

INCIDENT LIGHT

GENDERED ARTIFACTS AND TRACES
ILLUMINATED IN THE ARCHIVES

May 25 – July 27, 2014
Blackwood Gallery

Tara Najd Ahmadi & Hannah Darabi*
Ala Dehghan*
Maryam Jafri
Jumana Manna
Nahed Mansour
The Otolith Group
Tejal Shah

Curated by Leila Pourtavaf

*Works commissioned by Azar Mahmoudian in
collaboration with the curator



INCIDENT LIGHT: GENDERED ARTIFACTS AND TRACES ILLUMINATED IN THE ARCHIVES features a group of Middle Eastern and South Asian artists whose works focus on traces of gender and sexuality within various archives from the region. This exhibition interrogates the authority that nationalist historiographies hold in relation to their subjects through a repositioning of cultural artifacts from various historical depositories. In photography, the term “incident light” refers to the source emitting the direct light that illuminates a subject, as well as any secondary sources that redirect light onto it to expose unseen details. The participating artists, many of whom refer back to archival photographs and footage as their source material, take up this metaphor in various registers to re-imagine regional and inter-regional pasts and to elaborate on the ways in which gender-marked bodies conceal and reveal themselves within the archives. The exhibition takes a *longue durée* approach to such historical traces, and attempts to recuperate, reclaim, and reinvent the region’s past narratives from prehistoric times to the present.

Tejal Shah’s triptych collage print, *Between the Waves* (2012), opens the exhibition and weaves together history, mythology, iconography, and pornography in an attempt to return the figure of the unicorn, now a popular queer icon, back to its native roots in India. In doing so, the artist traces the origin of the one-horned creature to its earliest appearance on seals and tablets created by Indus Valley civilizations between 5000 and 2000 BC. Shah’s piece also directly references Rebecca Horn’s iconic 1970s performance *Einhorn (Unicorn)*, which features a white female body, naked except for a horn strapped to her head, roaming in an empty field. For Horn, the unicorn is a descendant of Christian mythology and represents purity, chastity, and innocence—values that she suggests are imposed on the bourgeois female body. Shah’s referencing of Horn’s unicorn is transformative rather than representational. Shah straps Horn’s horn on genderqueer and sexualized brown bodies travelling across fantastic ecological landscapes towards their native resting place. Shah’s unicorns embrace communal and collective eroticism, re-positioning the unicorn as a contemporary queer signifier with a rich historical legacy.



TEJAL SHAH
Between the Waves – Inner, 2012
Mixed media collage, digital print
on archival rag paper
55 × 60 inches
Edition of 5
Courtesy of the artist and
Barbara Gross Galerie, Munich

The awakening of forgotten legacies, and the historicizing of queer sexualities outside western reference points are themes that resurface in **Maryam Jafri’s** *Death With Friends* (2010). The film is an adaptation of excerpts from the sixteenth century diary of the first Mughal emperor Babur. Written between 1494 to 1529, the text is the first known instance of autobiography within the Islamic canon and is generally read as a testament to the connections between Central and South Asia prior to European incursions. In Jafri’s film, Babur’s celebrated travels and conquests are juxtaposed with elements from the text that highlight sensual encounters, wine and opium consumption, and homosocial gatherings that culminate in lewd acts. Like Shah’s work, re-embodiment and performing history is central to the narrative structure of Jafri’s visual text. Thea-

trical elements are notably pronounced in the film as the camera pans out and shifts its focus to the geometrically designed stage that is reminiscent of Mughal miniature paintings. The visuals at once reinforce and interrupt the narrator, weaving together a new vision of a transnational early modern world that embraced both cultural and sexual fluidity. The re-staging of this historical narrative questions the authority of the archival material's relationship to truth and renders the fictionalization of history-making transparent.



MARYAM JAFRI
Death With Friends, 2010
HD video, 9:23 min, Video Still
Courtesy of the artist

In **Nahed Mansour's** *Satellite Telefizyoon* (2013), the artist takes a different approach to the notion of staging history. Here, her video plays on an old television set installed in a cordoned space with subtle colourful gestures that reference Ramadan. Using YouTube-sourced clips of the television quiz show *Fawazeer* (riddles), which aired on Egyptian television in the 1980s during the 30 days of Ramadan, Mansour takes popular culture as a site where a gender-marked nationalist narrative crosses paths and clashes with postcolonial critique. The clips feature iconic singer/actor Sherihan appropriating costume, song, and dialect from various countries around the world, while the audience is asked to guess which nation she is performing. Focusing on the relationship between Egyptian women and the rest of the world, the English subtitles which accompany the clips, and override Sherihan's dialogue for non-Arabic speaking viewers, quote a number of postcolonial scholars and situate Sherihan's performance in the context of Egyptian modernization strategies in the post-colonial period (1950s to 1980s). The juxtaposition of kitsch visuals representing cultural globalization and scholarly postcolonial texts, creates a unique dialogue demonstrating how a formerly colonized nation participated in the stereotyping of other cultures in order to make its own claims to modernity. Sherihan's performance also reminds us how the woman's body often stands in as the vehicle for nationalist modernization.



NAHED MANSOUR
Satellite Telefizyoon, 2013
Video, 4:44 min, Video Still
Courtesy of the artist
With generous support from the
Toronto Arts Council

Tara Najd Ahmadi and Hannah Darabi elaborate on the theme of popular culture as a site of modernity and national remembrance in their collaboration *Studio DCI* (2014). Like Mansour, they re-stage a domestic sphere in their corner installation of a 1970s Tehran home framed by a blue trimmed wall. Portraits of Zhaleh Kazemi, the dub artist responsible for the Persian voice-over of several female characters from 1970s western films, hang on one wall. Kazemi began her career in the 1960s—the golden age of dubbed films in Iran—when foreign cinema became increasingly popular in the domestic market as one of the many signifiers of Western modernity embraced by the Pahlavi regime. With the onset of the 1979 Islamic Revolution, these films came to represent Western imperialism and were banned in public, yet they remained popular amongst viewers who could access them through the black market and enjoy their content in the privacy of their homes.

In Ahmadi and Darabi's installation, images of the many actresses that Kazemi gave voice to are superimposed on her portraits in a manner that blurs the clarity of her image, though her presence is reinforced on the adjacent wall through a print of a landscape painting—a nod to another form of art she was known for. Audio clips of her voice-overs play on an old Walkman sitting on a table nearby. The cassette tape, a homage to the form of everyday reproduction technologies that were used by the Iranian public to generate personal archives of black market cultural products, transforms the excerpts from her dialogues into a private monologue. Though Kazemi was never a major historical actor, her story is resonant with the experience of a generation of Iranians who lived through the sharp shifts in pre- and post-revolutionary Iran. By giving Kazemi both a face and a voice, the artists assert her historical agency and relate it to discourses about translation, modernity, nationalist memory, and erasure.



TARA NAJD AHMADI &
HANNAH DARABI
Studio DCI – attempt 1, 2014
Laminated black and white photo
8 x 12 inches
Commissioned by Azar Mahmoudian
Courtesy of the artist



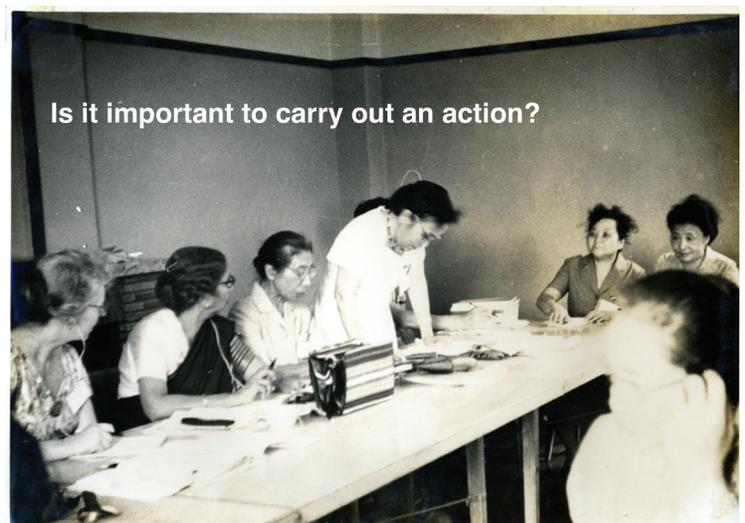
ALA DEGHAN
7 HOLYdays from
30 HOLYdays series, 2014
Mixed media, newspaper, colored pencil,
gouache, acrylic, marker, burnt Bahman
cigarettes, plastic cover, beads, nail polish,
watercolour, and tea
7 frames, each 11 x 14 inches
Commissioned by Azar Mahmoudian
Courtesy of the artist

Ala Dehghan's installation *As Dark as Ink* (2014) also grapples with memory, nostalgia, and historical narrative. For Dehghan, the archive represents the site of a leaking wound where historical trauma is separated into distinct elements that methodically seep out, leaving behind a diluted narrative. Her installation is composed of several disjointed elements, with archival artifacts layered onto each other to form a complex commentary on the days and weeks leading up to the 1979 Iranian Revolution. The centerpiece of the installation, *Waiting for a month and a half* (2014), is a time-based work composed of three clear plastic bags each inside the next. The first bag contains a stack of newspapers; the second contains a glittering fabric immersed in water that slowly, over the course of the exhibition, leaks into the third bag containing ink. While the newspaper stack represents a still and captured moment, the water seeping into the bag of ink suggests fluidity, filtering, and dilution. Ultimately, the installation interrogates the role of mass media in relaying information to the public.

The bags are accompanied by a series of seven framed newspapers with abstract paintings obstructing headline images and texts. Entitled *7 Holy Days* (2014), the paintings function as both abstraction and interpretation, marking the newspapers with the artist's reaction to the events that unfolded during the week of the revolution. Dehghan's take on this iconic historical moment, presented through the institutionalized language of *Kayhan*, a newspaper which is directly under the supervision of the Office of the Supreme Leader in the Islamic Republic, exposes the paper as an archive of nationalist fantasy. Dehghan's disregard for this version of history is made clear through her interventions, while her use of bright colours and repetitive imagery also reference Persian miniature paintings. This subjective layering of different histories and traditions allows Dehghan to assert her own authoritative and decidedly feminine voice in relation to the iconic images, thereby interrupting their linear narrative flow. The installation as a whole points to the ways in which history is synthesized, transformed, and

Several works in the exhibition speak to the polyvocal nature of archival material and the ways in which multiple narratives can come together to inform a historical event. The combination of historically distinct, but thematically linked artifacts is also explored in **The Otolith Group's** *Communists Like Us* (2010). The film assembles archival images produced by Soviet and Chinese agencies to chronicle tours of Indian stateswomen to the USSR, China, and Japan between the mid-1950s and early-1960s, a period in Indian history marked by Nehru's state-sponsored feminist and socialist initiatives. The images attest to an extensive postwar network of exchange between non-western women, which are often overlooked in both the historiography of the cold war and the non-alignment response to it. Like Mansour's work,

these images are accompanied by a secondary narrative which appears as subtitles from a scene in Jean-Luc Godard's 1967 film *La Chinoise*. The scene takes place on a train as the protagonist of the film, revolutionary activist Francis Jeanson, argues with Veronique, his young and idealistic Maoist student. In Godard's film, the power dynamics between the older and more experienced character of Francis and the naïve



THE OTOLITH GROUP
Communists Like Us, 2010
HD video, 22:55 min, Video Still
Courtesy of The Otolith Group and
LUX, London

Veronique follow a gendered stereotype. In the Otolith Group's intervention, the juxtaposition of this encounter with the archival images puts Veronique in dialogue with a transnational network of women who likewise pursue socialist aspirations. By overlapping these spaces and histories, *Communists Like Us* prioritizes intimate social relations between these women over the gender-marked debates about revolution.

Finally, **Jumana Manna's** film, *A Sketch of Manners* (2013), on display in the e|gallery, builds its narrative around an archival photograph. It is a portrait of the last masquerade hosted in 1924 in the lavish Jerusalem home of Alfred Roch, a Palestinian landowner who was later elected into the Palestinian National Congress. The portrait features guests in European costumes during the interwar years when Palestine was under British mandate, and many elite Palestinians believed Europe held the promise of self-determination and independence from the Ottomans. Manna takes this image as her starting point, and re-stages the event into a film set almost two decades later in 1942. It's the height of WWII, and with the Nakba (the 1948 expulsion of Palestinians from their homes) imminent, the images of the decadent lifestyle of elite Palestinian society are loaded with the impending threat posed by the formation of the state of Israel. While *A Sketch of Manners* makes no claims to narrative truths, it does mark a moment in Palestine's past that is often overlooked in a historiography where Palestine is defined through Israel as its referent point. Manna takes many liberties in her re-telling of this history, and in doing so, asserts history as an act of interpretation rather than a representation of facts. For example, the original photograph is marked by a rigidly gendered dress code, whereas Manna's revision features cross-dressing characters comfortably situated within Roch's imagined social world. In a move that resonates with Jafri's *Death With Friends*, history is once again presented as part-hallucination. Shot in Jerusalem, the film shows the multi-faceted social world that the city housed—not just a holy promised land, but also the site of spectacle, vice, and debauchery.



JUMANA MANNA
A Sketch of Manners
(*Alfred Roch's Last Masquerade*), 2013
HD video, 12:00 min, Video Still
Edition of 3 and 1 AP
Courtesy of the artist and
CRG Gallery, NY

Incident Light addresses sites of cultural remembering and amnesia by highlighting inter-regional echoes and suppressed histories. The exhibition interrogates the presence and absence of women and gender narratives from collective national memories, as well as the unities amongst different areas of the "East" resulting from horizontal relations and affinities within the region. The foregrounding of imagination over claims to truth, which is a feature of many of the works, is a form of history-making that is highly gendered and speaks to the need to assert a presence by those who are traditionally threatened with historical erasure. Building new stories from fragmented knowledge, the exhibition harnesses generative forces that anticipate, foresee, and fantasize about what was and what could have been.

TARA NAJD AHMADI is an Iranian artist who holds an MA in Motion Picture Directing from the University of Tehran and an MFA in Time-Based Media from the University of Oklahoma. She is currently pursuing her PhD in the Program in Visual and Cultural Studies at the University of Rochester. She works with photo and video installations, and is the recipient of many awards including the Norman Art Council's Individual Artist Award (2011), the Madeline Collaborate Fellowship (2009 to 2012), and the OVAC Momentum Spotlight Honorarium (2009). She has exhibited internationally in places including Tehran, Split, Paris, New York, Rio de Janeiro, and Los Angeles.

HANNAH DARABI is an Iranian artist who studied photography in the College of Fine Arts at the University of Tehran, and the Université Paris VIII in Saint-Denis. Her work deals with urban landscapes and has been exhibited in Tehran, Tokyo, and throughout Europe. She has self-published artist books that are part of numerous collections including Bibliothèque Kandinsky at the Centre Pompidou in Paris and the Bibliothèque nationale de France.

ALA DEGHAN was born in 1982 in Tehran, Iran. She received a BA in Persian Miniature Painting from Alzahra University, an MA in Painting from the University of Tehran, and an MFA in Painting and Printmaking from the Yale School of Art. In 2010, Dehghan was a resident artist at the Delfina Foundation in London. She has participated in exhibitions at Kalfayan Galleries, Athens; Thomas Erben Gallery, New York; Other Gallery, Shanghai; Brigitte Schenk Gallery, Cologne; Il Gabbiano Gallery, Rome; Asar Gallery, Tehran; and Thaddaeus Ropac Gallery, Paris. Her work has been reviewed in *frieze magazine* and *Time Out New York*.

MARYAM JAFRI was born in 1972 in Pakistan, and is now based in New York and Copenhagen. She holds a BA in English & American Literature from Brown University, an MA from Tisch School of the Arts at New York University, and is a graduate of the Whitney Museum Independent Study Program. Jafri has exhibited widely in Europe and North America, most recently in Manifesta 9, Genk; Shanghai Biennial; Taipei Biennial; Beirut Space, Cairo; Bielefelder Kunstverein; M kHa, Antwerp; Museum of Contemporary Art, Detroit; and Deutsches Filmmuseum, Frankfurt.

JUMANA MANNA was born in 1987 in New Jersey, USA. She works primarily with film and sculpture and focuses on the investigation of power structures, nationalism, history, and the body. She holds a BFA from the Oslo National Academy of the Arts and an MA in Aesthetics and Politics from California Institute of the Arts. Her recent solo exhibitions and screenings include Home Works Forum VI, Beirut; Henie Onstad Art Center, Oslo; Sculpture Center, New York; Performa 13 Biennial, New York; and Sharjah Biennale (2013). In 2012, Manna was awarded The Young Palestinian Artist of the Year Award from the A.M. Qattan Foundation.

NAHED MANSOUR is a Toronto-based artist who works in performance, installation, and video. She draws from personal and historic archives to address representations of gender and racial relationships. She graduated from Concordia University's MFA program, and is currently the Director of Mayworks Festival of Working People and the Arts in Toronto. She is also a member of the Pleasure Dome Experimental Film & Video Programming Collective.

THE OTOLITH GROUP is an award-winning artist-led organization founded in 2002 by Anjalika Sagar and Kodwo Eshun and is based in London. The Otolith Group produces films, installations, and exhibitions that combine narrative, archival material, and documentary footage. Centered on close readings of the image in contemporary society, their work explores the legacies and potentialities of the document, the essay film, and the archive, as well as speculative futures and science fictions. Recent exhibitions have been presented at museums including MAXXI, Rome; MIT List Visual Arts Center, Boston; MACBA, Barcelona; Bétonsalon, Paris; and The Showroom, London. Their work has been included in such international exhibitions as dOCUMENTA 13, Kassel; the 29th São Paulo Biennial; and Manifesta 8, Murcia. In 2010, The Otolith Group was nominated for the Turner Prize.

TEJAL SHAH was born in 1979 in Bhilai, India. Shah is a visual artist who works with video, photography, sound, installation, and performance. Their interests lie in the areas of sexuality, gender, ecology, and the interrelation between humans and nature. Shah holds a BA in Commercial and Illustrative Photography from Royal Melbourne Institute of Technology, and was a visiting scholar at The School of the Art Institute of Chicago from 1999 to 2000. They have exhibited widely in museums, galleries, and film festivals including Tate Modern, London; Centre Pompidou, Paris; Brooklyn Museum, New York; National Gallery of Modern Art, Bombay; and Documenta 13, Kassel.

LEILA POURTAVAF is a Toronto-based writer, independent curator and doctoral candidate in the Department of History at the University of Toronto. She holds an M.A. in Media Studies from Concordia University, and a second M.A. in Near and Middle Eastern Studies from the University of Toronto. Leila was a founding member and coordinator of the *projet Mobilivre—Bookmobile project* and is the co-editor of the forthcoming publication which chronicles the project's five year history. She is also the editor of *Féminismes Électriques* (2012), a bilingual collection of essays which reflect on the last decade of feminist art production.

PROGRAMMING

OPENING RECEPTION

Sunday, May 25, 3 - 6pm

A FREE shuttle bus will depart from Hart House (7 Hart House Circle, University of Toronto) at 3pm and return for 6pm. Join us at 4pm for a tour of the exhibition with curators Leila Pourtavaf, Azar Mahmoudian, and artist Nahed Mansour.

I'VE HEARD STORIES

Film program curated by Azar Mahmoudian

Wednesday, May 28, 7 - 9pm

City of Toronto Archives, 255 Spadina Road, Toronto

FREE and open to the public

I've Heard Stories presents five international short films, each exploring the intersection of art and documentary practices. For more information, please refer to the brochure insert.

ARTbus TOUR

Sunday, June 8, 12 - 5pm

The tour starts at the Justina M. Barnicke Gallery (7 Hart House Circle, University of Toronto), and then departs for Blackwood Gallery and Oakville Galleries. A \$10 donation includes admission to all galleries and afternoon refreshments by Trafalgar Brewing Company and Whole Foods Market, Oakville. Seating is limited. To RSVP contact artbus@oakvillegalleries.com or 905.844.4402 (ext. 27) by Friday, June 6 at 4pm.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

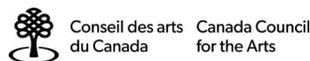
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Presented in conjunction with the Sixteenth Berkshire Conference on the History of Women, held at the University of Toronto, May 22 – 25, 2014.

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Gallery Hours

Mon - Fri: 12 - 5pm

Wed: 12 - 9pm

Sat - Sun: 12 - 3pm

The gallery is closed on statutory holidays.

The gallery is wheelchair accessible.

Admission is FREE.