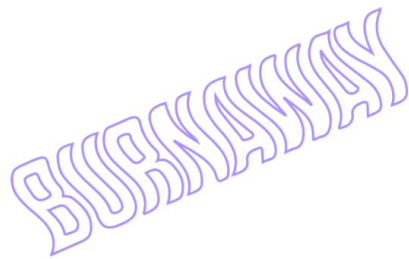


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So it appears at ICA VCU

BY LAUREL V. MCLAUGHLIN

JUNE 16, 2023



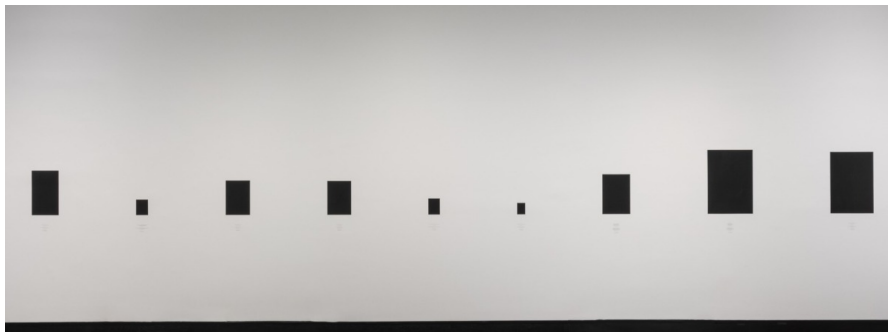
So it appears, installation view, ICA at VCU, 2023. Artworks shown: Dinh Q. Lê, Žilvinas Kempinas, Lawrence Abu Hamdan. Photograph by David Hale. Courtesy The Institute for Contemporary Art at VCU.

Slender glyphs in black gouache, ink, and pen on two hundred sheets of paper compose a grid in an airy gallery filled with natural light. The suggested movement and weight of the shapes defy the rigid structure as I look up at the expanse of the wall. In what Torkwase Dyson imagines as processes of “tuning”—a gentle reference for a radical reconceptualization—these “hypershape” forms of *Tuning (Hypershape, 311-520)* (2018) recall industrial containers for ecological resources, underscoring the precarious infrastructures ingrained in our era of climate disintegration. Rather than halting the chain of signification and ecological unfolding, the drawings generate a visual vocabulary of what Dyson terms Black Compositional Thought. This lexicon of squares, curved lines, and triangles, which are strangely close and also distanced, unlocks the liberatory potential of spatial geometry.



Tomás Saraceno, *Pneuma 420*, 2018; hand-blown glass, polyester rope, velvet rope, 57 ½ inches. Courtesy Tanya Bonakdar Gallery, New York / Los Angeles.

Even with Dyson’s vision of liberation, ICA VCU’s exhibition *So it appears* runs the risk of disassociating histories from their formal abstracted “truths” of color, light, line, and space. But instead, the artists in the exhibition resist this aesthetic temptation that captivated many of their modernist counterparts of the twentieth-century. What works by Lawrence Abu Hamdan, Monira Al Qadiri, Alexander Apóstol, Navine G. Dossos, Torkwase Dyson, Basmah Felemban, Žilvinas Kempinas, Agnieszka Kurant, Dinh Q. Lê, Jeewi Lee, John Menick, Novo (Reynier Leyva Novo), Trevor Paglen, Walid Raad, Tomás Saraceno, Pak Sheung-Chuen, Levester Williams, Sharon Mashihi, and Tricky Walsh relay under the guidance of Senior Curator and Director of Programs Sarah Rifky and ICA Curatorial Fellow Yomna Osman, is a deft reconsideration of abstraction’s tether to the concrete. The exhibition boldly challenges the meaning of the word *abstraction*—as a thought or idea without a basis in the physical. Not only does abstraction in this exhibition unveil the ineffable grounds of our reality, but these artists also employ abstraction as what the curators identify as “artistic strategy,” or perhaps artistic *strategizing*. Abstracting as an action calls for researching and perceiving differently—and this is curious in a cultural moment enamored with the figural and even the melodramatic.



Reynier Leyva Novo, *9 Laws from the Series the Weight of History*, 2014; printing press ink, dry transfer decals on wall, booklet. Photograph by John Schwikert. Courtesy Pérez Art Museum Miami.

The exhibition is expansive in material, scope, and placement across the institution, ranging from Navine G. Dossos’s gouache paintings on a lower level,

to an audio work by Sharon Mashihi accessed via smartphone, and a layered mural of paintings and sculptures by Tricky Walsh activated by augmented reality. Adjacent to Dyson's drawings are Levester Williams's *To Hold Us All Dear* (2015), Agnieszka Kurant and John Menick's *Production Line* (2016–2017), Reynier Leyva Novo's *9 Leyes from the series El Peso de la Historia (9 Laws from the series The Weight of History)* (2014), and Basmah Felemban's *The Jirry Tribe Stop* (2020–2022). The four corpuses diverge in their handling of abstracted lines and space, but each draws a conclusion concerning bodies in relation to signification.



Levester Williams, *To hold us all dear*, 2015; unclean bedsheets and poplar wood, 76 ½ by 46 ½ by 3 inches. Collection of Darryl Atwell, Washington, DC. Photograph by the artist.

While Williams's three canvases employ bodily fluids as line-work, Kurant and Menick's striated mark-making stems from outsourced labor run through AI, Leyva Novo's fully-redacted documents emphasize an outlining effect, and Felemban's main character resists the conventions of a line itself. They each conjure more than their formalism initially suggests. Williams's canvases evoke dreamlike phantasms through accrued sweat on bedsheets from the bodies of incarcerated men in Virginia. The bodily oils are rendered tenderly in their subtle, stained skeins, indexing marginalized bodies apart from their carceral and numeral abstractions. Kurant and Menick's line drawings lead viewers beyond the individual machinated lines to the "human intelligence tasks" behind the striations carried out by a remote and exploited workforce, or "Turkers." Rather than reifying the abstracted and inequitable labor in the series, the sale of a *Production Line* composite drawing benefits each contributor through profit-sharing. Leyva Novo's *El Peso de la Historia* takes the familiar redacted line and multiples it—the series turns nine Cuban laws affecting the freedom and movement of citizens into black rectangles, blotted with INk 1.0, a custom technology that approximates and reproduces the exact area and weight of ink in the legal documents on the wall. Felemban's game delves into space through a gömböc (a virtual shape that only exists theoretically) situated in the Sea of Boards, or a mythical flat plane in the Red Sea. This shape would lead—had the game been operational at the time I was in the galleries—the user on a simulated bodily adventure as the imagined shape itself. In each work, I observed artists aligning individual and collective bodies with points along imaginary lines, leading me deeper into political poetics.



Monira Al Qadiri, *OR-BIT 1*, 2016–2018; #D printed plastic sculpture, automotive paint, levitation module, 11 $\frac{3}{4}$ by 11 $\frac{3}{4}$ by 11 $\frac{3}{4}$ inches. Art Jameel Collection. Photograph by Mohamed Somji.

From abstracting the seeming precision and familiarity of a line to defamiliarizing volume, Tomás Saraceno, Jeewi Lee, and Monira Al Qadiri partake in the action. Saraceno's *We do not all breathe the same air* (2022) features gray air quality tests from Alaska and Hawai'i serialized into dots, revealing the disparities of our supposedly common air. Lee too abstracts an anthropocentric ecological footprint in *ASCHE ZU ASCHE (Ashes to Ashes)* (2019). Slate-colored bricks line yet another grid, compacting organic matter, ash, burned wood, and soap. The work memorializes a forest in Italy's Monte Serra destroyed by an arsonist in 2018. Saraceno and Lee's sampling of ecological devastation in toned circles and rectangles presents elegiac receptacles for possible reparative cleansing. Al Qadiri's floating metallic sculptures in *OR-BIT* (2016–2018) at first elude a terrestrial connection, until their oil-like sheen gives themselves away. Oil rig parts hover above their plinths, wielding the power and ubiquity of the unseen substance that drives twenty-first century life.

Throughout the exhibition, color appears prominently but not in the ways I had expected. Based on modernist precedents from the mid-century, such as proponents of color field painting, I half-imagined that abstracted color might direct viewers to a neat symbolic legibility. Bright monochromatic paintings by

Alexander Apóstol, mauve and sage-colored camouflaged wallpaper by Pak Sheung-Chuen, chromatic pixelations in Dinh Q. Lê's four channel video, blues in The Atlas Group/Walid Raad's *Secrets in the Open Sea, 1994/2004 (2004)*, and Trevor Paglen's acrid color studies distance us from political parties, protests, trauma, buried histories, and centers of incarceration in order to draw viewers close to a keen, affective uncertainty in governing systems, collective beliefs, and memorial residues.



So it appears, installation view, ICA at VCU, 2023. The Atlas Group / Walid Raad, *Secrets in the Open Sea, 1994/2004, 2004*; framed inkjet prints, 44 by 68 inches. Sfeir-Semler Gallery, Beirut and Hamburg. Photograph by David Hale. Courtesy The Institute for Contemporary Art at VCU

The hue that lingered in my mind was cerulean. Sky views lined the walls in Lawrence Abu Hamdan's *Air Conditioning (2022)*, animated by Žilvinas Kempinas's kinetic sculpture, *Double O (2008)*. Abu Hamdan catalogs Israeli "atmospheric violence" in Lebanese airspace from 2007–2021 through collated data across nine panels of cloud formations. The immersive effect of the Abu Hamdan panels with Kempinas's double fans blowing contorted video tape through the air constitutes a visceral clashing of movement and color. In that space I felt the disappearance of humanity within the abstracted blue to a zero degree. That excerpt of blue felt much like the shape of Trevor Paglen's *Trinity Cube (2017)* with trinitite residue from U.S. nuclear tests in New Mexico prior to the atomic attacks on Hiroshima and Nagasaki and irradiated glass from the Fukushima nuclear disaster: a bald proclamation. And it dawned on me that the warring movement underlying color, volume, and line cannot be separated from these formal properties. These artists strategically build an abstracted tension between closeness and distance that gestures toward the seeming impenetrability of contemporary violences.^[1] And yet, by holding fast to that seeming impenetrability, reshaping and recontouring it, resistance seeps into the stroke of a line, the design of volume, and the stain of color.

[1] I am grateful to Bryn Evans for providing insightful editorial guidance and offering prescient thoughts concerning impenetrable or unspeakable violences.

So it appears is on view at the Institute for Contemporary Art at VCU in Richmond through July 16, 2023.

TWO COATS OF PAINT

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MUSEUM EXHIBITIONS

“So it appears” at the ICA: Art and politics deftly fused

July 10, 2023 12:52 pm



Navine G Dossos, McLean, 2023, ICA at VCU, Installation View

Contributed by Jason Stopa / An international survey at the **Institute for Contemporary Art at Virginia Commonwealth University** explores how contemporary artists use abstraction to encode otherwise invisible realities: climate change, political strife, and inequalities of all stripes. Some are household names, others still emerging. Titled **“So it appears,”** the show is anything but timid. It boasts some 19 artists occupying three floors, each one

grappling with the limits of abstraction and its history and pressing beyond the frame of the canvas. Western abstraction has tackled social and political issues before – there was deconstruction in the 1960s, Neo-Geo in the eighties, and most recently the palpable Trump-era uptick. “So it appears” looks to the Global South for perspective.

Any mid-century abstract artist understood that form creates space. Modernists, by and large, aimed to control the picture plane by denying illusion. The utilization of that very space is now encouraged and can spill beyond the frame, as artists different as **Lygia Pape** and **Lynda Benglis** discovered some 50 years ago. And now that space is politicized, or so it appears. But while abstraction that refers to the social or political is a cultural advance, it is not necessarily an aesthetic one. The trick is to achieve both.



“So it appears,” installation view, ICA at VCU, 2023. Left to right: Torkwase Dyson, Reynier Leyva Novo, Agnieszka Kurant and John Menick, Jeewi Lee (artwork © Torkwase Dyson, Reynier Leyva Novo, Agnieszka Kurant and John Menick, Jeewi Lee; photograph by David Hale)

Navine G. Dossos gets it right. Her printed vinyl installation *McLean* graces the facade of the ICA building like a mosaic. This massive public work is a variation on the artist’s earlier work *No Such Organization*, a series of 100 gouache paintings of patterns, icons, and symbols made in response to the murder of journalist Jamal Khashoggi, who lived in McLean, Virginia. The bright, graphic palette belies its horrific content. From outside the museum the installation appears opaque, but sunlight entering passes through it as through stained glass and makes it sparkle. In the basement, Dossos has set up a computer archive of the crime, allowing visitors to click on individual paintings from the installation that link to research about Khashoggi. Sticky notes, a computer chair, and other office accessories disguise this setting as just another workspace, apparently to signify the blasé way the murder itself was concealed and then, once exposed, denied. The artist’s sophisticated use of dualities is compelling.



Navine G. Dossos, *No Such Organization*, 2018–20, gouache on paper, 39 × 39 inches each, installation view, “So it appears,” ICA at VCU, 2023. NOME, Berlin. (artwork © Navine G. Dossos, photograph by David Hale)



Navine G. Dossos, *No Such Organization Workshop*, 2023, gouache on paper, installation view, “So it appears,” ICA at VCU, 2023. (photograph by David Hale)

Other works in the show combine abstract painting's history and political history. **Alexander Apóstol**'s pieces read like flags or banners that look like paintings but are actually prints. His *Partidos Políticos Desaparecidos* is a selection of 13 digital prints contemplating Venezuela's democratic period. The artist sources color and patterns that were used to distinguish different political parties. There is a painterly materiality to the surfaces, which are almost lush, while Apóstol's formal geometry recalls hard-edge painting. Photographing the paintings turns them into political relics of a bygone era. Thus, the works function as a dual-purpose memento mori, referencing the death of both painting and democracy. They recall Jasper Johns's flag paintings, in which the nature of the work is in flux between the image of the flag and the painting as material reality.



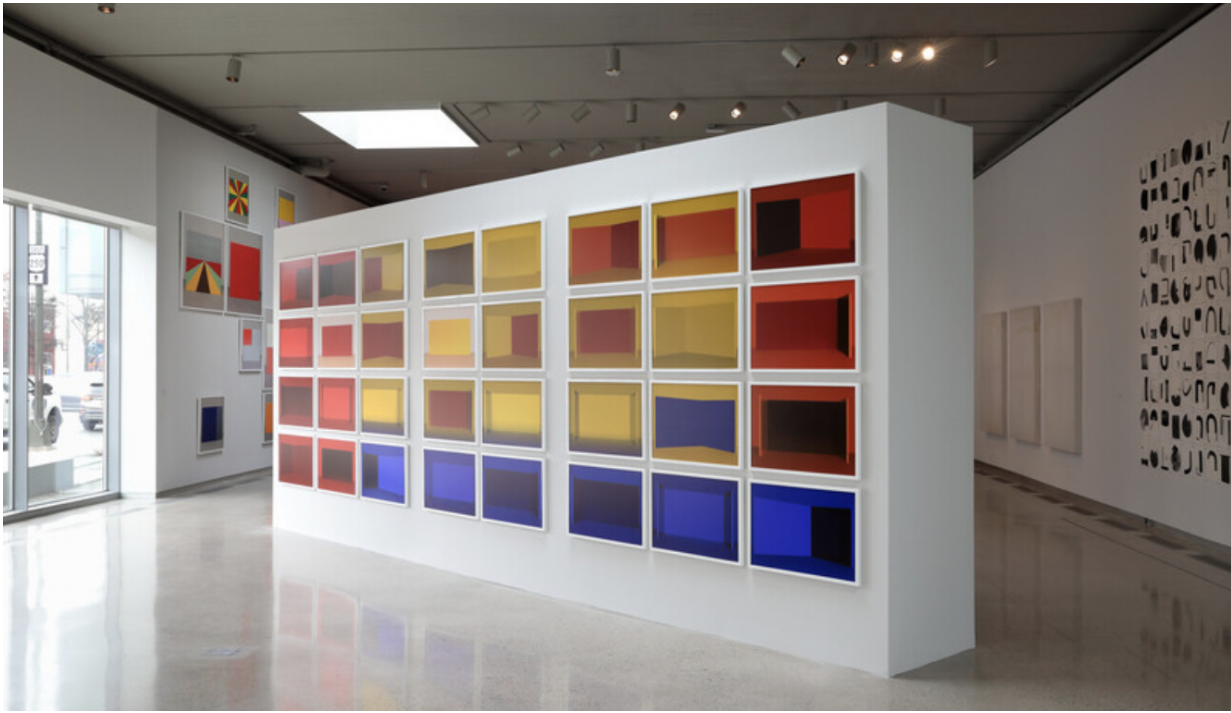
So it appears, installation view, ICA at VCU, 2023. Left to right: Alexander Apóstol, *Partidos políticos desaparecidos* (*Disappeared Political Parties*), 2018; Basmah Felemban, *The Jirry Tribe Stop*, 2021. (artwork © Alexander Apóstol, Basmah Felemban; photograph by David Hale)

On the top floor hang two photographs and one sculpture by **Trevor Paglen**, who once stated that secrecy “nourishes the worst excesses of power.” So what could be more appropriate than a photograph of a remote state prison? The artist captures a hazy black-and-orange field that dwarfs the prison on the horizon, rendering *Color Study (Calipatria State Prison, Calipatria, CA)* into a sublime color field. The grimness of such gimlet-eyed depictions of contemporary light pollution and mass incarceration is a far cry from the grandeur of Turner's landscapes some 200 years ago.



“So it appears,” installation view, ICA at VCU, 2023. Foreground to background: Trevor Paglen, Trinity Cube, 2017; Color Study (Calipatria State Prison, Calipatria, CA), 2018. (artwork © Trevor Paglen; photograph by David Hale)

In the early 2000s, a pretentious form of cultural anthropology was fashionable. Curators drafted lengthy wall texts and captions to explain socially and politically engaged work. The idea was to prod viewers into examining the presumptively politicized nature of the visible world, a hangover from the 1990s culture wars. Viewers were often mystified until they read the press release; the general approach was preachy. Seeing art merely as a literary object that can be linguistically decoded is misguided, as it assumes that all visual experience is nameable and qualifiable. No reasonable critic would claim that the import of a work is reducible to the language used to describe it. Its merit also rests on its visual capacity to deliver something more.



“So it appears,” installation view, ICA at VCU, 2023. Left to right: Alexander Apóstol, Levester Williams, Torkwase Dyson; (artwork © Alexander Apóstol, Levester Williams, Torkwase Dyson; photograph by David Hale)

Abstraction still has ground to cover. There are always gaps between what is being expressed by the artist, what is received as a viewer, and ultimate interpretation. We should not shun this ambiguity. Rather, we should embrace it as part of the challenge of expressing anything at all. The most successful works in “So it appears” recognize the poignant dissonance of works that illuminate unseen material realities while making space for thoughts and feelings.

“So it appears,” Institute of Contemporary Art, Virginia Commonwealth University, 601 W Broad Sreet, Richmond, VA. Through July 16, 2023. Featuring work by Lawrence Abu Hamdan, Monira Al Qadiri, Alexander Apóstol, Navine G. Dossos, Torkwase Dyson, Basmah Felemban, Žilvinas Kempinas, Agnieszka Kurant, Dinh Q. Lê, Jeewi Lee, John Menick, Novo (Reynier Leyva Novo), Trevor Paglen, Walid Raad, Tomás Saraceno, Pak Sheung-Chuen, and Levester Williams. Sharon Mashihhi and Tricky Walsh. Organized by ICA Senior Curator and Director of Programs Sarah Rifky and ICA Curatorial Fellow Yomna Osman.

About the author: **Jason Stopa** (USA, b. 1983) is a painter and writer living in Brooklyn. He received his BFA from Indiana University Bloomington and his MFA from Pratt Institute in NYC. Recent solo exhibitions include *Garden of Music* at Diane Rosenstein Gallery, (LA 2023) *Joy Labyrinth* at Morgan Lehman, NYC (2021). Stopa teaches at Pratt Institute and works for an academic journal at Columbia University. He is a contributing writer to *Hyperallergic*, *The Brooklyn Rail*, *Momus*, and *artcritical*, among other art journals.

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office

The Art of Becoming

— Art



September 13, 2019

Ahead of Berlin Art Week, *office* caught up with five faces of Berlin's art scene: Theresa Volpp, Marius Glauer, Clara Brender, Robert Grunenberg and Jeewi Lee.

We followed and photographed them throughout the city at the spots that matter to them most. Get to know more about the artists below.

Interviews by Hella Schneider

Photos by Benjamin Werner

Concept + Styling by Tim Tobias Zimmermann

Hair + Makeup by Isabel Maria Simoneth, Anne Timper + Anna Reynolds

Photo Assistant: Maximilian Heimlich

Talent: Marius Glauer, Theresa Volpp, Jeewi Le, Clara Brender + Robert Grunenberg

Theresa Volpp

Theresa Volpp is a painter exploring the perception of painting itself, having had a background with graffiti art. She studied at Kunstakademie Düsseldorf in the class of Katharina Grosse. Volpp is currently working on her new exhibition with painters Clare Price and Goia Mujalli, opening in London in November.



*Left - Deconstructed silk dress by Ottolinger, slippers by Aeyde, jewelry her own
Right - Suede leather college jacket, polkadot silkblouse, wool cullottes, all by Celine*

"I came to painting and art when I started to be bored with the standardized aesthetics of graffiti. I felt the need to evolve personally regarding my paintings. Being shot at Tierpark was a nice opportunity for me to look back to my journey of becoming an artist. I painted my first subway there around 12 years ago when I was at a very different point in my life. After having finished my MFA at Goldsmiths in London I wanted to move back to Germany. The only real option for me regarding art and friends was Berlin. It was and is the only city in Germany I can imagine living in. I've been living here for about three years now. I was completely in love with Berlin when I arrived, but after three years I'm more aware of the development of housing prices as well as of the persistently low salaries."

Berlin might appear cheap when you come from New York, London or Paris, but the low salary puts living in the city in a different perspective. I love my neighborhood of Schöneberg, the diversity and the freedom to walk around however you want, no matter if it [means] a fetish latex dog suit or no clothes at all. I haven't seen such a big range of crazy, ugly, funny, weird outfits in a lot of cities before, and I love how nobody really cares about it. Because it's Berlin. Every surrounding one is living in influences and informs the work. I definitely do different paintings here than I used to do in London. In Berlin, I always found the strange mix of architecture very strong, the clashes and breaks which seem to be fundamental for the whole city. It's visually outstanding.

The main aspects of my work are definitely color, scale, and movement. Movement of a brush, a spray can, an oil pen. The different stages a body can reach, different levels of power and pace working on a surface. When I started studying in the class of Katharina Grosse in 2016, I consciously worked on forgetting about most things I learned—how ironic. I started to think about painting in a more material-based way again, instead of justifying everything I started to enjoy the act of painting again. It was a relief for my way of painting and for me personally. I grew up in a small village with around 600 to 700 inhabitants in the south of Germany. I realized quite early what it means to be constantly watched and to be judged on for not fitting in the picture."

Marius Glauer

In 2010, Marius Glauer co-founded the artist-run gallery Heit in Berlin, which he was part of until 2017. His work is neither painting nor sculpture nor digital, but something in between. He just opened his show "GLAUER JOIE DE VIVRE" at Fructa Space in Munich, which he describes as "a moment when dopamine begins to dance, and we fall prey to euphoria."



Left - Houndstooth wool jacket and cordoroy pants by Wales Bonner, short-sleeved silk shirt by Edward Chruchley, jewelry his own

Right - Pinstrip suit in navy and a brown tie-dye silkshirt by Dunhill, jewelry his own

"Rüdesheimer Platz is an old neighborhood in the district of Wilmersdorf, West Berlin, where my father's family is from. As a kid, he was playing in the ruins around Rüdesheimer Platz. The Siegfriedbrunnen where my picture was taken was one of his playgrounds that was not destroyed during the war. Back in the 1980s, I would also play there. Surprisingly, it feels like my personality and life developed in parallel to the city's maturation. Berlin kept on progressing and merging in many aspects at the same time as I became an adult. When I was a teenager in Berlin in the 1990s and early 2000s, Berlin was too—gnarly, driven and wild! Now we are both professionalizing. What I love about Berlin are its progressive cultural vibes and the spirit of growth as well as the limitless expansion of new ideas. The worst would be if we cannot protect this.

In Berlin, I now work steadily and concentrated. Over the last couple of years, I have set up my personal infrastructure to produce and present my work. This is essential for me. When I lived and worked in NYC, my workflow accelerated a lot. I loved the speed and energy as well, and I was greatly inspired there too. I think I would work similarly well there. My creations blur the lines between high and low, abstract and concrete, organic and digital, serious and ironic, sexy and obscene. In terms of material and discourse, I am ambitious to cover the full range of anything and everything that can be considered photography. My particular point of interest is the threshold between digital photography, sculpture and painting.

Berlin is the place to be! Humans living free in an open-minded, multicultural and affordable city in a secure and vividly political country. We are the heart of modern Europe. Here, I work closely with the wonderful writer Simon Elson, the amazing curator Christian Ganzenberg and my companions, the artists Gernot Seeliger and Linus Dutz. Many other creatives from the program of Heit Gallery are part of my close network. I also admire the work of Clara Brender (Sprüth Magers Gallery), Diandra Donecker (Villa Griesebach) and my wife Kiki Albrecht, with whom I share a deep intellectual relationship."

Clara Brender

Clara Brender has been working with renowned gallery Sprüth Magers since 2014. In her current role she is connecting established as well as up and coming artists with potential collectors. Sprüth Magers represents artists like John Waters, Stephen Shore and Cyprien Gaillard.



Left - Silk top by Rianna + Nina, earrings by Toga



Right - Silk top by Rianna + Nina, earrings by Toga

"The road where my picture was taken under thee led through two countries—East and West Germany. Coming from one side of the hip Berlin centre, one suddenly slips unnoticed into pure roughness. In former times, the great Jewish family Loevy owned the most important bronze foundry of Berlin. They worked closely with Peter Behrens, Walter Gropius and the Bauhaus. Today, only the family grave nearby reminds us of this part of the past. A few metres further Theodor Fontane is buried. I visit this part of the city very often. It is a place that has been forgotten about its importance in history. When you move to Berlin you are confronted with Berlin's size and long distances. It feels like a never ending puzzle of unknown corners und endless suburbs. Instead of finishing this puzzle, you just get used to it. These long journeys between important spots are a result of the former division of Berlin. During this time, everything existed twice: two parliaments, two zoos, two art academies, two cultural centers. The result: you travel twice as long, and that's fine too.

Soon, Art Week 2019 will start in Berlin. Almost all galleries will have an opening, and the Art Berlin fair will take place in the former Berlin airport Tempelhof. Exactly 70 years ago, the Candy Bombers flew over this airport. Today, a lot of pigeons fly around at night in this huge building. I moved to Berlin because of the opportunity of an internship at Sprüth Magers. I will never forget one of my first tasks: organizing production material for the artist John Bock, a typical vienna sausage! John Bock often works with organic material, and I have admired his work ever since. I grew up in Cologne. It is said that Cologne has ugly buildings and the friendliest people in the world. In fact, I like ugly post-war architecture, and I laugh a lot. In the 1980s, Cologne was one of the most influential cities of art. That's also where Sprüth Magers has its roots. Now Sprüth Magers has its exhibition spaces in Los Angeles, London and Berlin. Kölsch, the famous Cologne beer, tastes just as good here.

In my role at Sprüth Magers, I am at art fairs, visiting collections and galleries, on the computer in front of catalogues, in museums and on the telephone. In the art world, you communicate a lot. I am in constant dialogue with curators, young collectors and those who want start collecting, and of course always, with the artists. The actual moment of a sale is usually the end of a long process of personal talks, consultations and exchange. There are always new aspects of interest, individual taste and space to consider. The great thing about working with contemporary artists is the opportunity to accompany the different stages of new artworks and then try to find the right collection or place. When an artwork is handed over after a successful sale, it is placed anew, and then something happens. I love how works of art behave in another environment, how they communicate."

Jeewi Lee

Jeewi Lee is an alumna of Universität der Künste Berlin, the city's most influential art school. Her work tends to fluctuate between photography, sculpture and performance. For her new project called "Ashes to Ashes," she made about 500 soaps from the ash and charcoal of a burnt forest in Tuscany. She also constructed paperworks that are imprints of the burnt trees. "It is talking about the phoenix phenomenal," Lee says.



Left - Nylon coat dress by Simone Rocha

Right - Embroidered dress by Renli Su

"It was important for me to be photographed in my own studio. It is a place where fulfilment and humility meet, where emotions like passion and hate clash. This ambivalence makes the place important. The greatest thing in Berlin is that there is a place for everybody with every kind of lifestyle. The sad thing about Berlin is that gentrification is knocking on the door. All the authentic places in Berlin have to close down, and a concept-store and pale ale bar are opening up. I'm happy that the city is still full of great and inspiring people. For me, that includes my gallerist Jan Philipp Sexauer, but also my artist friends like Mischa Leinkauf, Fabian Knecht, Ana Lessing Menjibar, Eva Vuillemin and Henri Haake. They are my great mental supporters.

I spent a part of my childhood in Berlin. So when I moved back here as an adult, I came back to my roots somehow. I kind of grew up in the back garden of the University of Fine Arts Berlin when I was a kid, because my parents studied there in the 1990s. Later, we were back and forth between Korea and Germany, mostly in Seoul and Berlin. Coming back, I remember feeling that Berlin was quite apocalyptic in the beginning. Then it became the most pleasant and inspiring city for me. Even if the city is changing rapidly right now, I'd say that Berlin is still a very open city of freedom with a lot of different co-existing bubbles.

Environments are always influencing work a lot, and it does in my work. I think in Berlin, I do very conceptual-based work even if I study painting. I think you can feel and taste an Asian and European cultural mix quite well in my works. I am very interested in bringing the past to the present and questioning absence and presence. Many of my works deal with leftovers and traces in a physical way, but also in a metaphoric way. In the past years, I hope I've changed [in terms of] opening up borders of thinking and experimenting with different materials."

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with jeewi lee



"The show was a lot to carry, in a literal way. Have you seen all these stones?" Jeewi Lee starts our conversation by talking about the monumental piece she installed at Sexauer for her solo show 'Inzision'. The black and white stones in the exhibition space are set up as the 38th parallel north, referring to the border between North and South Korea. Within her work, Lee takes personal and historical traces as points of view, while triggering imagination. We talked with Lee about her fascination with traces and her role as an artist in activating participation.

Interview by Sarie Nijboer

In your current show at Sexauer you are focussing on the country in which you were born - Korea. Is it the first time that you focus on your personal heritage in your work?

Jeewi Lee: It is not the first work in which I am dealing with a tradition or history from Korea. I have a background in painting, which I studied at UDK. There, it was always very important to work with your background. My work is mainly conceptual: from room installations, to images, to interventions in the city. Each medium is in some way linked to my background, albeit in very minimalistic and abstract terms. One of the most often recurring themes in my practice is that I am working with traces. I am very interested in absence and being present, in leftovers and traces as an index of something.

Where does your fascination with working with traces come from?

JL: I think it developed out of my stay in New York - I spent almost a year there, at Hunter College. Before arriving, I was focussing on patterns, camouflaging and mimicry, which are closely linked to my biography. I was born in South Korea, but when I was about 5 years old I moved to Germany with my parents, who are also artists. When I was 10 years old, I moved back to Korea, where we continued to move every second or third year. I had to constantly change my school, my surroundings, et cetera. When I was about 17 years old, I came back to Germany and entered a boarding school, after which I lived in Belfast and then settled in Berlin. I was changing my home environment quite a lot; as a kid it was hard because you are always looking for a certain identity, community, and a place to belong to. The good thing was that I became highly interested in the influence of the environment on the individual. That's where the idea of working with camouflage came from. After having lived in Germany for a while, I moved to New York. I was shocked by the diversity - all of these different nationalities. I was always the 'extra wurst', wherever I was. But in New York, everyone had crazy stories and mine weren't that different. Then, somehow my practice shifted 180 degrees. I was always interested in the influence of the surroundings on the individual, but then I asked myself: what influence does an

individual have on their surroundings? This is when I started to work with traces.

Can you tell us more about your current solo show, 'Inzision', at Sexauer and how this relates to traces of the North and South Korean border?

JL: The history of Korea is a complex one. After Korea was colonised by Japan, the Soviet Union and US Americans came to divide it into two occupation zones. They influenced Korea a lot with their political positions. It was the beginning of the Korean tragedy, which is still persisting nowadays. The border became the most firmly closed of our century — nobody thought at that time it would last so long. The border decision was made over night and set as a 38th parallel north border.

During the Korean War, the border changed like a thermometer, moving from North to South. At the end of the Korean War, it became somewhat stabilised in the middle, but in a slightly different form from the original border. Officially, it was meant as a ceasefire, but this pause has lasted up until now. What I found very interesting about the 38th parallel north is that even if the current border is a different one, the Koreans still have the 38th parallel north in their mind. In Germany, they use this wonderful word 'Kollektiv Gedächtnis', which means collective memory. The 38th parallel north is the significant border for Koreans, many people even use the "38th parallel" as a synonym for the word "border". It is like a scar on our country. There are even restaurants named after it and songs titled 38. The spirit of the former 38th parallel north is so dominant, but it is actually an imaginary one.

For my solo exhibition at Sexauer, I am showing a room-filled installation. The floor piece is called 'fraktur' – the German



translation of the medical term for a bone fracture. I used little black and white broken stones and divided the room into two fields. One half is covered with white stones and the other half black. The broken stones can be seen as a metaphor for soil, but also for individual humans. The idea is to see how visitors deal with the border situation. If you walk through the exhibition space, the stones will move and eventually break the border. I want the visitor to intervene with the space. A line or border can be received quite passively; some people just accept the line and try to keep it the way it is. To me, this also tells a lot about our society.

Next to the floor piece you are also showing five prints that are made with an ancient Asian technique. Can you tell us more about the process behind those works?

JL:The technique I am using for the five prints hanging on one side of the room is called Takbon, which is an ancient and traditional Asian print technique from the fifth century. They originally developed it to make copies of gravestones. I used it to make prints of the trees that are standing on the original North and South Korean border.

To follow the traces of Korean history along the 38th parallel north, I divided the 38th parallel into ten equal points. I found out that five out of ten points were based in South Korea and the other five in North Korea. As a South Korean citizen, I am not allowed to travel to North Korea. It became part of my concept that the other half is missing. I researched the coordinates of these five points and took several trips from the east coast to the west, to make prints of the trees standing on those points. Trees, to me, are also witnesses to history. Therefore, I chose very old trees that had already been there before the border division.

Trees are often a metaphor for life and personification. Trees are anchored to the ground by their roots and thus bound to their environment. They cannot escape if they are having a hard time, so they become observers of the fate of the locations to which they are bound. Looking at the way that

trees grow, you can find out in what kind of environment they have lived. I wanted to document that by using a traditional Asian technique. The prints of the five trees aren't hanging in the exhibition space in a classical way. I chose to present them only on the right half of the room, because I want to leave the

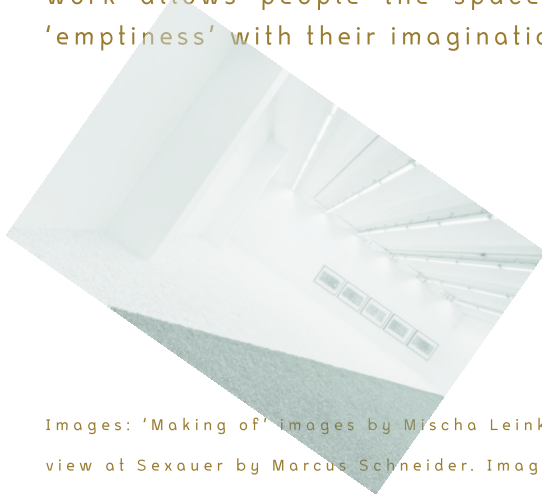
left side for the missing North Korean ones. To me, this is also about a balance; the white part is the part being filled.



Your work quite often takes a performative approach, without being performance per se. In your previous show at Sexauer, 'Blinder Beifall', you invited people to witness something that already took place. I also see this as a matter of inviting and excluding people. Can you tell us more about the thoughts behind this work?

JL: In my last solo exhibition at Sexauer, I built a ten-meter-wide white arena filled with sand. People were really lost when entering the room, because they saw the stage and expected something to happen. They were getting nervous, questioning whether they were too late. The work forced them to look carefully, because there was a lot to be seen in the sand; there was camel hair, there were llama footprints, and more. But everyone was so impatient. At some point, people realised that nothing would happen and only then they started to look at the work more carefully. Suddenly, they started to see the prints and this is when their imagination was activated. Of course, my work had a critical aspect in letting visitors miss what had happened in the arena - which was a circus show - but I was also interested in creating a situation by leaving some room for the viewer's own imagination. I received so much interesting feedback. People told me that when they got home they were still thinking about the piece and were asking themselves about the message of letting visitors miss out on something.

I feel that it is not about excluding, but about giving the audience space for imagination. In traditional Asian paintings, you treat the emptiness – the white space of the paper – as equal to the space that holds content. Whereas in Western society, it is just leftover space, outside of the painted area. I am very inspired by that. What I find interesting is that traces are very minimalistic and abstract in their form, but on the inside they also retain so many narratives. The tension between these two poles – having a great story to tell, but in a very reduced form – is very important to me, because it leaves space for imagination. I use the traces as pictorial elements; most of my images look like paintings, though they actually aren't. This also functions to question the medium of painting. Is it only painting if you fill an empty canvas? I really want to sharpen people's perception – to awaken certain senses and encourage them to reflect on their everyday lives. I think my work allows people the space to think and to fill in the 'emptiness' with their imagination.



Images: 'Making of' images by Mischa Leinkauf & Yongdeok Lee; *Inzision* exhibition view at Sexauer by Marcus Schneider. Images courtesy the artist.

My Art Guides

Interviews

Berlin from an Artist's Perspective: An Interview with Jeewi Lee

by Mara Sartore

September 10, 2018



On the occasion of **Art Berlin and the Berlin Art Week**, we interviewed artist **Jeewi Lee** to learn more about her practice and her perspective on the city art scene. Jeewi (b. 1987, Seoul) is currently artist resident at Villa Romana in Florence and has just opened a new show at Sexauer gallery in Berlin. Her new work "Einschlag" (Impact) which ingeniously inverts the actual purpose of a wrecking ball as an instrument to bring down walls and demolish is currently on view at BNKR in Munich.

Mara Sartore: Let's start with the exhibition that is opening just before the start of the Berlin Art Week at Sexauer gallery. The show investigates the history of your homeland, South Korea, and its division from the North. Could you tell us about this body of work and the creative process behind it?

Jeewi Lee: For the occasion of the exhibition, the piece "Incision" takes form as an extensive floor installation. The whole of the 225sqm gallery space is covered with gravel. Half white and half dark gravel. The two colours form a line, a sharp border. Visitors of the show have to decide whether to step over that border, not cross it at all or blur the line so that both colours mix. Leaving the border to the influence of the visitors' movements. Handling 14 tonnes of gravel was quite a challenge because the crane couldn't deliver it directly to the gallery. My gallerist and lots of supporters made it possible and of course Terranit Natursteinhandels GmbH that provided the beautiful material. The work refers to specific periods of my country Korea's past, which simultaneously reveal the everyday life of the people. I used an ancient Asian technique to make paper prints of Korean trees that are rooted precisely on the 38th parallel. The age of the trees was a relevant criterion since I tried to choose trees that grew before the division of the region in 1945. By their very nature, trees are unable to leave their

homeland by themselves. For me, they function as metaphorical living testimonies of the 1945 division. As the central line of demarcation, the 38th parallel also constitutes a manifestation of the complex Korean conflict. I pinned ten equally distributed points along this line, five of those points are located in South Korea and five in North Korea due to border policies. The fact that I am not able to enter North Korea and therefore the work is „not completed“ on five points, is an important conceptual element in my work. It represents the ongoing political situation.

As for the five points in South Korea, I chose trees that met my criteria of age and location to make Hanji prints of them, using the traditional Korean printing technique of Takbon. These prints of their barks symbolise „fingerprints“ of the trees as witnesses to the history of the division. The artistic translation of the line through my prints represent for me a visualisation of my home country's ever-present wound.

M.S.: Your main focus in your practice are everyday human traces, which can also be seen as traces of history which we can basically see as traces of our story. How do you apply this interest to your art? Which are your favorite tools of exploration?

.L: I have been working on an artistic cycle of works that deal with the visibility of traces for several years. In my work, I focus on human traces as well as historical ones, that inscribe themselves on various materials and so bear witness to history. The traces provide conclusive evidence of something or someone's existence. I often use traces and leftovers as pictorial elements because they are visually minimalistic and abstract but contain elements of narrative and time, which I find very interesting.

M.S.: You are currently working in Florence as part of the Villa Romana award which you received in 2018. Could you tell us about the residency and the project you're working on? How do you spend your lifetime in Florence?

J.L: That might be the question I've been asked the most this year. Florence is very enriching and to be at the Villa Romana is the greatest gift to my art production. The city is filled with history and traces and as with the old Villa, which has existed as an art institution since 1905. One of the latest work I did this month is "Impianto II". "Impianto" is a project, where I interfere directly with the architecture, especially with the facades of buildings by filling in the blanks or replacing 'missing parts' with marble that is considered a traditional and valuable material. Highlighting the blank-space and referring to its time and story - an intended reevaluation. I was inspired by my stay in Florence, where I got the chance to observe and study a culture and society that emphasises and cultivates the preservation and revitalisation of the past. I question the value system and the meaning of restoration work.

Right now, I am working on an intense research based installation. I was inspired by hangers left in the wardrobes at Villa Romana. Hangers represent the human body. Metaphorically they carry our everyday life, but are always locked back in the closet. I noticed some parallels between a closet and an archive system. The Villa Romana archive has got a lot of private photos and letters from the former artist, showing their everyday life during the residency. All these documents are sorted in closed folders in bookshelves. Since every artist is questioning every year, who used to work in earlier days in their studio space, I decided to track back traces from my studio room named "Toscana".

I am producing by my own wooden hangers and engrave on each of them the artist's name who worked and lived in my studio. Since there is no documentation about who was in which studio in the Villa, I started my research from archive materials, old catalogues and private contacts.

M.S.: You studied painting at the Berlin University of the Arts and divide your time between Seoul and Berlin. What is your relationship with the city of Berlin? Does the city itself inspire your work?

J.L.: I grew up both in Berlin and Seoul. My parents are also artists and they studied at University of the Arts Berlin when I was a kid. So Berlin feels like home for me. To have two places I feel home is very inspiring and enriching itself. I am bringing materials from Korea to Germany and ideas from Germany to Korea. Thank to this situation I always have a heightened awareness of my surroundings.

M.S.: We've recently published *My Art Guide Seoul / Gwangju / Busan* a paper guide dedicated to the biennales that are currently running in the Republic of South Korea and we've explored a new artistic panorama. Now we are coming back to Europe with the Berlin Guide. How do you perceive these two realities in terms of art scene and cultural ground?

J.L.: This is a very difficult question, since it is impossible to reflect upon this objectively and it is very complex. The art scene and the cultural ground is very different in those two cities, since cultural development and the understanding of society differs. One thing I can say for sure is that I hope that the arts in Korea have more visibility and presence with society.

M.S.: *My Art Guides* likes to recommend to its readers unique places to visit in each destination, not necessarily connected to contemporary art, in your opinion, what are the absolutely unmissable places, landmarks and spots in Berlin? And would you recommend something not to be missed during the Berlin Art Week?

J.L.: I love to walk through the Museum Insel at night in Berlin, when the amazing buildings and the streets empty and the tourists disappear - it has a very special atmosphere. Sitting at the waterfront in the dark gives you a totally different perspective of Berlin compared to that of the daytime. Everybody in Berlin loves Tempelhofer Feld. So do I. It is very refreshing to have such a huge public space with no buildings around in a metropole such as Berlin. I would recommend going there early in the morning, before it gets crowded or on warm, windy days I really enjoy going there. Not far from there, there is a exhibition space called Kindl - Centre for Contemporary Art, which has nice shows and architecturally speaking, it is amazing too. If I have to recommend another art space, I would say Haus am Waldsee. It is an art institution, which is in Zehlendorf - a small distance from the city centre but they have wonderful exhibitions and also being surrounded by nature after seeing an exhibition is quite nice too. In Berlin there are so many nice bars. Especially, the old school ones, called "Kneipen" in German. Unfortunately due to gentrification in Berlin they are slowly disappearing but if you look carefully you can still find them. One of my favourites is Zum kleinen Mohr (even the name is terribly politically incorrect) and Lützowstübchen in Schöneberg. If you are in Schöneberg, of course you shouldn't miss Kumpelnest. Combining Kumpelnest with Victoria Bar is even nicer. The most important landmarks in Berlin in my opinion, which are disappearing over time, are the abandoned buildings. Despite the gentrification in Berlin, there are still some blank spaces in the city, which define the character of this city and you should keep your eyes open for them.

HYPERALLERGIC

Art **Reviews**

Images of War Outside the Frame



Jeremy Polacek March 20, 2015



'Frames of War' installation view (all images courtesy Momenta Art)

What is the scale of war? What can we know of it? Seeking revelation in the ways that war is curtailed, hidden, biased, and unfinished, *Frames of War*, a rigorous group show at the small but dauntlessly ambitious Bushwick nonprofit Momenta Art, approaches state violence through the edges of recognition.

Drawing its title from Judith Butler's 2009 collection of essays, *Frames of War: When Is Life Grievable?*, the exhibition makes a challenging, inescapably dense argument — like Butler before it — for an expanded vision of war, vulnerability, violence, and grief. It calls for knowing and seeing further, noting that there is much that we overlook, neglect, or prejudice. What images and people move us to tears? And what dries them up? Where does violence hide? And where has it been hidden? War becomes opaque and falsely truncated because it is difficult to fathom its enormous breadth; and because we so often don't.

Cut out invisibility. Cut out reply.

Video still from Lina Selander, "Around the Cave of the Double Tombs" (2010)

A spare one-room, five-artist show, *Frames of War* nevertheless feels thick. A grave atmosphere waits on your attention, a sense of deep time. Of the six pieces on view, four are video works. You need to watch, look, and listen, or move on. Aesthetic comforts would be problematic. (Curated by Natasha Marie Llorens, the exhibition has also included screenings of Ala Eddine Slim, ismaël, and Youssef Chebbi's film *Babylon*, Chelsea Knight's *The End of All Resistance*, and a presentation by Brad Samuels of SITU Research on the "Left to Die Report.")

Consequently, Jeewi Lee's "Geist," two photographs of a work the artist installed in an abandoned building in Berlin's Auguststrasse neighborhood — now an arts destination but formerly a Jewish neighborhood — might appear immediately engaging. Because, by comparison, is it ostensibly the least demanding: just two pictures. But even that initial lightness becomes laden after looking.



Detail of Jeewi Lee, "Geist" (2010)

As its title suggests, "Geist" is haunted by something, the specter of two figures — either soldiers or guards. Insinuated within the lovely surface of old, striped wallpaper, its red pattern overlapping with vertical white bars, the two figures flit across its face, sort of the way history folds imperceptibly into and out of an old cityscape — felt but not seen, seen but not heard. For Lee, they recall the memorial stones or *stolperstein* that commemorate the names of Jewish and other victims of the Holocaust in towns across Germany. But unlike those plaques, "Geist" is buried in the wallpaper of a ruin; it seems to be far away, excluded from the everyday. But installed in Momenta's gallery — in the form of two simple, unframed photographs — this estrangement and distance seem a success, an example of photography's ability to convey but also conceal, bringing you closer to something that remains out of reach.

Nearby is Chitra Ganesh and Mariam Ghani's "**Index of the Disappeared**," the show's other non-video work. A collaborative project the two artists have carried on since 2004, their archive catalogues the redacted, black-streaked records of post-9/11 disappearances. Here they have selected two documents, installed in light-boxes. Intervening against the censors and the documents' deletions are their handwritten insertions, excerpts from the **US Constitution** and texts by the Founding Fathers, a trace of black humor, or at least irony, within their vehement record-keeping. Ghani's solo video, "Universal Games," is likewise wry. Freezing, zooming in — *confusing* — footage of the Second Intifada and the 2000 World Series taken from the same week in October of that year, Ghani finds uncanny, curious overlap in the way mass media looks and speaks. For example, in the throwing motion of a pitcher and that of a protester throwing stones, or in the uniform tone and appearance of network talking heads. Ghani roots out how much can be absurdly similar in our world if you look closely enough while, at the same time, not being the same at all.



Video still from Helene Kazan, "Masking Tape Intervention: Lebanon 1989"

Focusing primarily on risk, real estate, and domesticity, **Helene Kazan's contributions** — "Masking Tape Intervention: Lebanon 1989" and "(De)constructing Risk: a Domestic Image of the Future" — scrutinize the home as an embattled space. For its residents, the home is protection in times of war. At the same time it is a place of precariousness, the **target of missile and artillery strikes**. Between tomb and bunker, "Masking Tape Intervention: Lebanon 1989" also seems to record a third state: that of a prison. A taped window — to mitigate the danger of shattered glass from nearby explosions — casts bars across an empty kitchen in a time lapse video, the plant outside shaking anxiously as the gate-like shade stretches across the room, personal protection and war making a jail of one's own home.



Installation view of 'Frames of War' with Lina Selander, "Around the Cave of the Double Tombs" (2010)

Playing on the gallery's largest television, in front of a black couch, Lina Selander's "[**Around the Cave of the Double Tombs**](#)" holds a sort of pride of place. But that might be a creature comfort for whomever views *Frames of War*'s hardest work.

Silent, black-and-white, and mundane, Selander's 16-minute video crystallizes apprehension about representation. Accompanying wall text describes a concern with being seen and said; unseen and unsaid; spoken for and misheard — "the sadness in saying and showing." Filmed mostly in the West Bank city of Hebron, Selander's film distances us from the familiar imagery of destruction and damage, instead documenting the debris caught in a chain-link fence erected to shield Palestinians from settlers' stones. What emerges is a strenuous, elliptical study of the corona of war. Selander seems to be searching for an engaged but unburdened way of looking at the damages and echoes of conflict and media. Her video hovers between averting its eyes and rendering the aversion.



'Frames of War' installation view

"Around the Cave of the Double Tombs" will test your focus, as will much of *Frames of War*. Selander's video and Kazan's contributions can feel *and* reward like academic texts: suffused with aphorisms, lectern-style speaking, and slow pacing. Like a semester's towering reading list, there can be an unevenness between these pieces, which do not quite speak to one another, their gravity pushing rather than pulling each together. Their rewards can feel small and hard-won.

Maybe there is a way to be grave, deconstructive, *and* accessible when addressing war, but this is not it. *Frames of War* is perhaps what we deserve, but not what we want. For that, Llorens might have heeded the influence of [**Slavoj Žižek**](#) or Clint Eastwood, but to do so carries its own set of problems.

Frames of War continues at **Momenta Art** (56 Bogart Street, Bushwick, Brooklyn) through March 23.