



“Basel Abbas and Ruanne Abou-Rahme: Only sounds that tremble through us” at the MIT List Visual Arts Center by Toby Wu

PALESTINIAN ARTISTS BASEL

Abbas and Ruanne Abou-Rahme have persisted in making through non-endings for fourteen years, most recently in their rematerialization of *May amnesia never kiss us on the mouth* (2010–ongoing) at the MIT List Visual Arts Center. To characterize their practice as itinerant, or to brusquely elide their acts of resistance as the sedimentation of found footage from the Arab world, would be

to conceal the force of systematic displacement they so resist on every physical and affective register. Instead, we need only simply notice the discreet labor of Abbas and Abou-Rahme’s inoculating gestures—starting with the filtering of external sunlight with a pink-violet gel onto the Hayden Gallery’s central glass wall, queering the notion of a rose-tinted perspective to prime our perception of their archive.

A two-channel soundtrack of syncopated synthetic beats and howling alarms draws us through the gallery before we even see its source, emanating from the three-channel video installation *Only sounds that tremble through us* (2020–2022). Along with the tinted light that fills and reverberates through the space, we are compelled to move toward the video installation, past the initial exhibit *Where the soil has been disturbed* (2023) despite its immediate visibility at the entrance of the gallery.

Abbas and Abou-Rahme effectively create an inescapable sensorial field, even if one averts one’s gaze. It is useful here to think with their precise artistic strategy: contamination.¹ Despite the seeming impossibility of inoculating an “other” into the unending grief of decades-long dispossession and ongoing genocide, Abbas and Abou-Rahme operationalize the sonic as a form of intoxication. This pervasive contamination is evocative of Mel Y. Chen’s notion² of the non-dualistic toxic spectacular and toxic ordinary, specifically the tension of attuning to slow, ongoing structural violence over absolute and apparent devastation. We are lured into the depths of the gallery, made to move through the various scaffoldings of the installed work, now positioned to receive a sliver of everyday reality.

As with most installations of Abbas and Abou-Rahme’s work,

(above and opposite)
Installation view,
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Center, 2024. Photo
by Dario Lasagni.

such as earlier works *And yet my mask is powerful* (2016) and *Oh shining star testify* (2019), the MIT List edition of *Only sounds that tremble through us* places disaggregation to the fore. There is not a single untroubled surface, with eroded steel and concrete panels usurping the projection screens in receiving solid images, casting shadows and aspersions on their coherent form. This compulsion for the image to riff and tear is rooted in their internal motion, the videos themselves recalling online-sourced recordings of vernacular Iraqi, Palestinian, Syrian, and Yemeni performances. At moments all three screens are synced, displaying the same images, and in others they allow Abbas and Abou-Rahme’s choreographer collaborators to convulse and channel their desire to return home from three diffractive angles. Every contemplative

beat slips into uncontainable rocking, pounding, revolt, in every scenario; longing over arid landscapes, raving in the domestic abode, synchronized in moving between land and sea. This liberation from restraint is reflected in other installation elements: The projector key is intently aligned to allow images to spill onto the floor; stills extracted from the corpus of *May amnesia never kiss us on the mouth* archived videos flutter in their chiffon banner form in the installation of *Low cloud hum* (2023).

We are clued into Abbas and Abou-Rahme’s physical manifestation of a desktop documentary in the exhibition’s installation form, into a viewing paradigm where these images are actively conversing with one another. *Where the soil has been disturbed* indexes the processing

of traumatic experience on a computer, with digital-image prints of mourning poems represented with their text-box software frame. These planar interruptions render a landscape that is decidedly anti-perspectival, or more precisely anti-spectatorial, placing the viewer in the active mode akin to Abbas and Abou-Rahme’s sifting through their accrued archive. Sedimentations of everyday performance are never isolated phenomena; they are tethered to a continuous, echoing collective. Such a presentation of predominantly moving-image work is pleasantly intuitive, resembling our many-windowed interfacing with online-circulated videos, a far cry from dictatorial cinematic black boxes.

We are under no illusions that these moving images are transmitted as a direct broadcast from



the artists to their audience, as a means to merely inform and sample. Retroactively, we understand the pink-violet window screen at the center of the gallery is more furtively configured than initially perceived. Abbas and Abou-Rahme filter sunlight to pronounce our always already mediated perception of reality. Looking

back upon the 2022 Museum of Modern Art *Only sounds that tremble through us* installation, in its original commissioned form, the pink-violet window screen is of even more prominence in their Kravis Studio gallery—beaming directly into the sphere of the three-channel video and diffusing the spectrum of negative colors in the videos.

“We are in the negative // (no) / we are the negative,” write Abbas and Abou-Rahme in a visual poem embedded within *Postscript: after everything is extracted* (2020) on their Dia Foundation Web commission. These words, too, pulsate on the screens disjunctively, skirting across the peripheral and central screens, in the glitch between the melodic and rhythmic soundscape. One wonders if it is so simple: if the logic of the settler-colonist is unabashedly antithesis, demonstrated by the inverted palette that renders their sampled dances as “otherworldly,” matched by the displaced improvisations of Abbas and Abou-Rahme’s collaborators. Everything about



the installation of the work suggests otherwise. What is the shift from being within to becoming?

This is what work by Abbas and Abou-Rahme instills: obdurate monoliths of negated being, *not* translucent portals into a forever inaccessible home. It is not a peering through from a distance, into perpetual suffering, but an accumulation of persecution. We register *Only sounds that tremble through us* not as a mere subversion of an assemblage of practices, images, and sounds, or a rematerialization or re-enactment of lost culture, but instead a complete solarization. What solidifies as negative, as stubborn darkness, remains hyper-visible: there is no such thing as overexposure in images of genocide.

Genocide is a story we know, and there is still need to turn to sites of promise and ruin,³ to become fully fricative in protest. Abbas and Abou-Rahme’s echoing gesture by embedding resilient Syrian and milk thistles across the gallery seems to be in kindred spirit with Anna

Tsing’s art of noticing the matsutake mushroom post-nuclear devastation. They guide us, in the video projection of *Where the soil has been disturbed*, flitting through the contours of patchy thistles and resistance, in seamless rack focuses melding fore and background. The haptic surfaces of these images quivering as bodies in the opposing screens, and in the gallery, shudder and convulse in indignant eruption. There is no coda in genocide. ■

“Basel Abbas and Ruanne Abou-Rahme: *Only sounds that tremble through us*” is on view at the MIT List Visual Arts Center through July 28, 2024.

Installation view, “Basel Abbas and Ruanne Abou-Rahme: *Only sounds that tremble through us*,” MIT List Visual Arts Center, 2024. Photo by Dario Lasagni.

—1 Ksenia M. Soboleva, “Basel Abbas and Ruanne Abou-Rahme,” *BOMB Magazine*, August 17, 2022, <https://bombmagazine.org/articles/2022/08/17/lingering-in-the-fragment-basel-abbas-and-ruanne-abou-rahme-interv>. —2 Mel Y. Chen, *Intoxication* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2023), 4. —3 Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing, *The Mushroom at the End of the World* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2015), 18.

“Signed, Sealed, Delivered: Envelopes Addressed and Mailed by Type Designers and Notable Graphic Designers” at Katherine Small Gallery

by Poppy Livingstone

KATHERINE SMALL GALLERY

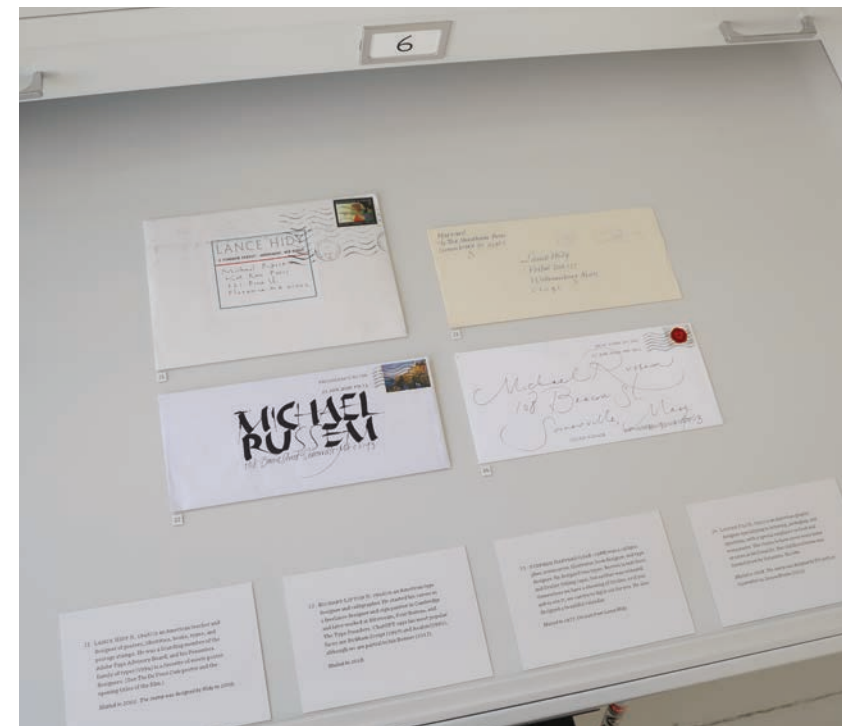
wants you to pay attention. Its angled front stoop siphons into a small world of particularities. There are graphic design catalogs to peruse, handsome books to pore over, and a venerable zoo of typographic specimens to consider and compare. Michael Russem, a book designer of good humor and singular tastes, owns the exhibition space, graphic design bookstore, and not-so-private library. Aiming to share his collections with like-minded designers and introduce non-designers to the omnipresent and accessible nature of graphic design, Russem’s exhibits often serve as exercises in comparison and close looking. An early show placed book covers by Dick Bruna next to twentieth-century Japanese matchboxes. Another displayed pieces by Milton Glaser and Corita Kent alongside gum wrappers and ephemera Russem found on the street. Here, the design stories of everyday objects are treated with the same reverence as seminal works of typography and design.

The latest installment in Katherine Small’s quotidian curriculum is “Signed, Sealed, Delivered: Envelopes Addressed and Mailed by Type Designers and Notable Graphic Designers.” Drawing largely from Russem’s collections and correspondences, the exhibition explores how thirty-six masters of modern design approached the once daily task of addressing the envelope.

Envelopes pose an exceedingly simple and familiar design problem. The return address must slot into the top-left corner. The mailing address must be printed legibly in the center. Though there is room for decoration and experimentation within these constraints, these core features are universally shared. In this way, the envelope is uniquely suited for the kind of comparative design thinking that Katherine Small Gallery fosters.

“Signed, Sealed, Delivered” is housed in two large flat files containing five drawers each. One file is nestled in the alcove of the space’s generous bay windows; the other sits along the gallery’s left wall between a well-stocked bookshelf and Russem’s desk. Given Katherine Small’s emphasis on the overlooked, this presentation is fitting: to view the envelopes, one must open and peer into each glass-covered compartment. The repetitive act of glissading a drawer along its tracks calls to mind the action of opening a long-anticipated letter. It conjures a sense of anticipation, recalling a time when correspondence was a tactile process rewarding patience and close reading.

The oldest letters in the exhibit illuminate the lost art of letter writing. Languid arcs of cursive mark the postcard of illustrator



Installation view, “Signed, Sealed, Delivered: Envelopes Addressed and Mailed by Type Designers and Notable Graphic Designers,” Katherine Small Gallery, Somerville, 2024. Photo by Poppy Livingstone for *Boston Art Review*.