

LOOKING AND SEEING WITH HAJRA WAHEED



Video Installation Project, 2011-2013
Fayaz: 3.41 min.

In *field notes and other backstories*, Hajra Waheed experiments with the scientific practice of recording observations as if she were part-archaeologist and part-archivist. Meticulously annotating her encounters in the world through drawing, collage, photo transfers and video, Waheed maps out distinct places, people and icons that are at once familiar and estranged to the viewer. She invites them to decipher their meanings by looking closely and moving back and forth between fragmented, layered yet recognizable images such as the cockpit of an aircraft, aerial views of a building or a satellite floating in space to personal footage from her travels.

In this exhibition, she presented them in the form of intimate and diaristic collages as in the *Scrapbook Project* (2010-2011) and *Fear Brings About* (2010) that evoke a child-like sensibility and contest linear models of progress. In another series of detailed drawings, *The Anouchian Passport Portrait Series* (2008-2011), Waheed appeals to the personal and collective practices of remembering and commemorating a loved one through photographic portraits. Inspired by passport photographs taken by Tripoli-based Armenian photographer Antranik Anouchian between 1935 and 1970, Waheed produced 198 drawings, comprising of 11 sets of women and 11 sets of men; works categorized on the basis of the physical attributes of the sitters themselves, such as 'Men with Glasses,' 'Men in Suits,' 'Women with Short Hair' or 'Women with Long Hair.' Waheed bends these conventions of the colonial gaze that systematically objectified and categorized diverse practices, people and cultures through an Orientalist lens to elucidate important backstories of modernity and vibrant, pluralistic societies that have existed in the Middle East for over a century. She breathes new life into these fixed

photographs housed in the archives of the Arab Image Foundation in Beirut as she transforms them by hand while simultaneously offering a poignant critique of the rigid parameters that govern the passport photograph: the iconic markers of identity in our post-9/11 culture of fear and surveillance. In this context, the passport portrait has been used to discriminate against people based on their appearance, race, religion and nationality, and thereby limiting their movements freely across national borders.

Waheed expands this ongoing inquiry of the gaze and practices of documentation itself in her most recent work - a multi-channel video installation (2011 - present) which captures a sequence of banal and mundane moments that pay homage to the numerous ways in which seemingly polarized entities collaborate and co-exist in the everyday. Moving from the fundamental signifier of one's identity in our transnational world to minor moments that would otherwise go unnoticed, Waheed highlights the interconnections and collective experiences that have shaped and informed the growth and development of societies across North America and the Middle East. Working with a video camera for the first time, Waheed embarked on this body of work during a four-month doctoral research trip to Dubai, Jordan and Lebanon in 2011. She recorded a number of un-staged vignettes that she observed and encountered through her travels. Describing them as 'magic moments,' Waheed wanted to investigate the multiple ways the gaze played a role in collecting and celebrating these seemingly lost moments. She challenged herself to see the beauty in the mundane, the surprises in everyday routine and ways of documenting these very minor moments within the constraints of censorship laws¹

¹ From an email conversation with the artist between March 20-25, 2013.



Video Installation Project, 2011-2013
Dead Sea: 5.49 min.



Video Installation Project, 2011-2013
Darbh: 0.59 seconds.



Video Installation Project, 2011-2013
Hut 1: 2.07 min.



Video Installation Project, 2011-2013
Hut 2: 1.30 min.

What emerges are equally surprising, small and disorienting as the visuals and sound resonate and shift regional stereotypes and reveal the various structures of power that are embedded in quotidian rituals. For instance in the 5-minute video titled *Dead Sea*, the vignette unfolds on a beach with pristine turquoise water peppered with tourists floating in the sea and bathing in the sun. The camera observes a couple arrive on the scene dressed in traditional Saudi attire. The man wears a *kaf-fiya*, the Saudi headdress, paired with a long white robe known as a *kamroon* and the woman is dressed in a black burqha. They find two empty chairs on the beach, whereby the man undresses to go wading and the woman makes herself comfortable in her chair. Shortly after, while the man bathes, the woman starts recording him on her cell phone. Counter to popular media portrayals, the burqha-clad woman makes no qualms about displaying the object of her desire and affection in public.

In another pair of videos, *Hut 1* and *Hut 2* nothing seemingly takes place. Also filmed from a static observational stance within what looks to be the inside of a Bedouin hut replete with portraits of a Sheikh, flags and a cushioned floor seating area, all we can hear in *Hut 1* is the soundtrack of a Hollywood film. Upon listening closely for a few seconds it is easy to recognize the voice of Arnold Schwarzenegger in *Commando 2*. *Hut 2* meanwhile, reveals more of the same, this time with a full view of the large flat screen television at its centre and another unfolding film scene. While the combination of sound and image captured in these vignettes are hilarious, they echo the global reach of American pop culture, and remind us of the extent to which Hollywood has trained our memory and our senses as individuals.

Waheed presents these videos in handmade walnut cases. The hand-held tablet-sized screen embedded inside the wooden case itself emanates a confluence of cultures provoking questions and blurring lines between the traditional and contemporary, the tangible object and the fleeting virtual image, and between memory and history itself. Mounted on the wall, the viewer is required to get close to the viewing apparatus to look into the screen in order to experience the work – as

if each viewing station requires them to enter a new space, even though they share the same walls at the Art Gallery of Windsor. By forcing the audience to interact with the videos on such an intimate level, Waheed constructs a way of seeing that is both active and very personal.

In contrast, she presents one such work as a large-scale video projection – a nine-minute video loop of *The Wave* which is barely visible, but whose presence is experienced by audiences on visceral and metaphorical levels. Imagine: a set of arid hills, bereft of any vegetation towering above the fixed frame of the camera. It is a bright sunny day. The reddish-brown colour of the rocks and parched earth against blue skies makes for a stunning visual to look at while out of nowhere the thunderous sound of an approaching breaking wave fills the room. The anticipation is disorienting and perhaps even meditative. However, in the video the wave itself is anti-climatic, it only takes up a small portion at the bottom periphery of the video frame radically reversing the expectation from the sound. Upon looking again and listening to the approaching wave in systematic 90 second intervals, it is evident that it is man-made and constructed purely for the pleasure/leisure of surfers and tourists. Some surfers succeed in riding the wave, others fall, their bodies miniscule in comparison to the harsh landscape surrounding it and surprisingly similar to the scale of three goats, which climb the hills and make their way across the screen at the same time. All the while, as an audience member one is highly aware of the limits of the frame of the camera, as if it was their eye behind the lens. This compelling work unleashes the juxtapositions between the natural and built environments, the notion of place and non-place, private and public and beckons a response from the viewer and the artist. Waheed as the maker of the video chooses to present this vignette like the others – as a series of glimpses or found moments with no fixed beginning or end. She empowers the beholder to construct their own narrative arcs. Radically different from the divisive portrayal of cross-cultural relations in the mainstream media, Waheed invites viewers to participate in shedding the mediatized gaze that promotes systemic forms of othering.

This series builds on Waheed's longstanding concern of working with remnants from our contemporary culture to stage her critique of the omnipresence of the camera and the reach of the photographic image that mediates everyday realities either as spectacles for consumption by the masses or for surveillance exclusively accessible to authorities and those in power.² In her most personal body of work, the *Scrapbook Project* comprising of 34 mixed media works on paper, she uses a repetitive process of cutting, slicing, drawing and layering images that demand a nuanced way of looking. It is a search for democratizing the gaze such that the viewer, subject and the eye of the camera (the surveyor) engage in an ongoing conversation, which may shift and change over time, never leading to a grand finale, rather, revealing multiple interpretations and translations that provide a deeper understanding of the work itself. The series chronicles Waheed's experience of being raised within the gated headquarters of Saudi ARAMCO, the largest transnational oil and gas corporation in the world located in Saudi Arabia but with strong history and ties to the United States. Strict regulations regarding access and

prohibition to use photography and video documentation shaped her worldview and informed the artist's critical approach to image making. Using the strategy of the bricolage, Waheed moves back and forth between archiving her unique experiences while problematizing the apparatus and framework of documentation itself.³ This series, a precursor to the video installation project, acts as a witness to complex shifting cartographies whose historical foundations are deeply linked to the growth of the US as a super power since WWII. Waheed resists a linear approach and shares the burden of its memory by recording the remnant as well as that which is lost, erased or missing. Transforming the act of witnessing into the 'in-between space'⁴ that not only testifies and records external occurrences but also simultaneously looks inward implicating the self within the other. In *field notes and other backstories*, Waheed changes the individual, scientific approach of observing into a discursive space that beckons multiple subjectivities and forms of witnessing that are at once collective, active and inclusive.

² Berger, *Uses of Photography, Selected Essays of John Berger*, ed. Geoff Dyer (London: Bloomsbury, 2001) 53-54

³ Martha Pachmanová, *Mobile Fidelities: Conversations on Feminism, History and Visuality*, n.paradoxa online issue (no.19, May 2006) 17.

⁴ For my analysis of the notion of the witness in Hajra Waheed's art practice, I am indebted to filmmaker, writer and composer Trin. T.Min-ha or her keynote lecture at UC Berkeley, Gender and Women's Studies Department, 20th Anniversary Conference on October 7, 2011.



Video Installation Project, 2011-2013
The Wave: 9:20 min.