

## THOMAS DANE GALLERY

M.T. Niagara, “Windows, Mirrors, and Frames in Akram Zaatari’s *28 Nights and a Poem*”, *The Brooklyn Rail*, 6<sup>th</sup> May 2015

There are many different windows in Akram Zaatari’s newest film *28 Nights and a Poem*: physical windows, to the outside world and between worlds, computer screens, camera viewfinders, televisions, smart phones, projections, the boundaries of the film format itself. Zaatari places these devices front and center, juxtaposed with immanently human hands, in a film that is a meditation on practice, life, and work based on the filmmaker’s experiences moving the life’s work of Saida photographer Hashem el Madani to the The Arab Image Foundation in Beirut.

In the studio, el Madani performs his practice for the archival camera. He’s opening up the shop. He opens the door, puts on a fan, turns on a light, and then goes to sit by the window. We are left to reflect here, on what Zaatari calls the archaeology of the gesture. In fact these very motions might cease to ever be practiced again. They have become obsolete. In this case, what could be lost is the reality of a practice, of the body’s movements at work, which are passed down, person to person, as a kind of knowledge of its own.



*28 Nights and a Poem.*

Zaatari shows us photographs formed within el Madani’s body of work: photographs of shopkeepers standing in front of their shops, photographs of people at the beach, photographs taken in the barbershop, studio portraits. There are different series within the studio’s work: photographs of same-sex couples<sup>1</sup>, photographs of men in bathing suits, showing off their muscles, smiling men with big guns taken in the ’60s and ’70s. Zaatari contrasts these images with similar representations in contemporary popular media, such as a portrait of the actor Abdel Halim Hafez, singing in the mirror in *My Nights of Love*. The shot is framed nearly identically to el Madani’s series of barbershop portraits. Finally, Zaatari shoots in a present-day barber shop, taking us through the complete process of hair-washing, haircut and shave, even threading, sculpting eyebrows.

We see repeatedly this mirroring, not just of the gestures of people across time—demonstrating that, for example, people at the beach and the barbershop behave now as they did in the past—but also how the popular culture is mimicking the idea of reality, or how reality is imitating the idea of popular culture. So we see how the job of the photographer is not dissimilar to the job of the artist, the job of the documentarian to the job of the archivist. El Madani takes photographs of the people,

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and then they present themselves in these photographs in the ways they see people being photographed, on TV or in the newspapers, or just in ways that please them.

In 1960 el Madani started to shoot video with a Super8 camera. We see various footage from this camera. The first scene is of a man walking through a garden, looking at the camera occasionally and smiling; then of children on a hillside, always walking towards the camera. There is no sound, but it is clear when el Madani gives direction, as the subjects always pause and look at the camera before they react to his instructions. There is a charming sweetness to the sequence. We then see a family posing, then a family playing in the snow on the hillside. In another scene, Michael Jackson's "Smooth Criminal" is overlain onto the snowball fight. Then the video changes to a choreographed dance routine, which also happens to sync nicely with Jackson, and from then on the audio track switches between the traditional music the dance was originally performed to and the pop song. His replacement of the soundtrack very clearly throws a frightening and alienating aspect onto movements that to another beat might seem happy and playful. He plays repeatedly with these juxtapositions, and with others, old duets cut in with modern covers, nationalistic pop songs performed to or for Mubarak, sitting in the front row of a televised concert.

And then there's the poem, "Second Life," which is either a metaphor or a double entendre, or even just plain reality. Zaatari shares his own practice, sitting in the darkened studio with el Madani as they both watch his computer screen. Their faces are lit by the glow of the laptop, and they sit, engaged with the screen, while another scene unfolds behind them: first the beam of a projector cuts across the darkened room, then a multi-colored strobe light, and next the rolling reflections of a disco ball. The spectacle is happening behind them, where they can safely ignore it, immersed in their practice, their presentation, and its preservation. The long shot continues, el Madani and Zaatari absorbed, watching together, before the screen cuts to black.

<http://www.brooklynrail.org/2015/05/film/windows-mirrors-and-frames-in-akram-zaataris-28-nights-and-a-poem>