

June 1 – July 14, 2012 ————— ■

This Story Begins and Ends With Us

Basma Alsharif

Curated by Erik Martinson and cheyanne turions



Basma Alsharif, *We Began By Measuring Distance*, 2009, 19 minutes, video

Closing Reception and Artist Talk Thursday July 12, 5 – 7pm

**Presented by A Space Gallery, Pleasure Dome, No Reading After the Internet,
Trinity Square Video, The Images Festival**

In Basma Alsharif's 2011 video *The Story of Milk and Honey*, the unnamed narrator claims that the drama about to unfold is "our story, which is also hers," she being a woman witnessed in the throes of insoluble grief. This gesture, of all stories being one story in so many different guises, is a central concern weaved throughout Alsharif's work, and she is in a particularly apt position to recognize such acts of translation. Born in Kuwait to Palestinian parents, Alsharif spent her early childhood in France, later immigrated to the United States, and has since lived between Egypt, Lebanon, Jordan and the United Arab Emirates. Inevitably informed by this nomadic way of life, Alsharif's art practice invites us, the viewer, to recognize ourselves in her characters. With a skillful play between moving images, text and voice, Alsharif's formal gestures call out our position of watching, asking us to reconsider the certainty with which we know the world. In these interpretive acts, her stories have the potential to move toward the unknown viewer. Featuring recent work by the artist, *This Story Begins and Ends with Us* compels us to imagine how our identities might be discerned amongst the material remains of experience, be they our own archives or the desk drawers and piles of rubble containing fragments of the lives of others.

In *The Story of Milk and Honey*, an unidentified Lebanese man attempts to write a love story in order to reconstruct the powerful affections of the aforementioned insoluble woman, weaving together still and moving images, text and song. Steeped in research, the video tracks a creative process that seeks to reach out to the individual and particular viewer by creating a legitimate space for intuitive or idiosyncratic judgements. Many methods are utilized to bridge the content of the video with the audience, most involving historical documents and some sort of erasure—the narrator confesses to rubbing out the faces in family photographs, admits to removing the nomenclature of plants from their illustrations in books, and discloses his practice of capturing anonymous, blurred bodies in photographs taken on a seaside promenade. In these spaces of erasure, it is possible to insert oneself as actor and agent. The reciprocal consequence, however, is the realization that there are different ways to read the remnants of a life; a definitive history is never possible despite efforts to arrange posterity otherwise. In how the video conjures this process of rewriting, *The Story of Milk and Honey* tackles how larger cultural and political narratives can play out through an individual, their desires, their memories and their migrations.

But an openness of interpretation need not always be so inviting. *Turkish Delight* (2010) is a disorienting viewing experience: Super 8mm images of the interiors and exteriors of homes in Jordan collapse into one another through a frame by frame interweaving of image and sound. The effect is an aural and visual strobing—it is hard to look at, hard to listen to, and furthermore, the viewer is barred by mosquito netting from entering the room where the work is presented. The images—empty interiors and exteriors of homes in Amman, a city in a country with a large Palestinian refugee population—conjure a scene of tragedy. Empty dinner plates and an unmade bed lead us to assume the need for quick flight. Yet why? Perhaps the residents are merely out of the framed shot. The video's voiceover—chopped up, its bits repeated incessantly—is composed of Arabic words for food items. Does it sound alarming to those of us who do not speak the language? Is this a result of the frenetic pace of the piece? By keeping attempts to reconcile a clear meaning at bay, *Turkish Delight* plays on the assumptions of the viewer, refusing the satisfaction that comes when a puzzle has been solved.

The difficulty of interpreting lived experience is also taken up by Alsharif in *We Began By Measuring Distance* (2009), where she recounts the complexity of embodying Palestinian national identity. Much like in *The Story of Milk and Honey* and *Turkish Delight*, Alsharif

uses the charged space between sound and image to disrupt solid notions of meaning. Transposing Arabic narration into English prose, Alsharif's subtitles in *We Began By Measuring Distance* utilize the materiality of language as an aesthetic object, suggesting that the film is meant to stand as an object of translation only fully knowable in its movement from one language to another. Instead of the usual correspondence between narration and script, the subtitles are an extension of the visual imagery. For instance, the unsettledness of the film's anonymous characters is emphasized as the accompanying subtitles march across the screen in a complete trajectory from left to right. The distance of the title is another example. A game of measurements evolves from an innocent diversion into a political mapping of pivotal years in Palestinian history. The relationship between the text and the lived experience is somewhat vague as the measurements in kilometres become markers of time without didactic contextualization. Again, here, Alsharif creates a space for her audience to read themselves and their ideas into the images, but given the political charge of the history she invokes, moral concerns follow. How do our readings of present and historical events serve to shape reality?

Creating a story far enough removed that it is science-fiction, yet eerily familiar in its tragedy to be factual, *Everywhere Was the Same* (2007) begins with a slideshow projection of abandoned places and a narrative told through the subtitles of two girls who find themselves on the shores of a pre-apocalyptic paradise. We are told that one of the girls survives the catastrophe as witness, but the images on the slides do not show us any people, only architecture and skylines. The double look of projected slide image and its video documentation is further mediated by the text on screen, which first seems to belong to the larger image, but then retreats to the frame of the slides, as if to subtitle the photographs rather than the video. When the image and text malfunction, losing their semblance of indexicality, the story too becomes incomprehensible, and the video

wanders away from the room of the slideshow, allowing the viewer to see what is happening elsewhere. *Everywhere Was the Same* brings the possibility of paradigm shift to the fore, be it formal, political or historic, through collapsing these into a narrative that allows mythology as a means to understand the trauma of displacement. The title indicates that this trauma is carried, that it creates a film over the eyes, thereby mediating what is lived in a new context. Our past experiences cannot help but shape our understandings of the present.

Alsharif's practice evinces an interest in how people relate to and internalize geo-political shifts that occur within their lifetimes, and those they carry with them from past

generations. Weaving structural visual codes with material archives in her work, Alsharif's aim is to decentralize content and produce work that operates through a multi-vantage perspective, thereby transforming information into a visceral experience. Archives become videos, the buried and hushed become public and loud. As such, her practice performs a liberating function on archives, personal or otherwise, restoring to them the uncertainty of the lived experience from which they draw.

- Erik Martinson and cheyanne turions, Curators



Basma Alsharif, *Turkish Delight*, 2010, 3 minutes, video

BIOGRAPHIES

Born in Kuwait to Palestinian parents, **Basma Alsharif** spent her early childhood in France, and then immigrated to the US after being denied residency. She received an MFA from UIC in 2007 and relocated to Egypt. Alsharif has since worked between the US, Egypt, Lebanon, Jordan and the UAE on multi-media and single channel installation works. Alsharif's work has shown in exhibitions and film festivals internationally.

Erik Martinson is an independent curator and has been a member of the Pleasure Dome programming collective since 2006. He has curated film/video programs for Art Star 3: Video Art Biennale at SAW Gallery (2007), Vtape's Curatorial Incubator (2009), Rendezvous with Madness Film Festival (2010, 2011) and The Images Festival (2012), plus numerous events and screenings with Pleasure Dome. He has worked in video distribution at Vtape as the Submissions and Outreach Coordinator since 2005.

cheyanne turions is a Toronto-based writer and curator. She is the director of No Reading After the Internet (Toronto), sits on the Board of Directors for Fillip and the Editorial Advisory Committee at FUSE, and recently worked with the Images Festival as Off Screen Exhibitions Assistant. Currently, she is the Shop Manager at Art Metropole. She maintains a website devoted to dialogue around curatorial practice at cheyanneturions.wordpress.com.

Alsharif will be leading a workshop at Trinity Square Video entitled *The Re-Enactments*. For more information and registration, please visit www.trinitysquarevideo.com.

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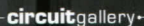
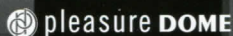
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