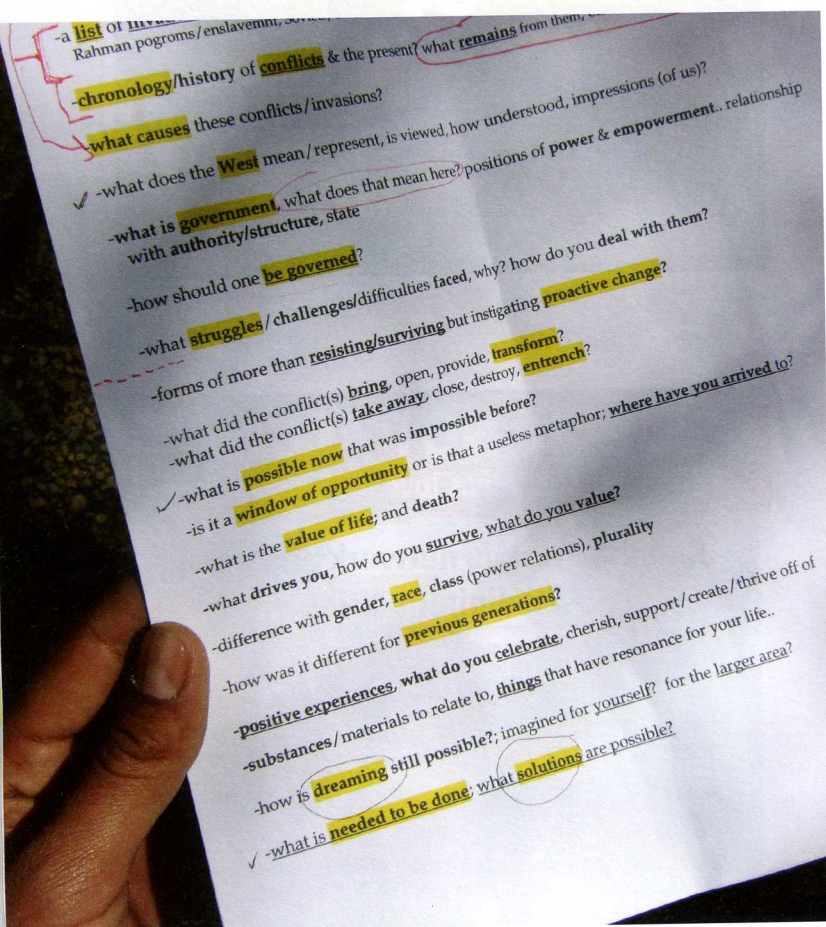


MATERIALIZING MEANINGS: JAYCE SALLOUM'S *history of the present (selected works 1985 – 2009)*

Kamloops Art Gallery • 25 October 2009 – 3 January 2010

CURATED BY Jen Budney REVIEW BY Portia Priegert



in the process, revisional routes, taping, notes with Sanjee, Bamian, Afghanistan, 4/16/08 [DSCF2892]. Photo: Jayce Salloum, 2008.

Jayce Salloum uses his art as a lever to pry open conventional assumptions and superficial analyses, creating space for dialogue and new understandings. His work operates at a fundamental level, asking viewers to question what they know and how they know it — essentially to reconsider the world around them. This open-ended approach requires much of audiences, and has earned the Vancouver-based artist a reputation as challenging. Moreover, the voluminous archival qualities of his videos and installations resist easy consumption. But for those willing to spend time with it, Salloum's first retrospective is an immersive and overwhelming affair; prodigious and at times frustrating, it is ultimately successful in prompting critical reflection.

The retrospective, featuring work from 1985 to the present, is organized by the gallery's former curator, Jen Budney, now associate curator at the Mendel Art Gallery in Saskatoon. Budney, in her catalogue essay, describes Salloum's vocation as a "multi-pronged transnational cartography of human experience and relations, or a process of way-finding through visual and material culture in different parts of the globe." He is, she observes, better known outside Canada than within, and has exhibited at leading international galleries and biennials as well as small storefronts and community centres. While Salloum's projects and cultural activism are linked to various social-justice issues, Budney emphasizes his work's epistemological grounding. "It is, I believe, the failure of the imagination inherent in the West's (and increasingly the world's) attachment to certain concepts — all of which are epistemologically related — such as individualism, the inevitability or naturalness of capitalism, the nation-state, and particular forms of empiricism, which frustrates some viewers of Salloum's work, who would prefer the artist speak from a fixed, identifiable standpoint and present us with messages and products that are easy to consume," she writes.

A major component of the retrospective is an installation of *untitled videotapes*, an ongoing series that explores global sites of resistance. Probably Salloum's best-known work, it includes two tapes dealing with the legacy of colonial settlement on the Syilx, the indigenous



Installation detail of *map of the world*, 1999-2009 by Jayce Salloum. Photo: Ray Perreault. Courtesy: the artist.

people of B.C.'s Okanagan Valley, where Salloum grew up. Other tapes feature a dialogue with Soha Bechara, a former Lebanese National Resistance fighter, and conversations with artists, academics and workers in the former Yugoslavia. The installation, presented simultaneously on monitors and projected on the walls of a darkened gallery, is compelling for both its thoughtful content and its visuality.

Still, Salloum is keenly aware that his work is just a partial representation of a much larger body of information and experience. "I don't think a total understanding is possible, or even what we're aiming for," Salloum tells Mike Hoolboom, who interviewed him for *Practical Dreamers: Conversations with Movie Artists*. "With subjects/people in all my tapes, we can only imagine what this life was/is like — in fact, we can't imagine it. We can only have very partial glimpses or fragments of understanding at best. It's more about other things, like materializing an approach to the material, developing a sense of the situation on the ground, addressing specific representational issues, articulating the various positions and relationships, and

finding an empathy for the subjects. The work is designed for what I've called 'productive frustration.'"

One interesting aspect of Salloum's work is his disruption of the space "between what one is looking at and the formulation of its meaning," says Vancouver curator Keith Wallace, who contributed an essay to the retrospective catalogue. Salloum destabilizes conventional viewing habits with strategies like juxtaposition and appropriation, as well as video techniques such as blackouts, choppy edits and shaky camera work. Says Wallace: "It decelerates our normal process of consuming images as they confront us on a daily basis, and offers the viewer some semblance of ownership in the processing of knowledge and the making of meaning."

This concern is also evident in Salloum's installations, including *Kan ya ma kan (There was and there was not)*, a massive collection of photos, postcards, books, documents and other cultural artifacts relating to the history of Lebanon, Salloum's ancestral home. White gloves set out on a table invite visitors to explore the archive.



Installation detail of (*Kan ya ma kan*) *There was and there was not*, 1988-1998 by Jayce Salloum. Photo: Ray Perreault. Courtesy: the artist.

Similarly, Salloum encourages viewers to manipulate *table of contents*, a table covered with hundreds of images cut from books, part of an installation called *Acts of Consumption*, which questions the formation of knowledge. Another installation, *map of the world*, is a large multi-panel collage of flayed business envelopes, photos, sketches, dried seed pods, string, leaves and other found objects that Salloum accumulated over a decade. While it is not interactive, it manifests a concern with archiving experience and offers viewers space to make their own associations.

The retrospective also includes Salloum's photo-based work, which ranges from streetscapes of late-80s New York to a 2008 project in Afghanistan with the Hazara, a persecuted ethnic minority. For the latter, Salloum explored the Bamiyan Valley, where he documented an arid landscape littered with rusting military equipment as well as empty cliff niches that once sheltered two colossal Buddhas destroyed by the Taliban in 2001. One of the most potent images shows an assembly of schoolgirls in white headscarves.

The power of Salloum's work can be explained in part by his empathy. The trust he builds allows subjects to reveal themselves in

affecting ways so viewers can connect emotionally on a deeper level than with conventional documentary or news formats. While some have queried his involvement with those outside his own identity affiliation, Salloum says he operates from a position of solidarity. "I speak in affinity with," Salloum tells Hoolboom. "My videotapes are collaborations, there is an exchange, a sharing and a trust ... it's what we as subjects are saying that is important, not the fact that I am from that locale or not, or whether I am black, white, red, yellow, brown or an undefined shade of grey." While there are no easy solutions to complex world issues, this retrospective asks viewers to embrace their humanity — to observe, to think and to feel.

history of the present, presented at the Kamloops Art Gallery, from Oct. 25, 2009 to Jan. 3, 2010, will be exhibited at the Confederation Centre Art Gallery in Charlottetown from Sept. 11, 2010 to Jan. 3, 2011 and the Mendel Art Gallery in Saskatoon from Oct. 7, 2011 to Jan. 13, 2012.

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