

FINANCIAL TIMES

October 21, 2015 5:58 pm

Walid Raad, Museum of Modern Art, New York: 'A pure wave of irritation'

Ariella Budick

[Share](#) [Author alerts](#) [Print](#) [Clip](#)

[Comments](#)



Walid Raad performs 'Scratching on things I could disavow', a 'Walkthrough' of his Museum of Modern Art show. Photo: Julieta Cervantes

A slight man in a dark suit stands at the foot of an equestrian statue, against a backdrop of blinding white marble. Except for the man's formal clothes and dour demeanour, it could be any tourist snapshot taken at the Victor Emmanuel II Monument in Rome. He is, we are told, the famed Lebanese historian Dr Fadl Fakhouri and the photo, taken in 1958 on his only expedition abroad, was later discovered in a plain brown envelope bearing the inscription: "Civilizationally, we do not dig holes to bury ourselves."

The thing is, the envelope, the discovery, the inscription, and Dr Fakhouri are all figments dreamed up by the artist Walid Raad. The man in the photo is actually his dad.

Raad, the subject of a lavish retrospective at the Museum of Modern Art in New York, is a sly fabulist, bolstering his fantasies with documents and misdirecting viewers who have no reason to believe, or disbelieve, any of his vignettes. The nonexistent Fakhouri was a

habitué of the track, and Raad displays pages from his scrapbook: newspaper photos of sprinting racehorses, festooned with a bettor's annotations.

Raad is equally meticulous in inventing his own life: he is a member of the Atlas Group, a fictitious collective of amateur historians who devoted years to chronicling Lebanon's civil war, assembling obscure documents, press clippings, notebooks, lectures, and photographs. What emerges from this mass of material is an atmosphere of Stephen Colbert-style "truthiness", a state of quasi-verisimilitude in which feelings take the place of fact. The show performs a painful belly flop into the waters of illusion, largely because it's hard to care whether his tales align with reality or not.

Born in Beirut in 1967, Raad has studied and taught in the United States for more than 30 years, and his work buckles under the load of academic theory he has acquired along the way. His topic is the way that, in the Middle East, every fact instantly takes on a nimbus of interpretation, every ordinary scene is shot through with the possibility of violence. We see Israeli soldiers relaxing in the shade of their armoured vehicle in photographs that Raad says he took as a teenager during the invasion of Lebanon in 1982. Are they heroes in repose? Are they smiling murderers, or ordinary kids sent off on a mission they can barely understand?

The exhibition continues in the museum's cathedral-like atrium, where the artist himself shows up sporadically to perform "Walkthrough". (If you miss those live appearances, you can always listen to it on your phone through MoMA's website.)

It's in that guided tour of his artefacts that the show appears to reach its apex of flimflam. Raad describes the inner workings of an insurance company for artists, run by a stunningly good-looking veteran of the Israeli intelligence apparatus. The company amasses an immense collection from artists who pay their premiums in kind. It also weaves a worldwide network of curators and has a database capable of predicting which artists will sell for how much at which auction. It is, in other words the secretive, Jewish-run node of a vast, high-tech artistic-financial complex. The whole story, accompanied by flowcharts, tables, clippings, and mug shots, screams paranoia.

Except, of course, this one turns out to be true. (Or mostly: Saadiyat Island, soon to be home to the Louvre Abu Dhabi and various other boldface cultural institutions, is not the size of Sicily; it's about 1,000 times smaller.) Raad always stops just short of a lesson, or a political stance. He simply lays out the facts, or pseudo-facts, and lets viewers draw their own conclusions. On the day I saw the show, a camaraderie of confusion formed among visitors who turned to each other for help.

All this is only partially Raad's fault. As it did last year with Christopher Williams, MoMA has handed its curatorial reins over to a conceptual artist. Instead of ministering to visitors' needs, the museum has joined in the artist's mission of mystification. The result is the ultimate snobfest: only those in the know will know what they're seeing, while everyone else gets totally lost.

The downloadable audio guide is an indispensable feature, since it helps translate visual gibberish into semi-provocative ideas. On the recording, Raad explains: "I always proceed from facts. But I think that there are different kinds of facts. Some facts tend to be historical. Some facts are emotional. And some facts are aesthetic."

Raad's scepticism runs deep, and he ruthlessly shreds the traditional concept of history. He undermines the belief that the past is something you can manipulate into making sense. In Raad's

universe, the search for what “actually happened” is a pointless quest, with no fixed answer. He launches into stories he never intends to finish, begins explanations he has no desire to conclude. Raad’s revelation, though, seems like old news in the age of the internet, when even a video camera can be an unreliable witness, when one person’s proof is another’s fabrication, and when the half-life of an unassailable truth is measured in minutes before it gets debunked.

His work resonates with the writings of W.G. Sebald, who sprinkled stories with murky snapshots of questionable relevance. In Sebald, too, a matter-of-fact tone veils the traumas of war and dislocation, and fictions bleed into stringently accurate narratives of outlandish events. Raad also shares a spirit with the Museum of Jurassic Technology, a bewitchingly odd Los Angeles institution that displays the memorabilia of fictional people, mythic creatures, scientific curiosities, and relics from the history of mobile homes — all with the same deadpan obsessiveness. The more I mulled over these connections, the more I lost touch with that first, pure wave of irritation that washed over me at the museum. Eventually, though, it returned. While Sebald and the Jurassic Technology museum enshroud their tricks in lyrical magic, Raad’s work is charmlessly dry.

Until January 31, moma.org

RELATED TOPICS United States of America

[Share](#) [Author alerts](#) [Print](#) [Clip](#)

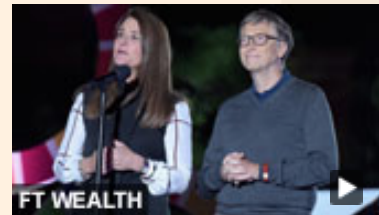
[Comments](#)



What is 'patriotic philanthropy'?



Giving away a Facebook fortune



Bill and Melinda Gates talk science

PROMOTED CONTENT

Promoted By Waldorf Astoria

Go for an unforgettable drive in three of the world’s top supercars

Imagine sitting behind the wheel of not one but three supercars, steering the Ferrari 458 Italia, McLaren MP4-12C and Porsche GT3 models along some of Europe’s and the United Arab Emirates’ most exhilarating roads. See more...[»](#)

VIDEOS