

Jayce Salloum: Making Pictures Work

by Keith Wallace



location/dis-location(s): reprise

CSA

September 12 – October 13, 2013

location/dis-location(s): contingent promises

grunt gallery

October 25 – November 30, 2013

“I work to raise questions, insert propositions, and to counteract the fulfilment of knowledge.”²

During the past forty years, the photograph has been confronted with rigorous critique. During the 1960s and 1970s, a shift in our understanding of photographic images was advanced by the writings of Susan Sontag and Roland Barthes, among others, who revealed the photograph as deficient in its ability to convey any sort of totality, and posited it as a fragmentary representation or, as Sontag would say, a resemblance, cropped from the surrounding reality from which it was extracted. Thus, the photograph hovers between the reality that it resembles and what it might potentially represent.

With this in mind, I find a paradox in the statement by Jayce Salloum, above, because his exploration of images, as I understand it, emphasizes the ways photographs disseminate information and, more importantly, knowledge and understanding. It is the words ‘to counteract the fulfilment of knowledge’ that are germane here; while Salloum encourages the viewers of his artworks to think about what they are looking at, to process and filter information from an image and then give it meaning, he simultaneously queries the certainty of knowledge and the systems within which it operates. By exercising doubt as a way to affirm rather than negate, knowledge can become fluid and irresolute, and, ultimately, something that the receiver can possess. While Salloum’s art practice crosses various disciplines, I am particularly interested in how he uses still and moving photography as a way of depositing photographs of their representational certainties in order to *expand* the sphere of cognitive possibilities that exists on both subliminal and documental levels.

Salloum embraces the dilemma of the photograph’s deficiency and has engaged the term ‘interstitial’ as a way to indicate this in-between state that the photograph occupies. Interstitial literally means a space that is in-between other spaces or things, and is applied in a number of professional disciplines such as architecture, medicine, science, and technology. For the viewer of Salloum’s work, the interstitial is also the space between visibility and cognition, between what one is looking at and the formulation of its meaning, a space Salloum describes as ‘undefined’ and ‘floating.’³ He has also suggested that while this space can disrupt and challenge habits of perception and understanding, it can also be productive, in that ‘possibilities exist to engage, encounter, reflect, and act upon the forces that act upon us at work or play.’⁴ This disruptive but productive relationship is what Salloum endeavours to establish between his work and its reception; 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.

For me, it is the engagement of juxtaposition that makes the interstitial manifest in Salloum’s work, an aesthetic strategy that flourished in Western art with the rise of collage and montage⁵ within Dada and Surrealist circles during the early twentieth century, which has since been applied in countless other forms. Juxtaposition, as embraced by proponents of Surrealism, and particularly conspicuous in the collages of Max Ernst and paintings of René Magritte, was summarized as the chance meeting of two remote realities on a plane unsuitable to them, a well-known sentiment initially introduced by the mid-nineteenth century poet Comte de Lautréamont. Rosalind Krauss described the Surrealist period, especially in terms of its photography, as a ‘revolution of values, a reorganization of the very way the real was conceived,’⁶ and within the meeting of remote realities, the familiar can become unfamiliar and mediate the relationship of one element to another, destabilizing assumptions about the way meaning is created and understood, a key factor in the functioning of much of Salloum’s work.

While the Dadaists tended towards the nihilistic, and the Surrealists exploited Freudian ideas of subconscious free association and the irrational, the destabilization of meaning within images went through another intense interrogation during the late 1970s and early 1980s, when Salloum was completing his undergraduate studies and maturing as a professional artist. The terms ‘appropriation’ and ‘re-photography’ were art world currency at the time and referred to the work of artists who literally re-photographed existing photographic images in order to displace



discarded phone books and magazines, Mercer St., by NYU, NYC, 1994, from untitled photographs, 1988-1998

them from their original context and create a remove that would expose them to critical scrutiny. This generation of artists became known as the ‘Pictures’ generation.⁷

Most images that circulate within the public realm, especially those affiliated with journalism and publicity, are didactic or rhetorical in that they are captioned and clearly intended to tell us something we are expected to accept. Re-photography and the presentation of an image without its caption releases the image from its contextual restraints (a conceptual legacy of Surrealist collage), alters the way we understand it, and nudges it into a speculative cosmos of interpretation that makes one acutely self-conscious of an engagement with images, a proposition that counters indifference to the relentless onslaught of photographs that populate our daily experience and that, for the most part, we simply accept.

Much of the re-photography work of the ‘Pictures’ generation was also framed in a discourse arising from the endless reproducibility of a single photograph, the loss of originality, and an aggressive questioning of the representation of truth in photography, an issue that was later amplified with the introduction of digital reproduction technology. Centred in New York, but not exclusively based in that city, artists such as Sherrie Levine, Richard Prince, Barbara Kruger, Jack Goldstein, Martha Rosler, Cindy Sherman, and Louise Lawler were representative of these ideas. They set out to demystify the power of photography, to decode its semiotic workings, and to put to test subjective expression. Informed by, and often dependent upon, theories based in structuralism, post-structuralism, deconstruction, and postmodernism, this period laid bare the limits of photography, and its legacy radically opened up the way we look at, and think about, images.

During the 1980s, most of Salloum’s work, both his photography and video, incorporated appropriated imagery, and can certainly be considered within the ‘Pictures’ generation discourse, although he has never really conformed to

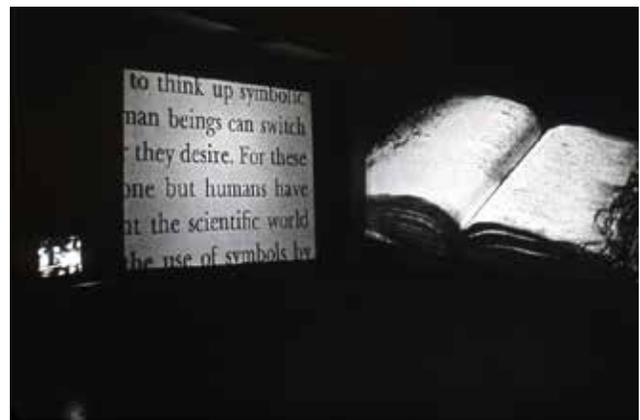


(Left to Right): *manoeuvre* (detail), 30" x 40" Ektacolor prints and 4' sq. original mirror tiles, Cameron Public House, Toronto, 1985; *..In the absence of heroes..* Warfare/A Case for Context, videotape, 1984; *..The Ascent of Man..* Part 2: Conditions of Mercy, videotape, 1985-1987

the tenets of any movement and prefers to maintain his artistic independence.⁸ He was, and still is, interested in the critique of representations of 'truth' and 'originality' to remind us of the inherent limitations of photography, yet his work is directed less to those limitations than to the wealth of meaning that a photograph can generate. And while he has acknowledged that re-photographing images is a way of 'stepping back and developing a critical distance,'⁹ at times disclosing the ideological agendas embedded within them, for Salloum this seemingly objective stance adopts a subjective relationship with existing images, a relationship he pursues both for himself and the viewer. A photograph—any photograph, even one that is appropriated—is an expression of the photographer's subjectivity in that the act of choosing to photograph something involves the selection of subject, moment, and composition. Likewise, a viewer cannot help but bring his or her own subjectivity (associations, memories, prior knowledge, etc.) to any reading of an image.

The literal use of collage and appropriation to destabilize images and generate subjective engagement is employed in much of Salloum's early photographic work, from installations such as *man'oeuvre* (1985), in which he configured headshots re-photographed from unrelated Hollywood films of men and boys expressing intense emotional states, to videotapes such as *..In the absence of heroes..* Warfare/A Case for Context (1984) and the three-part *..The Ascent of Man..* (1985-87), in which he splices together compilations of appropriated film footage depicting catastrophic events, war, random pans of landscapes and street scenes, superhuman feats, movie excerpts, and even footage he himself has taken. These videotapes are edited in such a way that images suddenly and rapidly cut in and out, creating a sense of agitation and anxiety that heightens the visual and psychological impact. The fleeting images are unconnected and represent various periods of recent history, but all evoke familiar genres (documentary reportage, home movies, advertisements, etc.), forcing viewers to incorporate their own experiences and memories into any act of interpretation.

Acts of Consumption (1985-87), an installation consisting of wall works, a bookwork, slide dissolve projections, videotapes (including *..The Ascent of Man..*), and a table laden with hundreds of cut-out images, best exemplifies this collision of images and forms of representation. The wall works bring together collage-like clusters of images cut out of 1950s encyclopaedias and educational textbooks, once considered trusted sources of knowledge gathered and presented by experts. But Salloum's presentation of these images, his selection and the way he combines them, affects how they are perceived. Disparate but related realities converge and, in keeping with the re-photography discourse, no longer depend upon captions or text to provide meaning. They are, as Salloum has described them, 're-purposed,'¹⁰ now open to different interpretations by different viewers. One set of images shares the formal characteristics of orbic shapes—children standing around a globe of the earth, an atomic explosion erupting from the sea, a circular doorway opening into a vault. Another set shows animals in

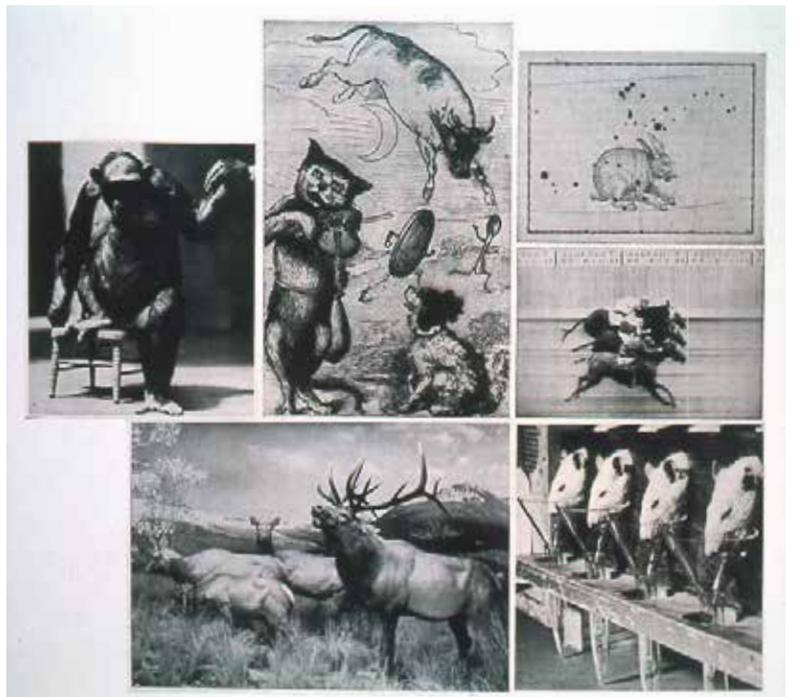


Acts of Consumption, 1985-1987, installation (detail), New Langton Arts, San Francisco, 1987

human-like or human-related activities, and yet another presents physical comparisons among people through body shape, measurement, ethnicity, and race. While these images convey a sense of observation, study, and scientific enquiry, their former purpose is now rendered ambiguous and inexplicable. The original narrative has become subject to a collective meta-narrative contingent upon the collection of images placed within the spatial framework Salloum has devised, as well as other components within the installation, such as the slides and videotapes.

Salloum exhibits his interest in typological comparison and classification in these peculiar, and at times humorous, arrangements of images, with their sources rooted in history, science, sociology, and other modern analytic fields. An avid collector of images, he has accumulated thousands, both appropriated and those he himself has photographed. At times, these images remain 'archived' for years before finding a place in an artwork. And, rather than conforming to standard archival protocol, his system of collecting and classifying is not necessarily directed to a rational and practical maintenance of history, but instead to one that arises from his own personal perspective that helps him to 'make sense of the world and his place in it.'¹¹

While Salloum has determined a visual agenda by selecting what images he brings together in *Acts of Consumption*, he is also interested in developing an even more open-ended space for viewers to exercise their own subjectivities in the gathering of knowledge and construction of meaning. One component of the installation is ironically titled *table of contents*—a table literally covered with hundreds of images, the leftover photographic contents of the books Salloum cut up to make the wall works. In this component, Salloum has conceived of a situation in which the viewer is encouraged to sort through this disorderly collection of images to consider the complexity of relationships that can emerge among them, and in response, to participate in the creative act by composing his or her own collage. This piece, as simple as it may be, was an important step in Salloum's inquiry into the mutability of meaning that images can engender, and how meaning is dependent upon each individual's



From the installation *Acts of Consumption*, 1985-1987: (Top to Bottom): *table of contents*; *animal acts/attributed*



كان يا ما كان (*Kan ya ma kan*) *There was and there was not* (1988-1998); (Clockwise from left): *orientalist corner* (detail), *with falling* (self portrait 1), 1992, American Fine Arts, New York, 1996; *reconstruction cluster/bourg* (detail), National Gallery of Canada, 1998; "every picture I took in Lebanon"(1992), Optica Centre d'Art Contemporain, Montréal, 1996

comprehension. It is also an enactment of generosity on the part of the artist, of surrendering some degree of control while keeping the creative process in motion, an approach that precedes the viewer interactivity characteristic of Relational Art as it developed in the 1990s, in which artworks became both physically and conceptually activated by the viewer in an exploration of interpersonal and multi-sensorial involvement (e.g., artists may make dinner for visitors to the gallery or invite them to play music). But aside from any affinities Salloum's work may have with Relational Art and its attempt to subvert the sovereignty of an artwork and accepted gallery etiquette, I think that Salloum, in being consciously disruptive and productive in intent, sets up a more critical context in which viewers are encouraged to reflect and question, rather than simply participate in what are often, ironically, merely 'acts of consumption.'

Salloum's practices of collage, archiving, research, and viewer interaction inform much of his later projects, although perhaps in less obvious ways. For example, *كان يا ما كان* (*Kan ya ma kan*) *There was and there was not* (1988-1998) marks a shift in Salloum's work, and at the same time employs the artist's familiar approaches. While making this piece, his art practice collided or coincided with his personal background in a very new way. He began developing *كان يا ما كان* (*Kan ya ma kan*) *There was and there was not* in the late 1980s, during his first visit to Lebanon (from where his grandparents emigrated to Canada), and more extensively in 1992, when he spent a year in Beirut working on several projects including shooting footage for the videotape *This is Not Beirut / There was and there was not* (1994). (This videotape is a kind of journal in which, as a Canadian of Lebanese descent, the artist reflects upon his perceptions and the challenging debates he encountered in his efforts to understand a city that has



كان يا ما كان (*Kan ya ma kan*) *There was and there was not* (1988-1998), mixed media installation, (detail, 2005), dimensions variable, Collection of the Vancouver Art Gallery, Gift of the Artist and purchased with the financial support of the Canada Council for the Arts Acquisition Assistance Program and the Vancouver Art Gallery Acquisition Fund. Photo credit: Tomas Svab, Vancouver Art Gallery

endured and survived various occupations, conflicts, and confounding transformations of social and political highs and lows. It is also a project that transpired in a volatile locale in which politics could not be ignored, an aspect that would have a more explicit, though measured, presence in subsequent work).

كان يا ما كان (*Kan ya ma kan*) *There was and there was not* is an installation comprised of a massive accumulation of images, objects, and ephemera related to the history of Lebanon, and is an extension of Salloum's desire to understand how representations of Lebanon (and, to a lesser extent, the larger region of the Middle East) play out in the collective imagination, while acknowledging that any understanding is personal, not universal, and subjective, not objective. The installation is daunting in its density, and offers the viewer literally thousands of items to peruse—photographs, videotapes, books, postcards, calendars, maps, files, audio tapes, lists, notations, objects, and so on. Unlike previous works, in which images tended to lose their moorings and exist within more subliminal spaces of the imagination, كان يا ما كان (*Kan ya ma kan*) *There was and there was not* presents a studious environment that seems historical, sociological, or anthropological in spirit. Yet the aspect of study—there is a desk to sit at, white gloves to handle delicate photographs, books and files to leaf through (resonant of the interactivity encouraged in *Acts of Consumption*)—is not led by a programmatic or didactic delivery of the history and culture of Lebanon, but rather by a kind of organized collage comprised of myriad representations of Lebanon that have in some way personified an understanding of it—misguided or not—including photographs, videotapes, and notations by Salloum himself, that have circulated via a diversity of means to different geographies at different periods of time.

As Walid Raad wrote in reference to كان يا ما كان (*Kan ya ma kan*) *There was and there was not*, 'This archive brings together objects that usually circulate in different contexts and places [and] that seldom occupy the same space.'¹² Yet although these images and objects are in many ways independent, at times even contradictory, they are simultaneously connected by virtue of having contributed to the perception of Lebanon's identity and, by extension, the Middle East and its historical and contemporary position relative to other parts of the world. Within this installation, juxtaposition creates a labyrinthine experience that stimulates critical reflection: What does all this information mean? What is Lebanon? And with so many points of access, where does one even begin? The space between the information on display and the comprehension of it is huge, and by default the viewer becomes involved in a process of research. As a participant in this meeting of many realities, the viewer is a tourist negotiating a complex symbolic map that explores a particular land and culture, and is also a subject of the artwork, as his or her understanding, or misunderstanding, is complicit in how the installation functions. And although Salloum has

taken charge of the format of its presentation and what material is made available, he once more concedes his own personal agenda by situating the viewer in the position of choosing what to look at and thus piecing together his or her own narrative.

As part of his research during his second trip to Lebanon, Salloum informally took photographs of the places he visited, and upon his return to New York, began a re-consideration of his role as a producer of 'original' images, a practice he had more or less abandoned in the early 1980s. Having explored the genre of ready-made images intended for circulation within the public realm and proposing new ways of understanding them, he embarked on a series of photographic suites that consists of images he himself photographed, and which have now spanned more than two decades and several cities. Under the summary title of *untitled photographs*, and sub-titles that differ from installation to installation, for example, *TO THE TRADE* or *22 oz. THUNDERBOLT* or *NEUTRAL / BRAKES / STEERING*, etc. (1988-1998), *location/dis-location(s)* (1996-ongoing), and *subjective affinities* (2004-ongoing), this body of work continues his research and archival practices, and forms the basis of different photographic installations representing various, mostly urban, locations.

The majority of images in the *untitled photographs* that were shot in New York City consist of storefronts representative of low-end personal business ventures rather than brand-name franchises; enterprises that exist on the 'backside of urban capitalism.'¹³ As individual images, they are modest, recalling the tradition of street photography affiliated with the documentary exploits of Robert Frank, Lee Friedlander, and Garry Winogrand, artists who captured the ambience of urban life through chance encounters and impulsive observations. Jim Drobnick and Jennifer Fisher discussed the aspect of spontaneity evident in these images in the way that Salloum, while walking down the street, would suddenly stop, take a photo, and move on.¹⁴ The resultant images, cropped in a way that seems to forgo compositional considerations, emphasize the street photography snap shot aesthetic, and recall some of Salloum's earliest photographs from a series titled *thru the stillness that flies behind me* (1978-1980), in which he took pictures without even looking through the viewfinder.

But these images of New York are not simply arbitrary illustrations of the urban environment or examples of a provisional movement of goods; they are a visual diary, as well as a form of research, offering evidence of Salloum's



untitled photographs: HOME MADE CHOCOLATE (detail) Argos Gallery, Brussels, 1999



from *untitled photographs*, 1988-1998: (Left to Right): *two fish, expired fountain, coin and debris*, Catholic church, 14th St. and 1st. Ave, S.E. corner, E. Village, NYC, 1993; *textile store display*, lower Broadway near Broome St., NYC, 1997; *car wash*, 24th St., Chelsea, NYC, 1995

relationship with the cultural, social, and geographic conditions that he occupied at the time. In installations of these photographs, the very public subjects of the storefronts, where one is looking through glass from the outside to the inside, are punctuated by images directed to the outside, looking through glass from the inside of either apartments or taxis. Oddly, there are no people represented, and the storefronts he pictures are subjective stand-ins for the individual proprietors who present for the public an idiosyncratic transaction between their own personal aesthetics of display and the commodities they offer for sale. These images speak of stories, and ‘stories behind the stories,’¹⁵ not ones that can be literally identified but, rather, stories constructed by the viewer in response to the objects on display and the context of their surroundings.

As with all of Salloum’s work, the method of display plays a crucial role in how communication plays out. Following on the collage aesthetic of relational, symbiotic visual arrangements found in earlier work, such as *man’oeuvre*, *Acts of Consumption*, and *كان يا ما كان (Kan ya ma kan) There was and there was not*, these photographs are presented as an installation. I say installation, because while each exhibition is composed of individual photographs, the photographs have been positioned in ways—isolated, paired, or clustered in syncopated patterns across the wall—that tease out similarities or contrasts among them, and echo the disjointed and fugitive experience of moving through the city. In addition, the arrangement of the images is not set, and may alter with each subsequent installation (like the subtitles); although the images may remain consistent, new relationships can surface among them.



untitled: location/dis-location(s) (detail), bus shelter, Vancouver, 2006;
Photo credit: Scott Massey

A number of photographs from *untitled: location/dis-location(s)* were exhibited for the first time as a selection of back-lit posters in bus shelters throughout Vancouver, away from the Downtown Eastside, the neighbourhood in which most of the images in the series originated.¹⁶ At the same time, others were inserted into storefronts in the Downtown Eastside. Together, these two modes of installation played a highly public role in the self-reflection of a community (the city as a whole), and communities within this community. Salloum’s repertoire of urban imagery expands considerably relative to the kinds of subjects that capture his attention. In *location/dis-location(s)*, while images of storefronts have a continued presence, other incidental details have entered the picture within his experience of the urban environment, not only in terms of the marginal, grittier sides of the city—discarded garbage, makeshift homes that are but temporary shelters, empty and condemned buildings, all existing in some undetermined interstitial space that anticipates change and illustrates social dysfunction—but also, for example, in the persistence of nature, whether wild or



domesticated. Collectively presented in thematic or typological, tightly arranged clusters—piles, containers, nature, signs, sunsets, airports, fire, etc.—this universe of discreet moments makes visible that which might normally exist only in our peripheral vision as we manoeuvre through the city, moments that most people might unconsciously overlook, but ones Salloum seeks out. While these images are indeed documents, they do not comprise a documentary. The stories they have to tell are fragmentary, abstract, and even poetic. Salloum’s other ongoing photographic series, *untitled: subjective affinities*, shares many alliances with *location/dis-location(s)*, but presents an increasingly varied selection of images that are sparser in composition and more singular and elusive in subject matter—an adhesive bandage on an arm, a close-up of a flower, a house façade at dusk. These are displayed in a simple formal grid format.

Even though the images in these three bodies of work share similarities, the sense of spontaneity that characterizes the New York series appears less evident in the later series, where the ‘eye’ of the camera lens, via the eye of Salloum, seems more intentional in what becomes the subject of his photographs. And as his archive of images multiplies and becomes increasingly diversified, particular objects, moments, and scenarios seem to acquire greater resonance within his typological radar. In reference to other artists who have also photographed Vancouver streets, Bill Jeffries alluded to this difference as the ‘relations between documentary photography and photography as a semiotic project,’¹⁷ which, he proposed, might not render them so separate from each other, and might also distinguish the early documentary-like photographs of Fred Herzog, Kurt Lang, or Fred Douglas, for example, from those of Ian Wallace, Roy Arden, or Stan Douglas, the latter now representative of what is called the Vancouver School of photography, and whose urban investigations more aggressively blur documentary style with artistic intent—they are, and are not, documentary—and which encourage the image to be read and not just seen. What this suggests is that these artists, Salloum among them, are more self-conscious of the visual social/symbolic content of their images at the moment the photograph is taken, not after, which redirects the narrative content from the purportedly objective, or documentary, to something more deliberate, more subjective.

Although he has lived in Vancouver for close to two decades, Salloum has never really been included within the theoretical package constructed around the Vancouver School of conceptual photographers—a significant number of whom were born or raised in Vancouver—who have received deserved international recognition for photographs that take Vancouver as a site of deliberation around issues of the modern city, something Salloum is also engaged with. His images have a decidedly less traditional fine art photography aesthetic relative to the high production values found in the work of most Vancouver School artists, instead remaining rooted in the imperfect and provisional

from *untitled: location/dis-location(s)*, 1996-ongoing: (Top to Bottom); Sylvia’s shop, cabinet, previous wares holding their own, 245 Main St. (between Cordova & Powell St.), Vancouver, 7/6/04 [272]; stacking aesthetic/idyllic passing, Wyne’s Custom Tailors, 51 W. Cordova, Vancouver, 10/27/05 [1997]; gleaning palimpsests/in folding space, City Gate Motors, 2290 Main St., Mt. Pleasant, Vancouver 2/23/06 [2392]; PAIN, 10% TO 50% O., silver skies/ built upon the ruin of others, 757 E. Hastings St., Vancouver, 1/21/05 [922]; and it all came tumbling down, wood/capital residue pile (III), Woodward’s demolition, W. Cordova St & Abbott, Vancouver, spring 5/14/06 [26]



untitled: *location/dis-location(s)*, installation detail, MKG127, Toronto, 2007. Photo credit: Toni Hafkenscheid

characteristics of street photography, an approach that extends back to his very earliest photographic work in which aesthetic ‘finish’ was never a goal. But, perhaps more to the point, the conceptual underpinnings of his work did not evolve out of being in Vancouver, and thus might be more difficult to interpret within the established discourse of the Vancouver School. While many of his images are of Vancouver, his approach to photography is the result of having lived, learned, and carried out his practice for extended periods elsewhere—Kelowna, San Francisco, Toronto, San Diego, New York, Beirut—and, as such, his work is not so dependent upon place, but instead upon an encounter with potential images wherever he may be or wherever they may exist.

“Collectively presented in thematic or typological, tightly arranged clusters—piles, containers, nature, signs, sunsets, airports, fire, etc.—this universe of discreet moments makes visible that which might normally exist only in our peripheral vision as we manoeuvre through the city, moments that most people might unconsciously overlook, but ones Salloum seeks out.”

Looking beyond Vancouver is even more prevalent in his most recent series of photographs, *location/dis-location(s): contingent promises*, which continues the “cluster” arrangements—here further densified—that he employed with his earlier *location/dis-location(s)* photographs of Vancouver. This new series represents places Salloum has visited in recent years, among them Argentina, Panama, Costa Rica, Nicaragua, Hawaii, Mexico and the Galapagos Islands, as well as remote and rural places in the Okanagan Valley and on the west coast of British Columbia. Yet none of these locations are identified with a wall label, they do not assume a placename, so the interaction among them is through a visual, even subliminal, register. They do, however, share similarities within their differences. The tropical flowers, for example, with their electric colours and bizarre formations, are not common to Vancouver, yet an image of dandelions or an evening primrose found closer to home have a comparable presence within the visual cluster, so, in a sense their meeting within Salloum’s installation both “locates and dislocates” them.



untitled: *location/dis-location(s): contingent promises*, installation detail, MKG127, Toronto, 2012

As one scans the wall, cadences emerge—again a kind of syncopation—in which a cluster of images such as the brightly coloured flowers will shift into a cluster of geological formations, then to a cluster of architectonic entrances and exits, to birds and reptiles, to little bits of debris that have become hostage to a power line or a crevice in a piece of wood, and on and on. And in some cases the clusters emphasize formal relationships, be it architectural forms, colours, or the presence of something as seemingly banal as rectangles within sites that are worlds apart. Yet, Salloum does not restrict these clusters to tightly regulated themes; unrelated images are inserted into a cluster to complicate our reading of it, to question certainty, and as one navigates further through the installation even more of these juxtapositions emerge—conveying encounters that are inescapably a part of lived experience.

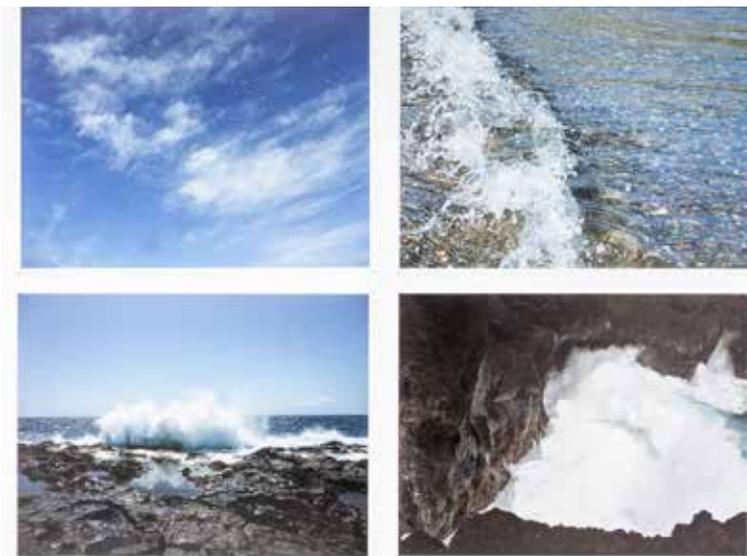
The contrasts between discarded detritus and images of nature in earlier manifestations of *location/dis-location(s)* have continuity in *location/dis-location(s): contingent promises*, where human intervention in both its most gentle and destructive ways appropriates the space of nature, often in subtle ways. In this installation, these relationships are less geographically or culturally specific and suggest that they are not confined within any single political or sovereign space; instead, they are endemic to the world. Flowers are not necessarily natural in that many undergo a process of hybridization or genetic modification that situates them within the domain of human mediation; even dandelions are not native to BC, and, like some ivies, thistles, and Scotch broom have become invasive foreign species within the natural landscape. In Salloum’s work, human intervention is seen and not seen; it is there but not always obvious, as in, for example, potholes that are carved into a road by the vehicles that traverse it. Indeed, images of humans remain rare in this installation—a hand picking up ice crystals, a figure gazing into the distance. Images of nature transform into more human habitats, some representative of the worst kind such as the Museum Of The Revolution in Nicaragua, where torture chambers have become memorials, a marked disparity to the sublime expanses implied in the images of sky and ocean that in human terms are symbolic of constant change above and beyond our control, or elements of nature that generate a recognition of its power, hopefulness and survival.

Presenting such a vast array of images offers an unpredictable wealth of visual experience, and though Salloum sees this particular project, as he does others previously discussed—as research, as collecting, and as a subjective chronicle of his various journeys throughout the world—for the viewer, the work is not necessarily meant to be considered exclusively about an experience that is his alone, but about how we can each construct yet another meta-narrative from pieces of the world that Salloum has picked up.

This sensibility extends into sculptural objects and what Salloum refers to as his wall ‘drawings,’ both of them consisting of materials he has collected over long periods and that now exist as three-dimensional objects or are pinned onto the wall as a kind of visual mapping of the most modest objects that enter one’s life. They consist of actual physical material and not only photographs—airline luggage tags, dryer lint, colour photo test strips, paperclips, painter’s tape, etc.—that have been repurposed into another manifestation of his ongoing visual diary that again proliferates and mutates rather than arriving at any conclusion.

untitled videotapes (1999-ongoing) is another of Salloum’s long-term projects. In fact, this one is intended never to reach a conclusion and it too is not based in any one location. Nine videotapes have been completed and he is currently nearing completion of two more. Although some can be screened individually, they are most effective when presented together as an installation in which the content of each individual videotape assumes greater resonance and complexity, as dissonant as the experience may seem, through its interplay with the others. *untitled videotapes* consists of stories that are for the most part recorded in an interview format, for example: Soha Bechara, an ex-Lebanese National Resistance Front fighter who spent ten years in detention and upon release moved to Paris; a number of individuals reflecting upon identity and the meaning of nationhood after the break-up of the former Yugoslavia; Abdel Majid Fadl Ali Hassan, a Palestinian man who has been living in Lebanese refugee camps since 1948 and returns to visit the ghost of his former home; and members of the West Bank First Nation in British Columbia’s Okanagan Valley who honour the traditional relationship to their land in spite of the dire circumstances that colonialism imposed on them. The visual and aural confluence of these very different sets of stories, which arise from different geographies and contexts and are expressed in different languages, have been brought together through the shared experiences of political resistance, and the impacts of war, displacement, or colonialism. Together, these videotapes not only represent individuals and their stories, but also time; they convey a past and a present that is known, and a future that is not, and several of the speakers reflect on the interstitial space they occupy, one in which they are positioned between where or what they were separated from and where their future will lead them.

More than any of his other works, *untitled videotapes* appears to be affiliated with a documentary tradition, especially with the employment of first-person accounts. Salloum is well aware of edging into this genre—a place he also found himself in with the *untitled photographs* series, and one from which his work is often understood (or misunderstood)—but he does so with self-criticality; he has referred to this work as ‘reluctant documentary.’¹⁸ At the same time, he believes these are stories that have a place in history and need to be recorded, and, as Soha Bechara expressed, they provide ‘a chance to talk, and act as witnesses.’¹⁹ It was while working on *untitled part 1: everything and nothing* (2001) that Salloum’s own complicity within the process of documenting ‘real’ people, especially considering that the contents of their stories are so highly political, became fully apparent to him, and he attempted,



sky snow sea hole lake tide water high clouds flow, from *untitled: location/dis-location(s): contingent promises*, installation (detail), 2012



out, used photopaper sculpture, 2013



everything and nothing and other works from the ongoing videotape, untitled, 1999-ongoing (installation detail), Kamloops Art Gallery, 2009
Photo credit: Ray Perreault

as in earlier work, to diminish his role in managing the direction or the reading of the narrative. Salloum's recorded voice is rarely present, and one doesn't always know if the speakers are responding to questions or directing their own narrative; for example, Bechara was for the most part responding in Arabic to questions Salloum posed in halting French, therefore Salloum didn't even understand most of what she was saying until after the video material was translated. Salloum initiated the occasion, but the outcome promised no preconceived form. Working in a spirit of collaboration, propriety, and trust put people such as Bechara at ease and enabled surprisingly candid dialogue, and the material collected largely determined the form.

Salloum further distances himself from traditional documentary practices through a filming and editing process that effects pauses and disruptions to the continuity of the narrative. The camera is an intrusion into people's lives and he makes its presence evident by acknowledging it as a mediating device. Each of these videotapes demands its own aesthetic style of shooting and editing according to the context at hand, as well as Salloum's visual/conceptual evolution from one videotape to the next. The camera work in the first videotape, *everything and nothing*, is relatively straightforward with a stationary camera focused on Bechara sitting on the bed in her modest room, and an unexpected interjection of black-outs seemingly provides breaks in which to catch one's breath or recollect a train of thought. The footage in *untitled part 2: beauty and the east* (2003) includes head shots of various individuals inter-cut with impressionistic images of the sky, public spaces, landscape, and planes flying overhead. The videotape *untitled part 4: terra incognita* (2005) displays jerky camera work, choppy edits, and inconsistent framing and panning across the landscape as though the camera isn't a machine at all, but an eye that darts about much like a human's might. These interruptions and the seemingly amateurish filming style arise from a conscious decision to disrupt the passivity of the commonplace viewer/image relationship, a reminder that one is experiencing a representation, that although these are real people telling their stories, what is being seen are images that are represented by a camera, and not reality. Once more, the photographic image comes under scrutiny.

But it is the portrayal of the conversation with Abdel Majid Fadl Ali Hassan in *untitled part 3a: occupied territories* (2001) that to me catalyzes the full complexity of *untitled videotapes* as an interrelated body of work. In the video

installation, behind the monitor of Hassan telling the story of returning to the site of his former home in Palestine, is a large video projection—*untitled part 3b: (as if) beauty never ends..* (2003)—dramatically traversing one wall at an oblique angle and spilling onto another. Rather than presenting a ‘straight’ interview, the arrangement creates a poetic journey that begins with images of beauty—waves washing up to shore, goldfish in a pond, and flower buds slowly opening—that contrast with Hassan’s melancholic words about the family home that no longer exists and his memory of its spirit. These images, however, gradually transform into ones of bloated bodies lying in the street and being collected for identification, with abandoned shoes, hats, and clumps of hair scattered about in what is clearly the aftermath of a massacre,²⁰ and then transform again into sunlight dancing on water, and finally to a journey into the vastness of the universe. The extreme contrast among these images, from the beauty of nature to the brutality of humans, and the various stories of loss, absence, conflict, and, yes, hope, returns us to the meeting of remote realities.

Salloum’s agenda is not so much that he wants us as viewers to understand as he does; rather, he acknowledges that his subjective relationship with images and objects has its own vulnerabilities, doubts, joys, and gratifications. His vision is not the same as ours, and ours are not the same as anyone else’s. While he has filmed, edited, and made decisions about each videotape, he leaves a reading of the work open-ended. Like *كان يا ما كان* (*Kan ya ma kan*) *There was and there was not*, there is no beginning or end to the *untitled videotapes* series and installation, but always an in-between. This circles us back to his interest in the idea of the interstitial. The viewer can enter into a story from any monitor and from any point in the story, view it in its entirety, or catch segments of many stories, all of which contributes to the way in which he or she will construct the meaning of the work. For Salloum, his work can only provide ‘partial glimpses or fragments of understanding at best;’²¹ there is no ‘fulfilment of knowledge.’ Yet, by borrowing from the world both its existing images and those his camera appropriates, and respecting their inability to offer fulfilment, he sends them back into the world a little changed, a little liberated.



warmth carrying far, central cedar fire, Wanock family potlatch, Alert Bay, 10/22/04 [711], from *untitled: location/dislocation(s)*, 1996-ongoing

Endnotes

- 1 The main body of this essay was first published in the catalogue *Jayce Salloum: history of the present*, ed. Jen Budney (Kamloops: Kamloops Art Gallery, 2009), it was updated by the author in July 2013 to include the new works in the exhibitions at CSA Gallery and grunt gallery, Fall 2013.
- 2 Jayce Salloum, 'From Lebanon to Kelowna: An Interview with Jayce Salloum', in *Practical Dreamers: Conversations with Movie Artists*, ed. Mike Hoolboom (Toronto: Coach House Press, 2008), 188
- 3 Interview with the artist, February 10, 2009
- 4 Jayce Salloum, 'Sans titre/Untitled: The Video Installation as an Active Archive, 2006', in *The Archive*, ed. Charles Merewether (London: Whitechapel/Cambridge: MIT Press, 2006), 190
- 5 Collage (*papiers collés*) was originally a late nineteenth-century term used to describe the process of gluing or pasting various materials onto one surface. Montage brings together images from different sources but, rather than creating a jarring disjointedness, they tend to blend together in uncanny ways. With the evolution of putting together unlike materials onto one surface, or even within one space, or combining unlike images onto a seamless surface, it is the idea of collage and montage, rather than the techniques, that has during the twentieth century become one of the most important aesthetic strategies to impact upon contemporary art.
- 6 Rosalind Krauss, *L'Amour fou* (New York: Abbeville Press, 1985), 15
- 7 This term found popular use after the 1977 exhibition at Artists Space in New York City curated by Douglas Crimp and titled 'Pictures'. It included Sherrie Levine, Jack Goldstein, Phillip Smith, Troy Brauntuch, and Robert Longo.
- 8 Prior to the 1980s, Salloum was taking his own photographs and experimenting with representing the everyday world around him, subject matter that would reappear during the 1990s.
- 9 Interview with the artist, February 10, 2009
- 10 Interview with the artist, October 15, 2008
- 11 *Ibid.* The study and classification of images is an important element within Salloum's creative process, an aspect that was influenced by his teacher at the San Francisco Art Institute, John Collier Jr., a photographer and visual anthropologist who worked in collaboration with anthropologists for projects in Canada's north, New Mexico, and South America. Collier Jr. introduced to Salloum the idea of photography as a visual methodology for research and understanding, and stressed the fact that images do have stories attached to them.
- 12 Walid Raad, 'On Jayce Salloum's *There Was and There Was Not*', (Montreal: Optica, un centre en art contemporain, 1996), brochure
- 13 Jim Drobnick and Jennifer Fisher, 'archive of the street', in *untitled: jayce salloum*, eds. Keith Wallace and Jan Allen (Kingston: Agnes Etherington Art Centre/Vancouver: Contemporary Art Gallery, 1999), 21
- 14 *Ibid.* 22
- 15 Interview with the artist, February 10, 2009
- 16 'Territory' was an exhibition co-produced by Presentation House Gallery, North Vancouver, and Artspeak, Vancouver, in 2006.
- 17 Bill Jeffries, 'The Shock of the Old—Street Photography in Vancouver', in *Unfinished Business: Photographing Vancouver Streets 1955 to 1985*, eds. Bill Jeffries, Glen Lowry, Jerry Zaslove, West Coast LINE 47, Vol. 39, No. 2, 2005, 21
- 18 Interview with the artist, October 15, 2008
- 19 Jayce Salloum, *untitled part 1: everything and nothing*, 2001
- 20 This particular footage is from the 1982 massacre of Palestinian refugees at the Shatila refugee camp in southern Lebanon, but it is symbolic of all such atrocities that take place in many parts of the world.
- 21 Salloum quoted in Hoolboom, *Op Cit.*, 188

Cover images: *objects/found* (sculpture) *cluster* (detail), *location/dis-location(s): contingent promises*, MKG127 Gallery, Toronto, 2012

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