

Walid Raad: Sweet Talk: Commissions. Oct 12 – December 9, 2017

[Exhibition](#)



Walid Raad has become a well known and sought after international artist who came to prominence in the early 2000s with his [Atlas Group Project](#), which is a documentary archive based on fact and fiction about the Lebanese Civil Wars. *The Atlas Group Project* was a fascinating exploration of ideas such as who has the right to accumulate historical facts and present them, as well as whether fiction can offer a knowledgeable and insightful account of history. Lately he has lead an artist boycott of the \$800 million Guggenheim in Abu Dhabi over the abuse and hazardous conditions for the workers building the museum. A new work called *Sweet Talk: Commissions* is being exhibited at the Audain Gallery, Simon Fraser University. On opening night he gave an artist talk as an introduction to the exhibition. The talk consisted of Raad

reading excerpts from writer Jayce Salloum's books and showing his own photographs from the 1970s through to his latest digital work. The explanation for reading Salloum's works was that Raad felt that Salloum had been writing things about photography that Raad himself was thinking of even before he met Salloum.

Raad's first reading was of Salloum's attempt to quantify and rank the devastation of wars in terms of a set of criteria based on their long lasting traumatic effects. This struck me to be a rather pointless intellectual exercise, a kind of theory for theory's sake endeavour. I am not particularly sure how you can begin to tell people who have survived the ordeal of a war that your war was more traumatic than theirs. All wars are horrific and it would surely be a significantly better use of time to think about how to eliminate and prevent them from happening in the future rather than musing over how to rank them.

Raad proceeded to read another questionable text of Salloum's about a Lebanese photographer whose photographs during the time of the Lebanese Civil War were often out of focus and blurry. Raad explained that this was probably the result of having to take photographs while in the line of fire and thus the photographer often had to move quickly to avoid being hit. Salloum's account went on to say that the photographer continued to make blurry photographs even after the war, suggesting it was the result of the long lasting effects of the trauma of war. Certainly taking photographs in hostile situations is not easy, but many photographers have been doing it for decades and with perfectly focused results. In fact I can name at least three Lebanese photographers who have taken excellent non-blurry photographs of the Civil Wars: Aline Manoukina, Patrick Baz, and George Azar. I am not saying that taking photographs in a war is easy, only that many photographers have done it, and done it well. Thus the explanation of the blurry photographs as solely the result of war is not a sufficient one. Perhaps Salloum's photographer was just a bad photographer. In addition, Salloum's text does not seem to

apply to Raad. Some of Raad's early photographs that he showed were also not well focused, but as the chronology of his photographs progressed, and his skill as a photographer increased, his photographs got technically better and better. There seemed to be no long lasting effects of the trauma of war. But then again, Raad spent many of the Civil War years outside of Lebanon in the safety of the United States going to school.

Overall this was a very disappointing artist talk, which basically turned into a two-hour rationalization of bad photographs through the use of equally bad theory. Raad's photo and digital work in the gallery exhibition were also disappointing. In the text beside a series of photographs of small shops in central Beirut (see photograph above), Raad compares his photographs that document the shattering and erasure of the city's war-ravaged structures with those of 19th and early 20th-century Parisian photographers Charles Marville and Eugène Atget. It is conceivable that this kind of photography will be of historical interest in a hundred years, like Marville and Atget's that document what has disappeared, but the interest at the moment is marginal. Gone is the thought provoking work that Raad did with Atlas Group Project and gone is the unique sense of humour that he used to incorporate in his art. No doubt this new seriousness is the result of our humourless times or, more to the point, of an over reliance on bad theory, which can kill the fun out of anything.