

Basel Abbas and Ruanne Abou-Rahme: Only sounds that tremble through us

April 4 – July 28, 2024, Hayden Gallery



MIT List Visual
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Working across a range of media—including moving-image installations, sound, performance, and poetry—Basel Abbas and Ruanne Abou-Rahme undertake long-term research projects that center themes of collectivity, resilience, and memory.

Their research, most recently into communal song and dance in the Arab world, yields densely layered, nonlinear narratives and saturated, multi-modal installations. Complicating these works—which sample found video footage alongside their own images and intense, pulsing soundscapes—is the artists' concern with gaps and glitches, as well as consistent reflection on their own role in translating the fugitive sounds and images they engage. References to masks and digital avatars raise questions of visibility and opacity, as does their use of surreal and inverted colors, which suggest the limits of the visible light spectrum.

Abbas and Abou-Rahme's exhibition features three bodies of work from their decade-long project *May amnesia never kiss us on the mouth: Only sounds that tremble through us* (2010–ongoing).

A central three-channel video installation, *Only sounds that tremble through us* (2020–22), which debuted at the Museum of Modern Art in New York in 2022, builds upon the artists' digital video archive of everyday song and dance—primarily from communities in Iraq, Palestine, Syria, and Yemen—which the artists collected from social media. At Abbas and Abou-Rahme's invitation, three musicians and one dancer use their bodies as samplers and take up varied improvisations in response to the movements, lyrics, or sentiments they observed in these quotidian recordings. Surfacing these ephemeral gestures through reinterpretation, Abbas and Abou-Rahme ask what it means to archive sound and gesture through embodiment and look to song and dance as modes of resilience and repositories of memory in the face of loss.



Low cloud hum, 2023 (detail). Installation view: Sharjah Biennial.
Photo: Shanavas Jamaluddin

Front cover:
May amnesia never kiss us on the mouth: Only sounds that tremble through us, 2020–22 (still)



May amnesia never kiss us on the mouth: Only sounds that tremble through us, 2020–22 (detail). Installation view: Astrup Fearnley Museet, Oslo, Norway. Photo: Christian Øen

May amnesia never kiss us on the mouth: Only sounds that tremble through us, 2020–22

Only sounds that tremble through us presents moving-image montage across three channels, in an installation marked by a multiplicity of screens and glowing pink-violet light. Steel and concrete surfaces fragment and fracture each channel of video, refusing the possibility of a complete image. Despite its lush, palpitating moving images, overlaid by lyrical text in English and Arabic, *Only sounds* is equally concerned with sound: rhythms and melodies transmitted between bodies, frequencies impervious to walls. Its soundtrack is richly layered with echoes and reverberations, and song and voice serve as testimony to varied forms of loss and longing.

Only sounds emerged from *May amnesia never kiss us on the mouth*, Abbas and Abou-Rahme's ongoing archival project that began in 2010 when they observed—initially via video clips posted on social media—the popular uprisings that became

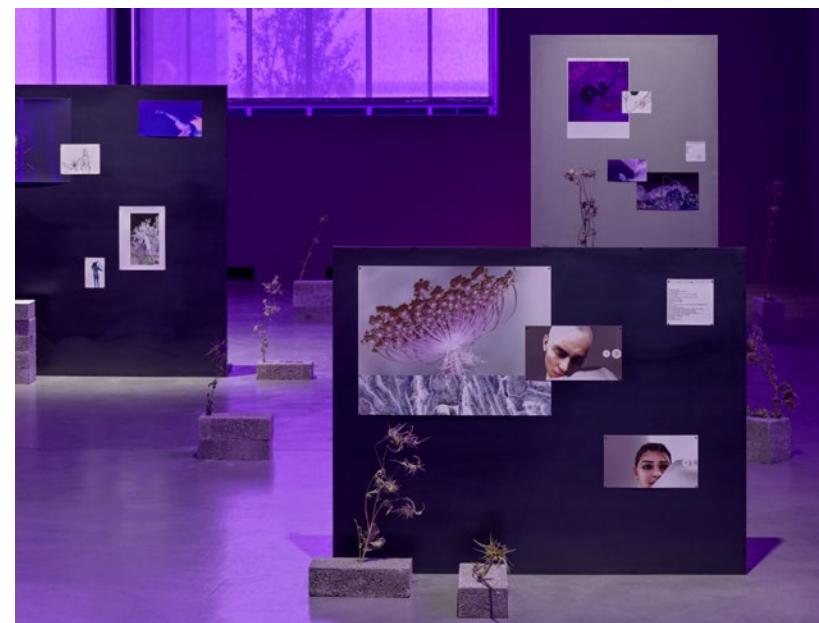
known in the West as the “Arab Spring.” Aware of both the historic import and the fugitivity of these digital (and open-source) fragments, they began to download and collect them, eventually building a moving-image archive that encompasses varied forms of movement and voice. Over the years, scenes of protest were joined by moments of song and dance, at times blurring the distinction between them. In *Only sounds*, for example, the artists incorporate, in color negative, samples of a 1990s television clip of an expressive Kawliya dance, and footage of a group of men dancing the *dabke*. For the artists, all of these acts form part of a personal archive of how, in their words, “fractured communities are resisting their own erasure and laying claim to space, self, and collectivity once more.”

What distinguishes *Only sounds* is the artists' effort to reimagine the gestures, melodies, and sentiments in this footage

through performance. Rather than creating a work of montage from found video, they spent over three years working with Palestinian musicians Haykal, Julmud, and Makimakkuk and dancer Rima Baransi to study this archival material, eventually inviting each of them to use their body as a sampler. In *Only sounds*, the performers are central; the found footage is sampled

sparingly. *May amnesia*, whose title is borrowed from Roberto Bolaño's “Infrarealist Manifesto,” is part contemporary lament and part call, or an incantation against forgetting, with *Only sounds* amplifying performance as a vehicle for resilience and the creation of community across time and space.

Where the soil has been disturbed, 2022 Low cloud hum, 2023



Where the soil has been disturbed, 2022 (detail). Installation view: Migros Museum, Zurich, 2022. Photo: Stefan Altenburger Photography, Zurich

Where the soil has been disturbed consists of a field of freestanding steel panels interspersed with concrete bricks, from which skeletal thistle plants seem to grow. Images, drawings, and printed screengrabs of the artists' poetry are posted on the panels. They are arranged in overlapping constellations, like digital windows on a stilled computer screen. Some show glitched avatars of faces, while others display tinted or color-inverted

images of leaves and stems. In a number of the drawings, human and plant forms intermingle, foretelling nonhuman modes of remembering. The installation is joined by *Low cloud hum*, a series of banners with saturated images of plants that debuted at the Sharjah Biennial 15 in early 2023. Subtly swaying, they echo the unearthly palette of the nearby video projection, hovering above the ground.

The Syrian thistle in this installation grows in areas of disturbance, and can inadvertently mark the ruins of former Palestinian villages. (The thistle's deep rhizomatic growth and wind-blown seed dispersal also make it a resilient source of wild food and medicine.) When the plants decay, their nutrients return to the soil and nourish other dormant or suppressed forms of vegetation. The plants within this gallery are no longer

alive, but their skeletal shapes nonetheless generate a kind of archive: as the artists write in one of their poems, "An echo / buried . . . deep / down / but / calling still." Together, these installations attest to how the land itself—through the vegetation and ecosystems it supports—also serves as a site for witnessing and inscription, as well as nourishment and resilience.

WORKS IN THE EXHIBITION

May amnesia never kiss us on the mouth: Only sounds that tremble through us, 2020–22
Three-channel video installation, two-channel sound with subwoofer, steel and concrete panels, custom seating
34:40 min.

Where the soil has been disturbed, 2022
Installation with six steel panels, digital images, thistles (dried Syrian and milk thistle, amount varies according to site), concrete blocks, original drawings, single-channel video, silent
23:22 min.

Low cloud hum, 2023
Digital prints on chiffon
Dimensions variable

All works courtesy the artists

LEARN MORE

Bolaño, Roberto. "Infrarealist Manifesto," 1976.

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Frampton, Hollis. *On the Camera Arts and Consecutive Matters: The Writings of Hollis Frampton*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2015.

hooks, bell. *Art on My Mind: Visual Politics*. New York: New Press, 1998.

Joy, Jen. *The Choreographic*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2014

Lyon, Dawn. *Rhythmanalysis: Research Methods*. London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2020.

Rich, Adrienne. *Diving into the Wreck: Poems 1971–1972*. New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2013.

Rich, Adrienne. *An Atlas of the Difficult World: Poems, 1988–1991*. New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1991.

Said, Edward W. *After the Last Sky: Palestinian Lives*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1999.

Serge, Victor. *Unforgiving Years*. New York: New York Review Books, 2008.

Serge, Victor. *Memoirs of a Revolutionary*. New York: New York Review Books, 2012.

Williamson, Sophie J. *Translation. Documents of Contemporary Art*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2020.

ABOUT THE ARTISTS

Basel Abbas (b. 1983, Nicosia, Cyprus) and **Ruanne Abou-Rahme** (b. 1983, Boston, MA) live and work between New York and Palestine and have collaborated since 2007. They have had institutional solo exhibitions at, among others, Astrup Fearnley Museet, Oslo (2023); the Museum of Modern Art, New York (2022); Common Guild, Glasgow (2022); Migros Museum, Zurich (2022); the Art Institute of Chicago (2021); Centraal Museum, Utrecht (2020); Kunstverein in Hamburg (2018); Art Jameel Project Space Dubai (2017); and the Institute of Contemporary Art, Philadelphia (2015). Their work has been included in major international biennials such as the Sharjah Biennial (2023, 2015), the Berlin Biennial (2022), the Busan Biennial (2018), the Gwangju Biennial (2014), the São Paulo Biennial (2014), the Istanbul Biennial (2013), the Liverpool Biennial (2010), and the Venice Biennale (2009). After this presentation, the artists have upcoming exhibitions at Copenhagen Contemporary and with Fondazione In Between Art and Film in Venice.

Abbas and Abou-Rahme's exhibition is organized by Natalie Bell, Curator.

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PUBLIC PROGRAMS



Graduate Student Talk: Ghida Anouti

April 11, 2024, 5:30 PM
Hybrid program



Graduate Student Talk: Brittany Ellis

May 8, 2024, 5:30 PM
Hybrid program

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