the political, showing us that a place is not local, language slips, stories can't be told, images lie, and that we're humans beyond our politics. Her mode of working and exhibiting is multifarious, operating between installation and cinema, and incorporating a variety of mediums. The following conversation focuses predominantly on her newest projects, a selection of which were exhibited in the solo show *Doppelganging* at Galerie Imane Farès in Paris this past spring. The moving image works in the show, *Deep Sleep*, *Girls Only*, and *The Story of Milk and Honey*, exist in various forms: as a self-contained work for cinema, as a film installation loop, and as part of a larger scale installation that included photographs, drawings, and texts. The entire exhibition was set within an astro-turfed environment with a soundtrack that filled the gallery with birdsong, the sound of thunderstorms, and a backwards rendition of Jeanette singing *Porque Te Vas*. *Doppelganging* also took the form of a performance lecture that included Alsharif's newest work to date *O, Persecuted* and was presented in May at the Berlin

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Documentary Forum.

Since 2007, Alsharif has lived and worked nomadically in Cairo, Beirut, Sharjah, Amman, Gaza, Paris, and now Los Angeles.

Aily Nash With *Doppelganging* you've identified your position as a Post-Palestinian artist, and stated, "I am shifting away from looking at Palestine through the world, to look at the world through Palestine." Can you describe the process of arriving at this position?

Basma Alsharif It was Eyal Sivan who first called my work "Post-Palestinian" at the 59th Flaherty Seminar in 2013, mainly as a response to the way I dealt with place, conflict, and identity with the luxury of distance and a kind of imagination about the future that isn't tied to the past, as well as the production of work that wasn't necessarily activist. This definition allowed me to realize that my perspective is based on an acceptance of the possibility that Palestine may never become a state, that the right of return will never be acknowledged, and that I am interested in what comes next, what we do now.

AN The group of works you made before *Doppelganging* focused on imagining Palestine beyond the conflict. The immediacy of the everyday is at the heart of *Home Movies Gaza*. And the focus on day-to-day survival brought your focus to the quotidian space within conflict, where turkeys roam and people watch television and practice violin. Rife with turmoil, of course, but life still has to go on. How do you see Palestine and its history of conflict as a microcosm that is emblematic of the complexities and failures of civilization?

BA Before fully realizing that I was making work that involved Palestine, the Palestinian identity, and the conflict, my understanding of Palestine was, on the one hand, as a place I was emotionally close to and familiar with because it was where I had family, and it was one of the few places I returned to frequently in my life. On the other hand, it was always a place of deep conflict, of struggle, pain, injustice, and turmoil. I saw and experienced these as two separate worlds. One was private, the other very public and polarizing.

In recent years, the question of continuing to hope the situation will improve has felt cynical to me, like some played-out phrase we keep telling ourselves so we can hold on to an antiquated idea about humanity. To ask for people to continue to have hope in the face of so much injustice is insulting. Especially as someone from the

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diaspora, I feel unable to ask those in Gaza to continue to have hope. The big surprise for me came in returning to Gaza after a ten-year absence to realize that people were living not *despite* the horrible circumstance they were being forced into but *beyond* it. The population in Gaza had recognized, perhaps subconsciously, that civilization had failed. Even the ruins had been ruined, and people were finding ways not only to survive but to circumvent their impossible situations. I found it had less to do with hope and more about being really clever in finding ways to move past a failed civilization. Life was not just about having food, water, and shelter but also about prospering and being involved in activities that have nothing to do with survival, to continually exist in the moment post-disaster.

When I was in Gaza, I spent a fair amount of time around people who were riding horses and putting on art exhibitions, and they weren't doing it as a conscious act of resistance or defiance or proof there was life outside of struggle, but because they were human beings doing what human beings do. I'm definitely not trying to say the situation is positive or hopeful or that it is possible to have a normal life within the Gaza Strip—absolutely not. The situation is tragic and totally inhumane. Israel has bombed a territory with 1.7 million inhabitants who do not have basic human rights, and who have been occupied for decades as a "defense" strategy. The point is that even given such circumstances, the individual is defined by their humanity, not just by history and politics.

One of the biggest indicators for me was that people had stopped talking about politics or history as they had when I was growing up, and this felt incredibly optimistic to me. It's something I saw mirrored in other places where I was living or spending time: people seemed fed up with governments and economic systems that enslaved them and a recognition, perhaps, that the pillars of civilization have grown problematic, have become obstacles in moving forward. I am interested in the small pockets of the world where people are finding ways to exist that are redefining civilization. In this way, I see Palestine as one place that is being forced to reconcile the shortcomings of humanity and the failure of civilization, and to find a way of moving forward.

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Still from *Home Movies Gaza*, 2013. Courtesy of the artist.

AN This realization is present in both *Home Movies Gaza* and in *Deep Sleep*, yet approached very differently. In *Home Movies Gaza* there is a formal distinction from previous works—in how “documentary” or straightforward the viewing experience feels. In *Deep Sleep*, you are performing a new technique—hypnosis as a “pan-geographic shuttle” to disparate locations, “different sites of modern ruin,” and you’ve linked this type of movement and mode of viewing to the fundamentals of the cinematic experience.

BA There are so many effects applied on almost every piece of footage in *Home Movies Gaza*: loops, things playing in reverse, overlaid images, non-diegetic sound, and chroma-keyed animals. The material was brought together to mimic footage from a home movie. It is meant to feel more straightforward or candid than my other works, where things are highly staged and heavily worked over. It was a strategy I used to show a place tainted by its political circumstance, with the contradiction being that the everyday does play out innocently in this inescapable situation. This is where the use of William Golding’s *Lord of the Flies* comes in. I felt that Gaza was the island the boys inhabit, but in reality, one hundred years later.

Deep Sleep is different in that I wanted to remove the specificity of Gaza, and allowed other sites (Malta and Athens) to be a reflection of Gaza, its past, and a future it never achieved. The three sites are heavy with ruins of ancient civilization, some more recognizable than others, but ultimately it is about surviving beyond the presence of history. Think of populations that are being forced to migrate due to climate change. Gaza may be destroyed, but so is the Roman Empire. The effect I was after was to deeply immerse my audience in an experience of these sites

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through my own physical experience of them, as a subject under autohypnosis—to force the sensation of being lost in one's own memory and the inability to recognize how one image follows another. I was interested in creating a world that had no beginning or end, sort of like a dream.

AN You often perform the act of creation of your works—carrying the tripod in *Farther than the Eye Can See*, and recording sound in *Deep Sleep*. You both insert and remove yourself from your work. Where do you find you want to enter, and how, and why do you encrypt your presence?

BA The use of myself in my work is as a kind of body-double. A lot of my work, even early explorations, has to do with a distance I create in the material I use. I would work to disconnect an image from where I had found it or how I had shot it. I had this idea that the autobiographical wasn't so interesting but that the subjective gaze was inevitably the perspective from which I make work, and so there is a kind of autobiographical process in discovering, making, and gathering materials for a work. I saw myself as a subject that moved things around, that went through a process and could be directed to serve a function in a film in the same way that sound or images move ideas around. It was less important to me that I be recognized as the "performer" in my works but rather as a figure that was part of creating the image. In *Deep Sleep* it was much more specific. My subconscious was the subject, and I wanted to invite everybody else's subconscious into the film to go to a place that is slowly disappearing (the Gaza Strip) through these other places (Malta, Athens).

AN You have a Venn diagram exercise in a version of your *Doppelganging* talk, in which you locate the meeting point of your circumstances with your practice, identifying this point of overlap as your position. I'm interested in the way you taught and shared this with students and the question of whether the artist's position grants one the right to depict certain people, certain topics. The exercise examines the intersection of one's own position as an artist, and that of the ethics of representation.

BA I have taken the ideas that led to these projects and turned them into issues to be expanded in a workshop I led in various places. One of the central questions of the workshop is where agency is located for each participant in relation to their practice: How do artists give themselves license over their subject matter? How do we treat the work of those who explore subjects that are outside of their own

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experiences or travel to foreign places to make a work versus artists who make work about a subject or place they are close to?

It's an old question, but one that continues to determine a great deal about how works are received, how we look at and make work today, whether or not we acknowledge it. This is something I have been interested in sharing with other artists, to see the range of responses, from Western to non-Western ideas, about agency in art-making. It has been a way to explore my own agency and how or why I give myself license to explore Palestine as a subject. I don't feel that my background as a Palestinian is enough to validate an "ethical" use of Palestinian history or the contemporary conflict, or that I have a green light to point my camera at a refugee camp for twenty minutes uninterrupted. But then again, I don't believe we need permission to produce work about places that are foreign to us. It's all about how we understand our power in relation to whatever subject we are exploring, and that the work acknowledges that relationship in some way without trying to validate why it is acceptable.

Whether or not I was born or grew up in Palestine is insignificant. My relationship to that place significantly affected the way I experience the world, and this perspective is the position my work operates from. Whether or not my work addresses Palestine, it is one context for understanding my interest. My work has less to do with Palestine, and more simply with the human condition in relation to political history, the environment, time, the future, etcetera. I don't have permission to shoot a refugee camp and honestly, it's not such a polite thing to do. But I decided to record a twenty-minute drive from Gaza City heading south from a car window. When I saw the footage for the first time I noticed a quick decline from city to slum. I saw children running around the ruined landscape almost oblivious to where they were and was most excited by how this footage described the landscape in this very two-dimensional way, like a wall of moving images that quickly disappears.

I was a little surprised at how depraved Gaza came off, how classically like a ghetto or *favela* it read as an image, and wanted to find other images that would complicate our understanding of that territory, especially as a place incessantly documented in the news because of the conflict. I decided to use the footage that I shot, not because I have a right to use it as a Palestinian, but because I wanted to make a film that asked its audience to have an experience of a particular environment created by war and occupation, which would then contradict itself.

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AN In the process of making *O, Persecuted*, and working with Kassem Hawal's militant 1974 film, *Our Small House*, as source material, how did you arrive at the other images and moments from media history that you wanted to put in dialogue with your performance and the original film?



Installation view of *Doppelganging*, 2014. Courtesy of the artist.

BA *O, Persecuted* was made by filming the process of painting over Hawal's film *Our Small Houses* in reverse, at 2.5 times the speed. It was then reversed to give the impression that the film was being uncovered, that the paint was being removed. This was paired with a soundtrack of several modified tracks from the original film combined into a single piece of sound. Initially, the film was based only on this act of uncovering, but as soon as I made the first cut, there was something sort of placid and banal about this act alone, something limited to a past, and my feeling about conjuring this history in the present was anything but passive. I was asked to engage with this material, through a commission by the Palestine Film Foundation in London. I saw it as an incredibly generous opportunity to speak to the current political climate.

Increasingly, there has been a lot of talk about the conflict, about self-determination for Palestinians, injustice, and war crimes. There is heavy condemnation of what Israel has done, is doing, will continue to do, and yet very little actually changes. To look back at the revolutionary period of Palestinian history is heartbreaking mostly in terms of time. How much time has passed since these films were made and how much worse is the situation? Hawal's film is unique in that it alludes to addressing

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both Palestinians and Israelis as persecuted people who are thrown together into a merciless battle. The past represented in the film is, first of all, one entity and not the fractured set of territories of today. Looking back on this moment is like moving in slow motion while the Israeli future is billowing forward without looking back. This is how the decision to bring the material of Israeli girls partying on the beach came about. These two realities are so inextricably intertwined but so totally disconnected from each other.

Another important aspect for me was to force women and women's bodies into this narrative as women's rights are second to the conflict, thereby reinforcing continued oppression and/or exploitation within each society. One of the biggest obstacles, for me, of spending time in the Middle East has been the dire situation of women's rights. Looking back at films of the revolutionary period in Palestine, it is painfully clear that women had more rights and more importance in the struggle than they do today. Conflating this moment in history with the Westernized spring-break type footage from Israel is to say that even though the other side seems to be having a better time, the women there are objectified and degraded. On one side women's rights are suppressed because of the overall humanitarian crisis, while on the other women's bodies are used to promote a seductive image of the country that is completely contradictory to the supposed security threat that affords Israel the green light to engage in major warfare whenever it wants.

Conflating this with the orientalist belly-dancer footage, as the bridge between the two—and the ghost that lingers beneath the surface—is to show the disparity within the reality of this landscape and how much work there is to be done that has nothing to do with nationalism/statehood. It's meant to force us to return to this idea in Hawal's film, that both people are persecuted and faced with the same fate—to kill or be killed—and to think about this question today as history moves in slow motion and the future is speeding toward us.

I think this film is undeniably angry but I believe people will find the aggression in different places. My interest was to enact a frustration with history, to have a particularly nostalgic part of Palestinian history colliding with a contemporary Israeli reality. Neither side is represented in a positive light, but it's also not an attack on either side. I kept thinking that the situation had only grown worse during my lifetime and this film is an attempt to point to a very specific instance of that reality.

AN You employ the intensity of the strobing image and loud, infectious music or

Nash Aily,
"Working with, and
through, conflict",
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sound to powerfully impart emotion, making us feel these stories without placing priority on narrative or factual information. The experience of the image is often more telling than the facts around it. How has cinema's visceral power become a central tool, or vehicle for you to communicate your ideas?

BA I am really taken by cinema's ability to allow us to experience emotions and have a cognitive response to subjects we know little about. Often without depending on language in a classical sense and allowing the moving image's ability to delve into the depths of our subconscious—relying on our senses to grasp and feel something beyond understanding. I think it's magical even in its most subtle and understated forms. There is a lot of misunderstanding around the Palestinian/Israeli conflict, and I'm not so invested in clarifying it, especially since it is this confusion I am interested in, along with placing it on others as a way to explore a more general confusion about how to exist on Earth, rather than in a particular country. Though I work in other mediums, I see the moving image as a parallel reality that I can create, manipulate, and invite an audience to be a part of.

AN Originally, your sole mode of exhibition was installation in the contemporary art context, but in the last several years you've transitioned into also showing your work in cinematic contexts. You've explored working with film alongside video, and have approached moving image making from outside the tradition of experimental film. How does this mode of working relate to your themes of peripheral experience?

BA I'm still really affected by the way that the moving image occupies space. The way it looks when it's projected outside versus a cinema, or on the ground, or while a band is playing, or as an LED in an urban space. I started working with video as a way of exploring other mediums. So, incorporating text, voice, drawings, 16mm film, slides, photographs, and so on. Now, I'm curious about the way in which working with film has made me think about my process before I start to film, rather than when I edit. Less about collecting materials and more about creating them from scratch. I think this is aligned with the fact that I'm no longer exploring the Middle East the way I did when I first came out of school. At the time, I was refamiliarizing myself with the region as a subject, a place I wanted to be more connected to personally. I was mining the field for how representation functions in that part of the world, how it reads to the outside world, how I related to it. It's not that my understanding of the Middle East or my relationship to it is totally resolved, but that I no longer feel I want to collect or archive, as this feels closer to a research

Nash Aily,
"Working with, and
through, conflict",
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process. Rather than exploring Palestine through my experience of it as an outsider, I am now curious to explore the world through Palestine, as someone who is essentially not from anywhere.

Aily Nash is an independent curator. She co-curates the New York Film Festival's Projections section and has curated programs and exhibitions for MoMA PS1 (NYC), FACT (Liverpool), BAM/Brooklyn Academy of Music (NYC), Anthology Film Archives (NYC), Northwest Film Center (Portland), Image Forum (Tokyo), and others. Her writing has appeared in The Brooklyn Rail, Artforum.com, Film Comment, de Filmkrant, and elsewhere. She recently served on the jury at Media City Film Festival and on the FIPRESCI Jury at Internationale Kurzfilmtage Oberhausen. Nash curates film and media at Basilica Hudson and currently teaches at Bruce High Quality Foundation University in New York. She is based in Hudson and Brooklyn, New York.

Marsaud Olivia,
"Basma Alsharif, Nouvelles
images de Palestine",
Diptyk, n°23, April/May
2014, p. 32



Basma Alsharif,
*The story of milk
and honey*, 2011,
vidéo

GALERIE IMANE FARES

BASMA ALSHARIF, NOUVELLES IMAGES DE PALESTINE

Questionnant davantage ses représentations que son état, l'artiste met en perspective la question palestinienne d'une manière très personnelle.

Le sol de la galerie a été tapissé de pelouse synthétique, il y a des plantes en pots partout et des cris d'oiseaux s'échappent du plafond. C'est un dépaysement total lorsqu'on entre dans l'exposition de Basma Alsharif, expérience sensorielle autant que visuelle. « Je voulais que le visiteur entre dans un environnement étranger et soit déconnecté. J'ai créé un jardin artificiel mais avec de vraies plantes, de manière à ce qu'on ne sache plus vraiment ce qui est faux ou réel... » Cette tension entre réalité et fiction traverse l'œuvre de la jeune artiste. Comme une métaphore de cette Palestine, pays natal de ses grands-parents, où l'espace-temps est instable, avec des frontières mouvantes et le traumatisme de vivre sous une menace permanente.

La vidéo *The Story of Milk and Honey* (2011), qui vient d'entrer dans les collections du CNAP, est le point de départ de l'exposition. Elle y explique sa démarche : interroger la mémoire et la narration collec-

tives, jouer avec le son et le langage, dont elle met en lumière à la fois le pouvoir et l'ambiguïté. Une voix off raconte l'origine et le montage du projet artistique. Mais c'est une voix d'homme. « Je n'ai pas voulu mettre ma voix car ce n'est pas seulement mon histoire. Même si le corpus artistique est personnel, autobiographique et familial, j'ai souhaité incorporer une subjectivité via cette voix d'homme, qui reste anonyme et dont on ne peut deviner d'où il vient : il peut être Palestinien ou Libanais... »

UNE IDENTITÉ NOMADE

La vidéo est accompagnée de 66 photographies de trois séries : « Corniche Beirut » (magnifiques photographies au piqué étonnant et au cadrage qui ne l'est pas moins), « Les Sauvages » (dessins de plantes en noir et blanc) et « Original Family Archives », photographies de famille sur lesquelles l'artiste a effacé tous les visages. Les voilà extra-terrestres, comme peuvent se sentir les Palestiniens

dépossédés de leurs terres. C'est d'ailleurs ce lien entre identité et espace géographique, tel qu'il existe dans l'imaginaire collectif, que Basma Alsharif questionne. D'où le titre de l'exposition qui fait référence à l'ubiquité, qu'elle associe à l'identité palestinienne.

Née en 1983 au Koweït de parents palestiniens et élevée aux États-Unis, elle est complètement nomade depuis 2007, vivant entre le Moyen-Orient, l'Europe et l'Amérique. Ce nomadisme se retrouve dans son usage de médiums très divers, mais aussi dans son passage du passé au présent comme dans le film *Deep Sleep* (2014), tourné en super 8 à Malte, Athènes et Gaza. « Je ne suis basée nulle part. Je vais là où me porte mon travail », résume Basma Alsharif.

OLIVIA MARSAUD

Basma Alsharif
« Doppelgänger »
Galerie Imane Farès, Paris,
jusqu'au 30 juillet 2014

Sirieix Barbara,
"Basma Alsharif's, "Dop-
perlgänging",
Art Agenda, June 17, 2014

by BARBARA SIRIEIX

June 17, 2014

Basma Alsharif's "DOPPELGÄNGING"

GALERIE IMANE FARÈS, Paris

April 3–July 30, 2014

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"A video titled *Milk and Honey*." These are the opening subtitles appearing on a plasma screen in the first room of Basma Alsharif's solo exhibition in Paris. The following words, spoken in Arabic by a male narrator, introduce a story to come, of a woman's lost love. They immediately remind me of Song of Songs (or Song of Solomon), a love story from the Old Testament often interpreted as an allegory of the relationship between a people and a nation: "Your lips, my bride, drip like the honeycomb. Honey and milk are under your tongue. The smell of your garments is like the smell of Lebanon."⁽¹⁾ Then, the narrative shifts to the making of the video and the admission of its failure: "What I was left with was a video with no images." At this point, we are able to identify Alsharif's own subjectivity behind the man's voice. She describes all the material she collected while she was in Beirut, as well as her initial intention to create a "fictional love story set in the Middle East devoid of political context."

The video is surrounded by an extensive display of photographs that are all part of an installation titled *The Story of Milk and Honey* (2011). Much like the rest of the works on view at Galerie Imane Farès, this installation testifies to Alsharif's inability to speak about a place inaccessible to her. Born in Kuwait to Palestinian parents, she grew up between the United States and France and now leads a nomadic life, traveling internationally with an American passport. In the introductory exhibition handout written by Israeli filmmaker Eyal Sivan, one finds a quote from Alsharif in which she expresses her distress of not being able to re-enter her ancestral homeland, the "PROMISED LAND," as she puts it. Alsharif originally wanted to write a love story about the Levant, as if it were a classical Arabic song, but ultimately she found herself conflicted by questions of nationalism and its underlying orientalist rhetoric.



1 Basma Alsharif, *The Story of Milk and Honey*, 2011.



2 View of Basma Alsharif's "DOPPELGÄNGING," Galerie Imane Farès, Paris, 2014.



3 Basma Alsharif, *The Story of Milk and Honey*, 2011.

Sirieix Barbara,
"Basma Alsharif's, "Dop-
perlgänging",
Art Agenda, June 17, 2014

Experimenting cinematically with autofiction—a literary genre of fictionalized autobiography—seems to have opened up a critical space for her, imbuing the narratives with a sense of nomadism. Due to her own personal connection to the political and cultural history of the Middle East, Alsharif realized that her attempt to write a purely fictional love story was unachievable. However, she did manage to produce three series of images, which are also described in the video "Original Family Archives" (2011), a series of family portraits and found photographs of anonymous persons with the faces erased; "Les Sauvages" (2011), a group of photographs of drawings and botanical texts in which all the words related to plants have been removed; and "Corniche Beirut" (2011), a series of photographs she secretly took of pedestrians on a seaside boardwalk in Beirut. The juxtaposition of these images on the gallery walls contributes to the installation's fragmentary nature, introducing an indeterminacy between imaginary and personal facts.

Alsharif unifies the exhibition by ensconcing its diverse works within a simulated natural environment. Entering the gallery space feels like entering a garden showroom: the floor is covered with an intense, emerald-colored synthetic turf topped with potted plants, which lend the show an exotic, orientaling feel. In keeping with the concept of the doppelgänger, or "ghostly double," its three different installation works overlap with one another, suggesting that different narratives can cohabit the same space. The "double" is also present as a self-reflexive means of traveling in time and space, like a stateless paradigm that exceeds borders. A reproduction of a vintage poster of the Olympic Games introduces the overall narrative of *Girls Only* (2014), an installation that includes a 16mm film projection and a series of prints altered with India ink. The poster features the elliptic symbols of the former USSR, while the others incorporate representations of athletes who embody the patriarchal notion of a "fatherland"; the words directly referring to the Olympic Games have been obscured with black bars, revealing the posters' ideological iconography even more clearly. At the end of the corridor, the film set in Athens's Panathenaic Stadium serves as a counterpoint to these images, featuring a girl repeatedly reciting words relating to notions of masculinity.



4 View of Basma Alsharif's "DOPPELGÄNGING," Galerie Imane Farès, Paris, 2014.



5 Basma Alsharif, *Girls Only* (detail), 2014.



6 Basma Alsharif, *Girls Only*, 2014.

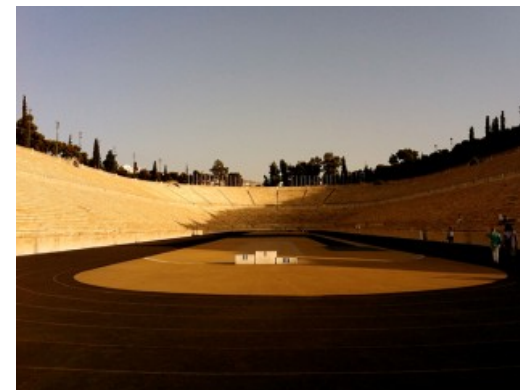
Sirieix Barbara,
“Basma Alsharif’s, “Dop-
perlgänging””,
Art Agenda, June 17, 2014

In the gallery’s basement, the video installation *Deep Sleep* (2014) activates a hypnotic state with color flickers and binaural beats. Shot on Super 8 film (and later transferred to high-definition video), Alsharif experiments with the idea of being in two places at the same time while hypnotizing herself amid ruins in Athens, Malta, and Gaza. Her approach recalls French scholar Raymond Bellour’s examination of hypnosis in cinema, which advances the medium’s *dispositif* as the viewer’s doppelgänger—as a physical body with gaze, presence, shadows, mass, and skin.⁽²⁾ Similarly, the performative dimension of Alsharif’s work emphasizes the corporeal qualities of cinema, with the texture of the film and the movements of the camera underpinning the idea of a body double. Even the artist’s own doppelgänger appears on screen. Intermittently, we see her walking around with a microphone while recording the film’s audio track—an act which stages both her cinematic double and the process of rendering it with sound simultaneously. Just as *Deep Sleep* demonstrates how doubling might possibly become a healing device of exile, Alsharif’s viewer experiences the uncanny, overlapping duplication of space, body, and memory in her exhibition-*qua*-autofictional garden, like a nomadic wanderer.

(1) Sg 4:11 (New International Version).

(2) Raymond Bellour, *Le corps du cinéma: Hypnoses, émotions, animalités* (Paris: P.O.L., 2009).

Barbara Sirieix is an independent curator and writer based in Paris.



7 Basma Alsharif, *Girls Only*, 2014.



8 Basma Alsharif, *Deep Sleep*, 2014.



9 Basma Alsharif, *Deep Sleep*, 2014.

Khadivi Jesi,
"Basma Alsharif: The Doppelgänger",
Ibraaz Reviews, July 29,
2014



REVIEWS

Basma Alsharif: The Doppelgänger **Berlin Documentary Forum 3 at Haus der Kulturen der Welt,** **Berlin**

Jesi Khadivi

29 July 2014

A young woman begins to speak in a darkened room. Gradually, a single light illuminates a figure sitting to the right of the screen clad in a bright, knee-skimming patterned t-shirt dress and shimmering silver shoes. A languid video flickers to her left as she speaks, layering accumulations of abstract textures. Occasionally, figures pierce these hazy color-fields flanked by snippets of text. While the video streams behind her, the woman introduces herself to the audience, briefly glossing her Palestinian parents' exile in Olympia, Washington, where she was conceived, and going on to trace the family's relocations to Kuwait, France, and the American Midwest in the years that followed.

Khadivi Jesi,
"Basma Alsharif: The Doppelgänger",
Ibraaz Reviews, July 29,
2014



Basma Alsharif, *Doppelgänger*, 2014.

Photo © Basma Alsharif.

Her tone then shifts mid-stream. A collective narrative suddenly elides the family's personal experience of the family: the Haganah, the Palestinian people, curtailment, savagery, rape, and death. Devoid of any regional inflection, the woman's flat American accent recalls the regionless dialect of American newscasters. Yet her voice and visage refuse to cooperate. Unlike an anchorperson, she fumbles slightly while reading, grimaces at times as if annoyed by what she sees, and squints to ascertain what lies on the page in front of her. One could mistake this for a simple case of performance jitters if she didn't cursorily flick the page beneath her sheaf of papers, commenting with a slight shake of her head, 'This isn't my story, I don't know how it got in there.'

Thus begins the cascading series of personal narratives, film and video clips, and bi-located performances that comprises Basma Alsharif's recent lecture performance *The Doppelgänger* (2014). True to its title, both the form and the content of Alsharif's performance posit a multitude of couplings: the personal and the political, the magical and the quotidian, the seen and the unseen, the screen and the stage. The term Doppelgänger entered literary discourse, and thus the popular imagination, through a footnote in a work by the German novelist Jean Paul (Richter) in 1796. *So heissen die Leute, die sich selbst sehen: This is what people are called who see themselves.* Indeed, although *The Doppelgänger* does at times engage Palestinian history, the bulk of the lecture performance concerns Alsharif herself: sharing anecdotes, familial history, and her rejection of the notion of a fixed Palestinian identity, as well as her ongoing research interest in the phenomenon of bilocation – the process of locating perception outside of the body and being in multiple places at once. After thirty minutes

Khadivi Jesi,
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2014

seated alongside the video screen, Alsharif rises to stand in the center of the screen. Binaural beats fill the theater, creating an electric ambience, while a wash of luminous color swells behind her. The combination of driving sound and pulsating imagery lulls the theater into a kind of collective hypnosis as Alsharif describes the co-existence of three landscapes as if she were viewing them from afar: a site, a model, and a ruin. The intensity of the sound and strobing lights peak as Alsharif vanishes from sight. She appears again onscreen, inhabiting the same scenes that she has just described.

In casting own story as the focal point of the performance, Alsharif activates the 'bundle' of perceptions that David Hume claims comprise the ever-shifting terrain of the self. In *The Doppelgänger* we hear about Basma the teenager, gaining her first citizenship at the age of thirteen; Basma the peripatetic artist, who is denied entry to the West Bank; we see Basma on stage talking to us – then we don't; We hear Basma's voice through the darkness; her back appears before us on screen, slowly walking ahead of us. Spawned from ancient myth and folklore, the double endures as an archetype in part because it resists definition. As a shadow self, the double emerges to haunt its host in times of stress and transition. Unlike its folkloric cousin, who is closer to a guardian angel, modern incarnations of the double in literature and cinema more frequently manifest as symptomatic of a fractured psyche, unsettling its beholder with the force of the repressed returning.

While Alsharif claims to be personally disinterested in identity politics, most likely because of the fact that its classical articulation often encourages mobilization around a single axis of identification that her own experience as a Kuwaiti-born Palestinian woman necessarily complicates. Yet, in thinking about the nomadic way in which she lives her life, the exploration of bi-location and the double in her work does take on a special relevance when considered within the Palestinian context. By focusing explicitly on how the body navigates space – both onscreen, onstage, and in the mind – Alsharif enacts an oblique protest against what she claims is one of the defining aspects of the modern Palestinian identity: the curtailment of movement. (Indeed, one of the leaflets Israel recently dropped during its most recent relentless bombing campaign against Gaza warned residents that 'Any moving body after noon will be struck.') Unlike an oppositional political stance, which directs its force against something concrete – whether a political party, social class, or religious group – the double conjures the limits of the thinkable, the sayable, and theactable. The transgressive quality of the double – its capacity to disrupt a social or political order – resides in its ability to inhabit multiple perspectives at once. The mutable quality of the double thus provides an oblique, chimerical political stance – particularly as it relates to the articulation and dispersal of Palestinian images.

The third Berlin Documentary Forum took place at Haus der Kulturen Welt, Berlin, from 29 May 29 to 1 June, 2014.

Jesi Khadivi

Jesi Khadivi is a curator and writer. Her writing has been published in *Fillip*, *Kaleidoscope*, *The Brooklyn Rail*, and *Harper's Bazaar Art Arabia*. She has organized events and exhibitions for venues including Golden Parachutes, Berlin; Vessel, Bari; and the Wattis Institute for Contemporary Art, where she co-curated the exhibition *Words and Places: Etel Adnan* in 2013. She lives and works in Berlin.

Wilson-Goldie Kaelen,
"Images of being and
nothingness",
The National, the review,
May 28, 2010, p.8-9

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Sandhu, The Telegraph

Images of being

Basma al Sharif's poetic narratives avoid politics – but they evoke a longing for

On a Friday afternoon in the early summer of 2006, seven members of a single Palestinian family were killed in an explosion on a sandy, shrub-strewn beach in Gaza. In the days and weeks that followed, video footage of the aftermath circulated furiously around the world. What it showed was a 10-year-old girl running across the beach and slamming herself to the ground beside the dead body of her father. She rises, slaps the tears from her face and wails the word "abouna" – "our father" – over and over.

The young girl, named Huda Ghalia, lost her father, stepmother and five siblings in one go. Israeli forces admitted to bombing the beach by land and sea that day, but a military investigation cleared them of all culpability, insisting the deadly explosion was caused by an old shell buried in the sand or a landmine planted by Hamas.

Local and regional news channels aired the images of Ghalia liberally. International broadcasters ran with the story, and the footage turned up on YouTube, where it has since been viewed some 300,000 times. But the beach attack came at the beginning of a brutal season in the wider Arab-Israeli conflict. By the time the summer of 2006 came to an end, thousands of people were dead and a million displaced. Ghalia's tragedy sifted to the bottom of a catastrophic pile, replaced by one disaster after another and forgotten.

The artist Basma al Sharif, however, remembered the story well when she discovered the footage of Ghalia in the archives of the independent news agency Rannattan. Sharif, who is 26, was born in Kuwait, raised in France and educated in the United States. She studied fine art in Chicago, lived for a time in Cairo and moved to Beirut almost a year ago.

But half of her family is from Gaza, and so the story of the girl on the beach, a phrase Sharif uses often when discussing her art, must have hit awfully close to home. Variations on Ghalia's tragedy have slipped into the intricate layers of her work three times in three years.

Semi-Nomadic Debt-Ridden



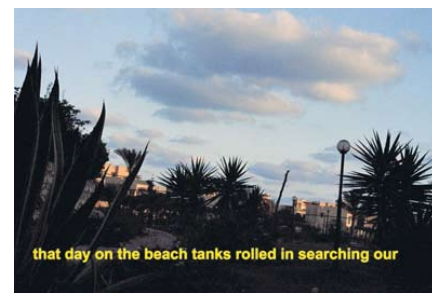
endless sea for the horizon it must be the debt ridden



We went for a walk on the hottest of days in the dead of the



lives are modest we fell to the ground and the shells stuck



that day on the beach tanks rolled in searching our

Photographs from Basma al Sharif's series *Semi-Nomadic Debt-Ridden Bedouins* (2006). Courtesy of the artist

Bedouins, from 2006, is a series of 12 subtitled photographs. The images appear arbitrary and banal: a cow, a seaside cafe, a sceptical journalist, an orientalist painting, a military tank, a pair of knees, a flyswatter above sandalled feet. But they are overlaid with fragments of text that piece together a narrative about two sisters going for a walk on a beach "on the hottest of days in the dead of summer".

Scanning from one photograph to next, we read the following lines: "the remains of our/lives are modest we fell to the ground and the shells stuck/to our cheeks my sister said remember those

things/we cannot forget and I said yes/their imprints on our faces we stood to walk/the ground opened up to swallow us whole." It is as if Sharif were transcribing the language of the attack while imagining the memories of summer that Ghalia and her sisters should have shared.

In the 12-minute video *Everywhere Was the Same*, from 2007, Sharif tells another story about two girls who turn up on the shores of a city. After their arrival, the piece, which features a slideshow of abandoned spaces, takes a darker turn, delving into an account of a massacre, the details of

which are never disclosed.

We Began by Measuring Distance, a 19-minute video from 2009, is Sharif's most ambitious work to date, weaving together several different strands of text, image and sound. The footage of Huda Ghalia on the beach in Gaza is present in the video's opening scene, but the catch is that Sharif uses only the sound: the metallic thud of a bomb, an ambulance's piercing siren, and then, unmistakably, Ghalia's stabbing cries. Gone are the highly charged images of a little girl beating herself up next to her father's corpse. In their place are placid shots of clouds passing

across a blazing sun, over a tangled cityscape on the sea, below another sun that has been darkened to the likeness of the moon. Like a warning, Ghalia's voice sets the tone. But she is nowhere to be seen. She is present but absent at once.

After the opening scenes, *We Began by Measuring Distance* follows a loose, aerated narrative about an unidentified "we". Two sisters, two lovers, a group of friends – as viewers we are never sure. But a man with an incredibly deep voice speaks in Arabic about their circumstances and behaviours. "On a day as any other day," he begins, "all of our memories would become

Wilson-Goldie Kaelen,
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nothingness",
The National, the review,
May 28, 2010, p. 8-9

TheNational thereview

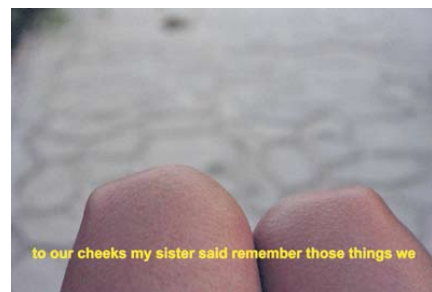
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09

An amusing look at the artist LeRoy Stevens, who has addressed the global financial collapse with a sculpture made from \$100 in US pennies, melted by the rays of the sun }

and nothingness

the memory of a place that no longer exists, writes Kaelen Wilson-Goldie



Sharif's work points in a direction that leads past the cold and the clinical, where notions as *démodé* as beauty and imagination can reclaim their critical potential.

Sharif composes her videos and photographs from material crammed onto the hard drive of her computer. Much of it deals with Palestine, but just as much of it has nothing to do with Palestine at all. She has collected Arabic love songs; articles about Italian cinema, fascism, political amnesia and collective memory; photographs of cities around Jordan; samples of ambient noise recorded in Beirut; texts excerpted from books about forests and drawings copied from books about wildflowers.

"I have this habit," says Sharif, "of constantly gathering and shooting material, of deciding what to do with it until later, of not having any idea and then suddenly producing something from it."

Sharif takes in a great deal of political context – just as a work like *We Began by Measuring Distance* is somehow "about" Huda Ghalia, most of her work is somehow "about" the situation in Palestine. But she also evacuates politics altogether from her work, hollowing out the specificity of her material and filling it in poetic narratives and suggestive mysteries. Spending time with her photographs and videos, one learns very little about Palestine in terms of facts, figures, constructed histories, lopsided representations or even polemical assertions.

What comes across instead is the slow creep of subjective, sentient experience. Sharif's work has the effect of making longing, nostalgia and melancholy palpably felt, without ever giving viewers the clues to what has been lost. Of course what has been lost is Palestine, but Sharif seems to be digging for something deeper, beneath nationalism and patriotism, toward a core answer to the question of what it means – or how it feels – to be tied to a place, a narrative, an idea that does not exist.

Kaelen Wilson-Goldie is a staff writer for *The Review* in Beirut.

significant only in retrospect." The narrator describes how they pass the time and stave off boredom by reading a book memorialising their homeland, which leads them to conclude: "Our homeland truly is a history that is no longer within reach."

Then, in the face of sadness and melancholy, they invent a game of measurements. The measurements start out as arbitrary – a circle, a triangle, the conversion of feet to centimetres – but become more geographically specific (the distances between various cities) and politically charged (key dates in the calendar of the

Palestinian-Israeli conflict) as the video progresses.

The images on screen jump from a frozen lake to a green meadow scattered with trees. The storyline breaks for a recitation on old-growth forests. We see images of strange creatures and plants in an aquarium and hear the woozy, instrumental bridge of an old Abdel Halim Hafez song entitled *The Fortune Teller*. At the end, we see footage of two women that has been slowed down to an absurdly lethargic pace. They approach the camera, evidently aggrieved. But their movements are so exaggerated we cannot tell if they are

laughing or crying. Behind them in the darkness, we can just make out stretches of sand and sea.

Sharif is not alone among artists grappling with the Palestinian condition and deconstructing the means by which it has been represented along the way. Nor is she alone among artists mining archival material for artworks engaging notions of memory and history. But she does belong to a small and select group making work in and around a region called the Middle East who are comfortable casting aside the most obvious markers of identity politics that have made contemporary Middle Eastern art

such a hot commodity in the international market.

Like the Egyptian artists Iman Issa and Hassan Khan or the Cypriot Haris Epaminonda, Sharif has created a distinctive visual language with its own internal system for generating meaning. Her videos and photographs do not ply viewers with information about the region's conflicts and troubles, nor do they make direct reference to newsworthy issues or events.

Instead, they hinge on codes, forms and gestures that only begin to make sense in relation to one other. After the so-called documentary turn in contemporary art,