Laughter into Tears: Ayman Baalbaki's Destination X

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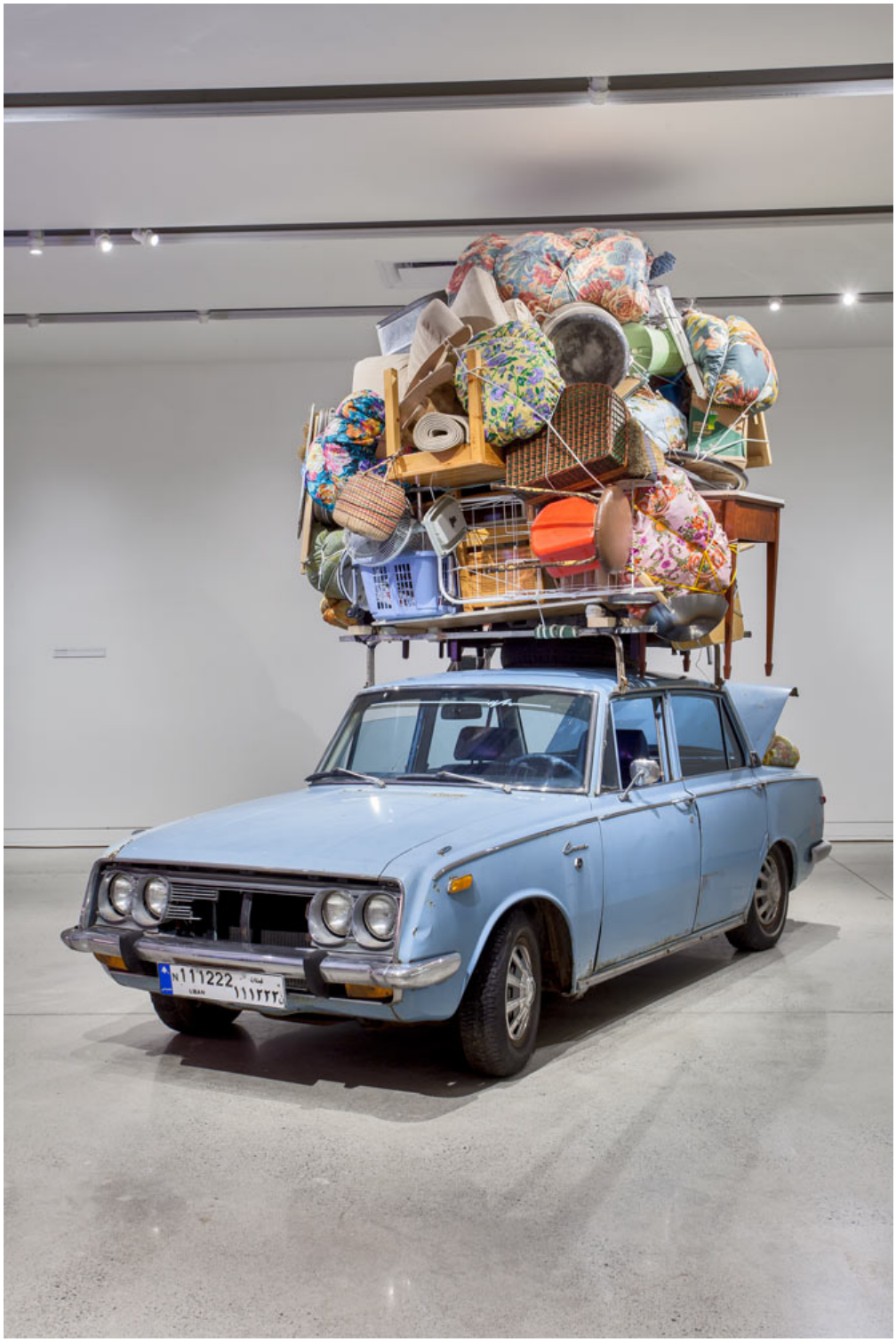
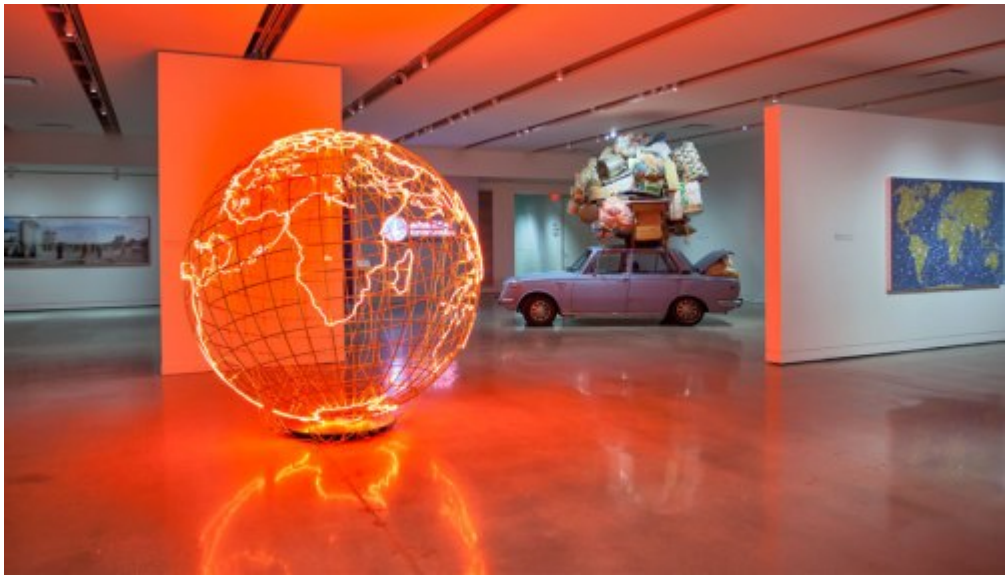


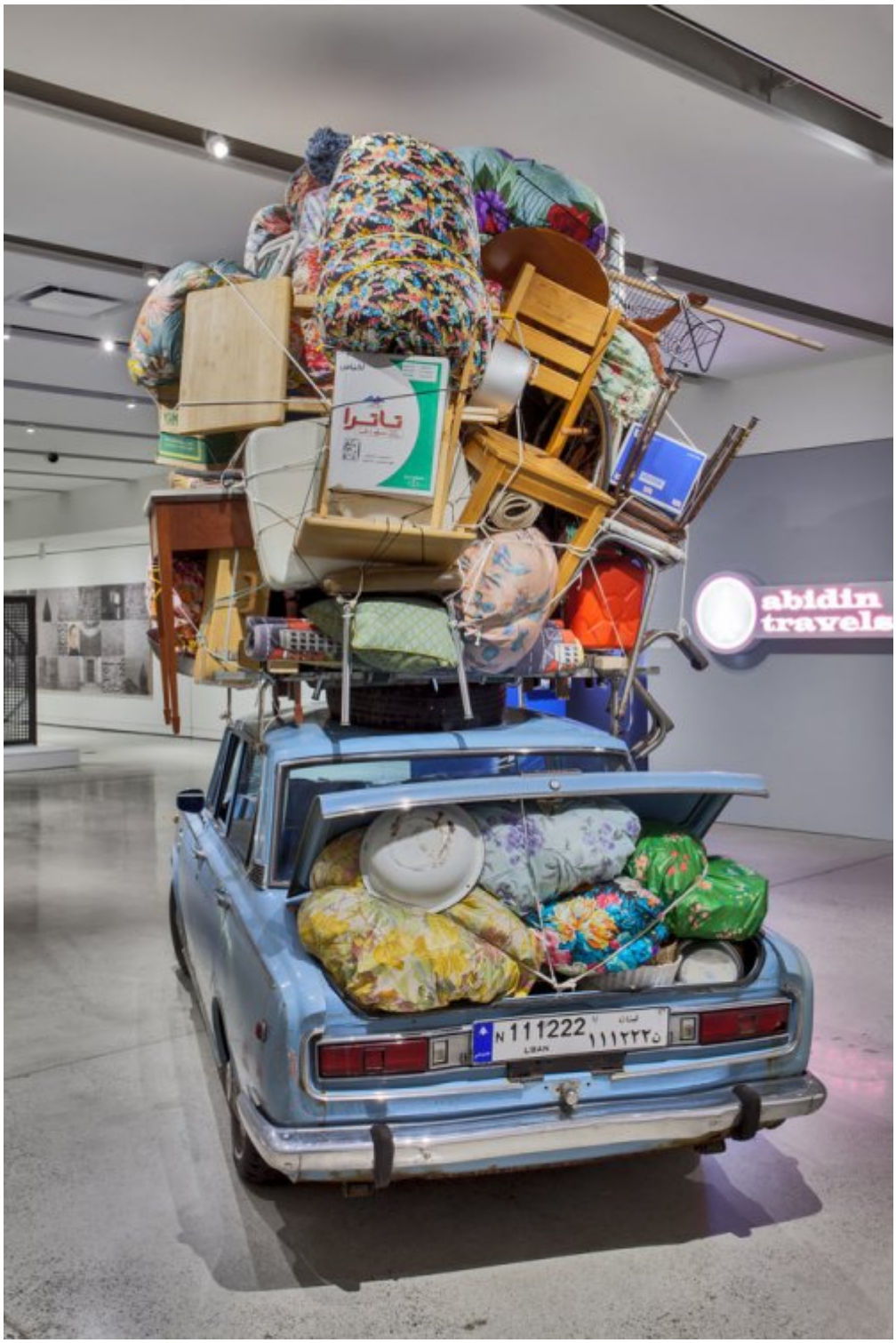
When I take visitors on tours of MOA, I occasionally bring them into the Audain Gallery to show them our major contemporary art exhibition, *SAFAR/VOYAGE.* Although visitors express an interest in all the works in the room, there is one piece in particular which seems to draw the most enthusiastic response: Ayman Baalbaki's *Destination X.* Consisting of a rusted Toyota sedan laden down with what appears to be the belongings of an entire household, the piece certainly captures the attention of visitors with its strong presence; it even manages to draw them away from the neon glow of Mona Hatoum's nearby *Hot Spot,* a pulsing metal effigy of the Earth.



For most visitors, their encounter with the car is a surprise. It's their response to the incongruity of the installation that interests me the most, as it almost always manifests in the same way: smiling, chuckles, and even outright laughter. I have observed visitors encountering *Destination X* for the first time on several occasions; since the work is hidden by a partition wall, they practically bump into it when they round the corner.

When they do, they look up towards the miniature mountain of blankets, chairs, and other belongings, their eyes light up, and they smile at each other. Children run around, peering into all of the installation's nooks and crannies. Through their response, one can tell that the age-old adage has probably occurred to them: 'Everything but the kitchen sink.'

Indeed, *Destination X* has an air of the comic about it. It's reminiscent of another popular cultural image, the clown car: dozens of gaily-painted entertainers packing into a space much too small for them. In the same way, the gaudy floral patterns of the various pillows, cushions, and blankets that repeat throughout the bundle, combined with the apparent flimsiness of the entire setup, evoke a peculiar sense of frivolousness. But for those familiar with the background of the artist, the work should not be humorous at all — quite the opposite.



Baalbaki was born in Beirut in 1975, the first year of the Lebanese civil war. He grew up in Wadi Abu Jamil, a neighbourhood in central Beirut; after its former residents fled, the neighbourhood subsequently became the home of refugees emigrating from Southern Lebanon. Yet the city itself was no less immune to attack; as Baalbaki grew up, Beirut was repeatedly ravaged by sectarian violence, and, later on, the invasion of the Israeli army. Wadi Abu Jamil has always been a neighbourhood composed of multiple ethnic groups, but in recent decades, this eclecticism has been the result of forced exile, rather than cosmopolitan immigration. As such, the sight of small cars overloaded with the possessions of an entire family, desperately fleeing their home in the face of war, was

common to Baalbaki. Of course, such a sight is not localized to Beirut. It is an all too common occurrence across the globe, and *Destination X* is no less meaningful in Vancouver, where many of the population identify as refugees.

So why, then, do we laugh at *Destination X*?

There are many theories of laughter. One of the most popular, historically, has been the idea that laughter is the expression of one's superiority over a subject; but numerous examples have discounted this notion (it doesn't explain, for instance, why we might laugh at wordplay), and one would hope that we don't laugh at *Destination X* out of a cynical sense of 'schaudenfreude'. Another idea, incongruity theory, has a stronger currency among philosophers. Advocated by Kant, Schopenhauer, and most recently by Jerry Palmer, incongruity theory suggests that laughter is a response to a disjunction between an expectation and a contradictory occurrence. In other words, a belief system that leads us to predict a certain outcome is undermined when we perceive an event that doesn't correspond with this system. The classic example of this, of course, is the knock-knock joke. Joke-making uses twisted logic to reconcile these differing realities together, and this, it is believed, is why we laugh.

Incongruity theory goes part of the way to explaining *Destination X's* humorous effects, but it doesn't address everything. After all, there are plenty of times when we experience incongruity in our lives, and our response isn't laughter, but confusion, sadness, and even disgust. In the space of the gallery, *Destination X* is incongruous; but why should it make us laugh more than any other response?

Georges Bataille, the famous early twentieth century philosopher and author who helped galvanize Surrealism, presents a more nuanced view of incongruity theory. In a 1953 lecture *Unknowing: Laughter and Tears,* Bataille claimed that laughter—along with other bodily experiences, such as sensations of ecstasy, anguish, or 'poetic feeling'—is an effect of an encounter with the unknown.

I should stress that *Destination X* is not an "invasion of the unknown," as Bataille might put it. A car loaded with goods, globally speaking, is a relatively mundane sight; it features regularly on travel documentaries and nightly newsreels. It is not the formal properties of the object that signify our journey into the unknown, but rather, the way in which the work functions within the gallery space. A car laden with luggage is ordinary, but when placed into an artistic context like *SAFAR*, where it is surrounded by more formalized images of war, political strife, luxury, and beauty, one cannot help but see the car as an intervening alien or iconoclast. The contrast between context and object stimulates the sensation that something is amiss, that the artist is 'playing' with the space —and indeed, Bataille refers to joke-making as a form of play. This play-making, this breakdown between the tragedy of the world and the serene microcosm of the exhibition space, stimulates laughter in the viewer.

Yet, Bataille reminds us that laughter is only one response among many to a confrontation with the unknown. We may just as well respond by erupting into tears, which, like laughter, is a bizarre physiological phenomenon; neither behaviour is fully understood by science, which makes their connection with the unknown all the more striking. Since both are an effect of the same occasion, laughter and tears are related. Depending on the circumstances, they can easily transmute into each other—and the incumbent sensations of tragedy and joy can likewise reverse. Bataille doesn't know exactly why one situation merits laughter and another tears, but he theorizes that it may be something do with control; we laugh at situations which we can manipulate, whereas we cry when we are 'overwhelmed' by the unknown. Of course, the border that divides the controllable from the controlled is fragile; and so the possibility of laughter lies within tears, and vice versa.

In this sense, the title of Baalbaki's installation seems all too suitable. Refugees of war are perpetually voyaging into the unknown. But in the gallery space, we are abstracted from the realities of exile; consequently, we are free to play with the visceral delights of an aesthetic of transience. Like the work itself, the ethics of such playing are ambiguous. But I would argue that, because of its power to create laughter without a conscious realization as to why, *Destination X* is a remedial object. It forces us to encounter an unknown which, given the troubles of contemporary geopolitics, seems to be forever growing and impending. Rather than positing the unknown as a threat, or invasion, Baalbaki invites us to embrace it, through humour. In the same way that Baalbaki's brilliant, colourful paintings of destroyed skyscrapers and masked *fedayeen* (freedom fighters) encourage Lebanese viewers to engage with their recent past without maliciously endorsing warfare, *Destination X* ever so carefully asks us not to run from the unknown, but to welcome it. As Bataille would insist, one must live without presuppositions.

SAFAR/VOYAGE is on at the Museum of Anthropology until September 15, 2013