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ArtSeen

WALID RAAD: Scratching on Things I Could Disavow: A History of Art in the Arab World/Part 1_Volume 1_Chapter 1 (Beirut: 1992-2005)

DEC 09-JAN 10

By [Kara L. Rooney](#).

Paula Cooper Gallery
November 6 – December 12, 2009



Installation shots of *Scratching on Things I Could Disavow: A History of Art in the Arab World/ Part I_Volume 1_Chapter 1 (Beirut: 1992-2005)* at Paula Cooper Gallery, New York. ©Walid Raad. Courtesy of the artist and Paula Cooper Gallery, New York. Photo Credit: Ellen Page Wilson.

They say that there are three sides to every story: your side, my side, and the truth. For more than two decades the Lebanese artist Walid Raad has worked within the slippery terrain defined by this categorical triptych, his subjects centered around politics and its cultural consequences, specifically the Lebanese Civil War(s) that plagued his homeland from the 1970s through the early 90s, and the rapidly developing infrastructure for contemporary art in the Middle East. One could describe this undertaking as futile in such a nebulous zone of war-making, cultural unrest, and inordinate economic polarity but what makes Raad's work especially interesting is his refusal to choose sides. Consistently cloaked in a shroud of ambiguity, Raad's brand of artmaking (artistic practice moonlighting as archival document masquerading as political history) refuses to deal in measures of truth or fiction, preferring to tow-the-line between the truly real and the apocryphally imagined.

His first venture into this forum was with the formation of The Atlas Group, a fictitious pseudo-collective/think-tank under which Raad exhibited most of his work until the organization's "disbandment" in 2004. For a greatest hits encore, Raad has installed an intricately designed maquette of the Atlas Group's collective works in the front gallery of Paula Cooper. Designed on a 1 to 100 scale, the artist effectively shrunk every archival document, photograph and video that the Atlas Group ever published; even the wall text is included in this miniaturized retrospective. Appropriately titled, "Part 1_Chapter 1_Section 139: The Atlas Group (1989-2004)" (2008), the sculptural effigy is by far the most absorbing piece in the show, its cumulative effect akin to Alice's fabled imbibe, but on markedly aesthetic terms.

But why the dimensional acrobatics? According to the wall text, Raad was asked numerous times to exhibit the Atlas Group's archives in one of Beirut's premier contemporary art galleries, an invitation he refused until 2008. Upon making the decision to show the work, however, the artist claims to have found that all of the pieces had inadvertently diminished in size—no doubt an allegorical reference to our mind's incapacity for the detailed retention of prior events. This is particularly significant in terms of the Atlas Group's conceptual premise, all works having been made in response to the physical and psychological traumas of war.

Entering the main gallery space, the exhibition's concerns shift from the politics of war to the politics of the art market. With "Untitled Installation 2018: Beirut Museum of Modern Art" (2009), Raad literally sets the stage for his upcoming play about art institutions in the Middle East. The wall relief itself is made of ivory-colored, high density foam and depicts what would be the architectural interior of one of the museum's gallery spaces. The fact that the museum has yet to be built or even realized in developmental drawings forces a double-take, like the idea turning in on itself—the *what if* made visible before its conception. But this is standard practice for Raad. He takes the notion of an imagined future one step further with "Index XXVI: Artists" (2009), a stream of illegible white-on-white vinyl text that spans the length of one gallery wall in both Arabic and the script's phonetic English equivalent. The text is said to comprise the names of the past century's most influential Lebanese artists, telepathically conveyed via futuristic technology to Raad in 2002. Other works include a series of plates that are meant to visually illustrate, via graphic means, the hidden afflictions of a war-ravaged society through the indigenous forms of Arabic letters and numerals, primary colors, and basic two-dimensional shapes, and the wall painting, "On Walid Sadek's Love is Blind (Modern Art Oxford, 2006)" (2009), Raad's Kabakov-esque reproduction of a non-existent installation.

As I sit here reading the *NY Times*'s most recent article on Obama's (in)decision regarding whether or not to send more U.S. troops to Afghanistan, I am reminded why this body of work seems so pertinent. In the oceanic morass formed by the contemporary union of fact and fiction, we must learn to circumnavigate the existing waters. Sink or swim? By allowing for the present convergence of past and future, Raad's nullification of time poses the antidotal response. With his temporal erasure, we are presented with a way out—a way of formulating history so that it no longer suppresses traumas endured nor hides the fact that conflicting accounts and misremembered events are all a part of the historical equation. Like the self-defining narratives (both fictional and true) of artists like Patrick Ireland and Joseph Beuys before him, Raad proves that personal history is not so much retold as re-constructed, for in a culture of forgetting, the victor does not write the story—we all do.

CONTRIBUTOR

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RECOMMENDED ARTICLES



West Side Story: Ill-fated Passion Burns Anew

By Susan Yung

MAR 2020 | DANCE

Robbins' contributions and choreography in the original versions will forever be treasured, but De Keersmaeker has provided powerful, contemporary new dances that shine.

Side Issues

By George Rush

OCT 2020 | CRITICS PAGE

With the notable exception of the brilliant Beverly Fishman, who encouraged us to question all forms of painting, my education didn't really consider the sides of paintings. They were painted white—that ever-problematic stand-in for neutrality—or stained by action on the front, but more often simply ignored.

44. (Washington Market, Lower East Side)

By Raphael Rubinstein

MARCH 2021 | THE MIRACULOUS

After stints as the staff photographer for SNCC and riding with a midwest motorcycle club, a young photo-journalist finds himself back in his native New York City where he learns of plans to demolish some 60 blocks of historic buildings, many of them dating back to the Civil War and before.

9. [Lower East Side]

By

JU

It's

announced in a televised address "that it shall be the policy of this nation to regard any nuclear missile launched from Cuba against any nation in the Western Hemisphere as an attack by the Soviet Union on the United States, requiring a full retaliatory response upon the Soviet Union."

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