

MendelArtGallery

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KENDERDINE ART GALLERY | COLLEGE ART GALLERIES

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This is the commonplace,
the tried and truism:

that history is made by the victors.

S O N G S — of — EXPERIENCE

by MIKE HOOLBOOM, Curator

JAYCE SALLOUM has forged a distinctive practice that attempts to grant pictures to a political underclass, to peoples made invisible through military means and political marginalizations. Whether it is the Palestinian refugees in Lebanon or First Nations people in the Okanagan, he holds up not only his own frame, but the frames of those who have gone before. These frames can appear as maps, slogans, home movies, or even the lines of a face. His work invites us to shuttle between these different picture modes so that we might produce our own engaged readings.

This program of international documentaries was selected to bridge and complement the exhibitions of Jayce Salloum at the Kenderdine and Mendel Art Galleries. Each of these movies has obvious and necessary connections with Salloum's practice, though each takes a singular approach. The series begins with the work of master Chilean filmmaker Patricio Guzman, a Cannes-award winning giant who has made legendary films since the late 1960s. While his work initially appears to be a lyrical exposition of Chilean astronomers, it slowly

turns its focus to the desert where regime protestors were buried. This is a movie about looking, about endless searching, and this restless inquisition is at the heart of Salloum's approach, as well. There is never a sense that a conclusion will arrive, that a definitive prognosis, a final certainty, will appear. Instead, we meet a complicated network of signs: in this instance, a duet of outer and inner space, the resistance movement of memory, and a nearly unbearable beauty.

In *The Oath*, Oscar nominee Laura Poitras weighs in with an intimate portrait of an Al Qaeda insider Abu Jandal. In its first-person focus, it is reminiscent of Salloum's extended conversation with Soha Bechara in *untitled part 1: everything and nothing*. In both instances, these iconic figures appear as types, larger-than-life heroes of the resistance, or on the other hand as deluded fanatics, tragically misdirected. How is it possible to part the veils of certainty that shadow these encounters? Derrida says ethics begins by allowing the other to speak in his own language, and in both these movies the subjects hold forth at length, laying down cross-currents of impressions that surprise and inform in equal measure.

Early in his practice, Salloum showed himself to be the maestro of the meta-movie, a movie that rigorously unpacks its own looking and assumptions. Like the radical psychiatry of the 1960s that brought patient, doctor and hospital together into the same frame, or the Brecht-inspired tactics of Godard ("I need to show, and to show myself showing"), in his first long movie about Lebanon (*Up to the South*), Salloum illuminates the frame again and again in a brilliant cross-cutting gesture that illuminates both sides of the camera. This meta-cinema found a new champion this year in Christian Von Borries, who made the stunning essay, *The Dubai In Me*. Filled with lavish, three-dimensional modelling, and stunning, high-definition views, the director's notes about the movie might have been written by Salloum about his own practice: "This film is searching for a new topography. This film is a metaphor, a displacement,

a shift where territories are marked, where things are seen, where they are given names and meaning. In this sense, the metaphoric task of cinema can be seen as subverting a previous metaphorical order, namely the official mapping of space and time. An order that defines places, that defines what has to be seen and done in those places, the way they are inhabited, their capacities and incapacities We have to reframe our community beyond the official scenarios about the third world, emerging countries, neo-colonialism, liberalization, modernization, etc."

Six years in the making, *Lessons of the Blood*, by James T. Hong and Yin-Ju Chen (they are husband and wife), offers a mix of styles, from direct reportage to media collage, in order to unravel the largely suppressed story of Japanese biological warfare in China. In its multi-headed approach, it is distinctly reminiscent of Salloum's work, which always seeks multiple points of entry and address, in order to establish a field of associations. It is this field that viewers are invited to traverse, each in their own way, whether in Salloum's wall photo collages or in audio-visual texts like *Introduction to the End of An Argument*. *Lessons* opens with a quote that might have headed up *End of an Argument*: "History is complicated. Nations are complicated. The political is complicated. Suffering is not." If *Lesson's* media collages are reminiscent of *End of an Argument*, or the found footage scrapbooks of *This is Not Beirut*, then the incisive details of the suffering, its locality, the bodies of suffering, bring an undeniable power and gravity to Hong/Chen's movie. In the same way that the first-person testimonies of torture ring through Salloum/Ra'ad's *Up to The South*, *Lessons* visits Chinese villagers still suffering from bodily sores festering decades after the initial biological infestation. Hong notes: "I think for us in the west, to live like that would be like a living death. They just persevere. It's something I suppose I couldn't do. The other important thing I realized was that some of [the vic-

tims] didn't even know what had happened [to them]. They didn't know why they've had these horrible wounds for so many years."

48, by Susana de Sousa Dias, is a work of portraiture drawn from a single archive, and the notion of the archive is also central to Salloum's work, which is often presented as a sprawling, necessarily fragmentary, overcrowded gathering of impressions, moving and still pictures, testimonies and reflections. It is both too much and not enough. Like a lover who has spent too long away, these presentations overflow with information, one story and point of contact leading to the next. The archive is partial, subjective, generous and beckoning. Won't you have a look?

A pair of familial works by Richard Fung and Yu Gu are also reliant on archives, as each of these artists rub their personal stories into official histories. There is a shuttling, back and forthness in this work, as if one were seeing a detail of a face, and then an entire country that this face looks out at, and then again the detail. This shuttling relocates the global in the local, like the "wrong" bird sounds used by John Huston in Richard's movie, or the defeated phone call by Yu Gu's father, who agrees to leave China immediately, in which one can read the crushed hopes of generations.

"Beauty is a form of nourishment. If there was a Canadian Food Guide which listed the five essential ingredients to live, it would have to be included. I'm not talking about conventional attitudes of beauty, but a richness and complexity of life, incomprehensible to a large degree, but very rewarding."

—JAYCE SALLOUM

But in the cinema
there remain a thousand plateaus of resistance,
of those who can find their way
through the camouflage of official versions
and uncover new pictures
or complicate old ones.

