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Akram Zaatari

LE MAGASIN, GRENOBLE, FRANCE

Quinn Latimer



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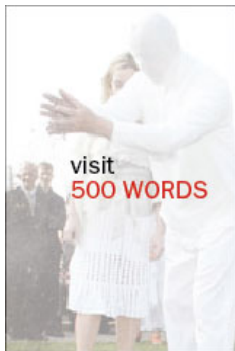
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Akram Zaatari, *This Day*, 2003, video, color, sound, 86 minutes. Installation view, 2012. Photo: Blaise Adilon.

“THERE’S A CAMEL IN THE PICTURE,” a woman’s voice intones with dry precision in the first lines of Akram Zaatari’s magisterial feature-length video *This Day*, 2003, which stands at the center of the artist’s affecting survey at Le Magasin, “*Aujourd’hui à 10 ans*” (This Day at Ten). She is describing a black-and-white image taken in the 1950s by the Syrian historian Jibrail S. Jabbur and the Lebanese photographer Manoug (the two worked together, with Jabbur often proposing subjects for Manoug to shoot). Details of the photograph fill the screen while the woman continues: “The picture is a perfect picture of the East meeting the West, because the Western jeep breaks down in the desert. And taking photographs of the desert and of the camels is looking at the Eastern object with a Western optic, a camera.” She reflects: “And the spirit to document such a thing is a Western idea, I think.” Here, she breaks into Arabic. “If you live in [the Syrian town] Al-Qaryatayn,” she says, before switching back into English to finish her thought, “you develop an aesthetic sense for the desert.”

An irregular, oddly soothing rhythm is established in the following scenes, as Zaatari studiously represents, recites, and reorders pictures of the Middle East, delineating an image-laden universe where personal photographs can be propagandistic and depictions of war intimate—and where many pictures are both at once. Frames are repeatedly offered and exchanged: a page from a book, a photo print, a car windshield, a light box, an e-mail in-box, a time-stamped video-editing monitor. The same images recur with allusive insistence: the desert, camels, Bedouins, a ship at sea. We watch an old woman tremulously attempting to balance a jar on her head (“There is no shame in being photographed while holding it,” a man tells her) as she remembers when, decades earlier, Jabbur and Manoug took a photograph of her in the same pose. We see Zaatari at his desk, reviewing the footage of her talking, Jabbur’s book in hand; here, as elsewhere, one gets a sense of the compulsive nature of his project—his need to research images, to reenact them, to register them, and thus to reinforce their existence, to expand it.

The video’s second half opens with a montage of an F-16 zooming across the sky in a painting of a desert. Zaatari’s desk again appears, heavy with the equipment of information and circulation: A computer, a fax, a phone, and a journal open to pages from the early 1980s when Israel bombed Beirut and Saïda, Lebanon—among whose residents was a teenage Zaatari. Television and Internet news reports about atrocities are intercut with Lebanese pop songs and studio portraits from the 1960s and ’70s of Arab men grasping guns. Video footage is rewound; Arabic text scrolls across the computer screen and is deleted. Throughout, images are framed and reframed, viewed and reviewed: a repeated scrutinizing and scanning. This constant shifting of border and support structure makes the similitude of surveillance, representation, image culture, and war suddenly clear. The word *surveillance* itself comes from the Latin *vigilare*—meaning “to watch” or “to wake” and itself derived from *vigil*—and this conveys the singular, devotional mode of looking that courses through Zaatari’s film.

Though *This Day* is now a decade old, it remains unimpeachably current in its limning of media and of war, and of their reciprocal effects—particularly since the conflicts described are ongoing in altered forms. In Grenoble, the formal aspects of Zaatari’s work are amplified by its installation in the institution’s cavernous, circa-1900 hall, which has been blacked out and hung with a series of five screens showing the artist’s other videos as if they, too, are so many frames. At the show’s entrance, *Vestibule*, 2012, makes the space resemble an airport runway, dark but for lights embedded along the narrowing walls, which lead you to the works beyond. Among them is *Nature Morte*, 2008, which shows two Arabic men working companionably, one of them making a bomb. For *Saïda June 6, 1982, 2002*, meanwhile, Zaatari digitally animates his own photographs of Israeli missiles exploding atop the golden hills of his hometown to make a two-minute short that slows down and examines these moments with surreal efficiency. More than once in the show I was reminded of Harun Farocki’s similarly quiet and radically reflexive filmic essays on the media and mediation of war, historical memory, and

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Zaatari's visual language can conjure a modernist, reductionist poem, in which symbolic images arise repeatedly in different syntactic constructions, so that their meaning imperceptibly shifts as the same iconography reappears, refrainlike. The Barthesian *jouissance* that Zaatari's image-texts provide gives rise to *This Day's* most striking scene, where the artist cuts out people and camels from Jabbur and Manoug's photographs and collages them against a view of the desert made from other images. The cutouts move across the screen while the camera pans over the whole, from right to left, as one reads Arabic writing, creating a kind of photographic diorama, a simulacrum of a landscape with the weirdness of a Photorealist painting. Whether still or moving, silent or with sound, personal or propagandistic, images outlive both memory and history, rewriting the past as they move farther from it. The decade since Zaatari completed *This Day* has only confirmed what the Arabic letters appearing on his computer screen will later declare with exquisite understatement: "In war, songs change and images transform."

"Akram Zaatari: Aujourd'hui à 10 ans" is on view through Jan. 6.

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