

Features

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# Jayce Salloum: Reclamation Artist

JAYCE SALLOUM GIVES VOICE TO THE LOST AND FORGOTTEN

by DEBORAH CAMPBELL



"Jayce Salloum" by Deborah Campbell, Fall 2010, pp. 118-123

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Through the broad windows overlooking Burrard Inlet at [Jayce Salloum's](#) live/work studio in Vancouver's Downtown Eastside, cranes operated by invisible hands unload orange and blue shipping containers that look like giant Lego blocks. If the containers represent the endless cycle of consumption and disposal that is, like it or not, a fixture of modern life, Salloum, through a broad photo-based and multimedia practice that has evolved over three decades, stands in the gap—preserving, documenting and organizing both objects and histories with the single-minded obsession of an archivist.

When I had last visited his studio, one wall was covered with *map of the world*, a tableau of objects and drawings that document his fixation—what we discard or overlook. It evolved organically over a decade: here a cascade of brightly coloured plastic bottle caps pinned to the white paper backdrop, there a snapshot of a ladybug wandering lazily across a bare arm, here airmail envelopes, there a bar code divorced from the product it represents. "What I'm interested in and feel part of is the detritus of society," he says. "The things you might walk past and kick, but that nonetheless have an immense potency."

Wearing a black baseball cap over his shaved head, Salloum rarely stops analyzing his surroundings. An offhand critique of the gentrification transforming the blocks around his studio, still home to Vancouver's poor and addicted, is characteristic: that artists such as himself are "colonizing the neighbourhood for developers." Take the chic bistro across the street—formerly a lunch spot run by an immigrant family, now packed with urban professionals enjoying \$12 glasses of wine beneath a crystal chandelier. Salloum's practice has always used art to galvanize marginalized communities, such as those who stand to be driven out. The sidewalk mosaic of a heart on the corner of Main and Hastings, three blocks away, was created by local residents through the *desmedia* (downtown eastside media) collective he founded with other artists to run free drop-in video and painting workshops; for the past few years he has also overseen art workshops in the Kamloops region that bring together Aboriginal youth and elders.

*map of the world* is self-reflective, and as such is a departure from much of Salloum's other work; his practice characteristically explores societal fault lines, the detritus of identities, of histories. A key example is his ongoing *untitled video project*, which features fragmented discussions with, among others, intellectuals from the former Yugoslavia, Palestinian refugees and First Nations communities. If the project was for many years better known abroad than in Canada, that changed in the fall of 2001. In the aftermath of 9/11, when the director

of the Canadian Museum of Civilization announced the indefinite “postponement” of an exhibition of Arab-Canadian artists scheduled to open that October, Salloum found himself at the centre of a media firestorm. In the end, such was the public outcry that Prime Minister Jean Chrétien denounced the decision in the House of Commons to a rare show of parliamentary solidarity. The exhibition opened on schedule.

Most of the controversy around the exhibition centred on Salloum’s installation *everything and nothing and other works from the ongoing videotape, untitled, 1999–ongoing*, which features a dialogue between Salloum and Soha Bechara, a former Lebanese National Resistance Front fighter who spent ten years in Khiam, Lebanon’s Abu Ghraib. The notorious prison was run by Israel though its proxy militia during its occupation of southern Lebanon, yet the video evades questions of torture or politics in favour of digressions about objects precious to the detainees, such as the sculptures they made from soap or chess sets crafted from olive pits. In the work’s most poignant moment, Bechara tells the story of a rose that somehow made its way into the cell where she was bound hand and foot; it was burned by a guard when discovered. “In spite of it all,” she says, “the rose remained a rose.” The exchange has the resonance of a found poem.

“I’m not interested in covering events, like the news does,” says Salloum. “I was interested in her as a person—her agency, her will, how she survived—what you never have time for in a 26-word sound bite.” A lot of his work takes years to develop. “It’s the reverse of how the news media and our dominant society value things, where if it’s five minutes old it’s worthless.” His motivation is reflected in a fragment of dialogue (spoken by Soha Bechara) in another video: “This history should be documented and preserved, remembered and talked about, in order to be able to know where we, who are a small drop in the world, are heading.”

One of five children whose grandparents immigrated to Canada from Lebanon in the 1920s, Salloum grew up in Kelowna, B.C., in a home where dinner was served with discussions of world politics. The seeds of the artist were evident in the boy: Salloum rode his bike through fields to abandoned log houses, gathering bottles and scraps of metal that he arranged on shelves like installations. “Collecting has always been integral to what I do,” he says. “Gathering materials, objects or images.” After high school he travelled to Africa to work with Senegalese young people through the Canada World Youth program, returning with the idea of becoming either a *National Geographic* photographer or a painter. He attended the San Francisco Art Institute and completed an M.F.A. at UC San Diego, soaking up the influences of experimental filmmakers such as Hollis Frampton and [Michael Snow](#) while plunging into the identity politics of the 1980s. By the time he moved to New York to attend the Whitney Museum’s Independent Study Program ([Barbara Kruger](#), a pioneer in the use of found images, was a guest artist when he was there), he was already a working artist—albeit one who survived, like some of his peers, by living illegally in his studio.



It was in New York that he met Elia Suleiman, the Palestinian-Israeli

director who later won the Jury Prize at the 2002 Cannes Film Festival for his feature film *Divine Intervention*. In 1990, using footage Salloum had shot on a trip to the West Bank and Gaza in the late 1980s interspersed with clips from film, television and cartoons, they co-directed *Muqaddimah Li-Nihayat Jidal (Introduction to the end of an argument)/ Speaking for oneself...Speaking for others...*, an early critique of the portrayal of the Middle East in Western media.

*(Kan ya ma kan) There was and there was not*—named for an Arabic expression that typically begins a story, much like “Once upon a time”—took up where *Introduction* left off. Examining representations of Beirut through a massive archive largely derived from Salloum’s travels to Lebanon in 1992–93, the multimedia work juxtaposes popular imagery of the once (and again) cosmopolitan city as it transformed from the Paris of the Middle East to a place of civil war, car bombs and international hostage-taking. Which represents the “real” Beirut—a postcard of the elegant Mediterranean city, an exploded shell casing or his grandmother’s Arabic Bible? (“Everyone thinks it’s the Koran,” Salloum says.) The archive, acquired by the Vancouver Art Gallery, weighs half a ton.

Given the diversity of his practice, however, the Canadian-born Salloum rejects being categorized as a strictly “Arab” artist. “People always pigeonhole you,” he says. “Because it’s such a sensitive topic, it overwhelms everything else.” Yet the political dimensions of his work may explain why the artist and curator Ken Lum calls him “a greatly underrated artist—and not least of all in Canada.” Internationally, Salloum’s work has been shown at the Centre Pompidou in Paris, New York’s Museum of Modern Art and biennials in Sharjah, Geneva, Sydney, Havana and other locales.

Yet Salloum’s central concern is less political than epistemological, writes [Jen Budney](#), who curated a recent survey show of Salloum’s work at the Kamloops Art Gallery. His practice, she observes, questions “what we know, why we know what we know, and how we acquire our knowledge, as well as how our knowledge relates to our understandings of truth, belief, and justification.” Such questions are usually left to philosophy rather than art, but in the so-called information age we have an answer of sorts: through the lens of international media. Most of what we think we know comes through that framework, a form of storytelling that tells us how to understand the outside world: Africa as a place of famine and child soldiers, the Middle East of deserts and oil and rabid fundamentalism, the West as a bastion of freedom (for markets as well as individuals) struggling against the barbarians at the gates. Simplistic, sensationalist, politicized, well, we all know that. But to deconstruct received interpretations requires exposure to other forms of knowledge. Travel to Africa or the Middle East, as Salloum has, and myths have a way of shattering irreparably.

In April, 2008, through a project initiated by the Toronto-based [South Asian Visual Arts Centre](#), he journeyed from Pakistan to Kabul to Afghanistan’s Bamiyan Valley with Khadim Ali, an Afghan-Hazara artist trained in classical Persian miniature painting. Bamiyan is home to the Hazara people and to the 5th-century Buddha statues destroyed by the Taliban in 2001, the obliteration of which met with international condemnation that far outweighed concerns for the persecuted Hazara minority, themselves victims of the Taliban, or for the plight of Afghan society after decades of war orchestrated by outside powers.

The resulting collaborative exhibition, “Bamiyan (the heart that has no love/pain/generosity is not a heart),” was shown at the Royal Ontario Museum in the spring of 2010 and will continue touring. Alongside Ali’s exquisite paintings are Salloum’s photographs of clusters of abandoned tanks and glimpses of life in desolate landscapes as well as pages from the infamous textbook created by the CIA for Afghan children during the Soviet occupation (a typical math lesson: one Kalashnikov, two grenades, three rifles). There are also five video loops that show fragments of the ruined Buddhas and a Hazara school in Kabul where female students begin each day with the song for which the exhibit is named.

In his editing suite, where he spends years developing his multimedia works, Salloum shows me raw footage of the girls gathered for the morning ritual, their faces in turn earnest, sleepy, bored. It would make a powerful documentary, I observe. He shrugs off the suggestion. If he isn't interested in making art that will simply "hang politely on gallery walls without engaging the social sphere," as he puts it, neither does he want to do journalism.

Instead he worries aloud that Ali, who fled his homeland for a new life in Australia, may be forced to support his family by working as a security guard, leaving little time for art. Salloum's concerns are the peripheral, the marginal, the lost and forgotten—most significantly, those left behind.

To see additional works by Jayce Salloum, visit [canadianart.ca/salloum](http://canadianart.ca/salloum)



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