PALESTINIAN ARTISTS BASEL
Abbas and Ruanne Abou-Rahme have persisted in making through non-endings for fourteen years, most recently in their rematerialization of May amnesia never kiss us on the mouth (2010–ongoing) at the MIT List Visual Arts Center. To characterize their practice as itinerant, or to briskly elide their acts of resistance as the sedimentation of found footage from the Arab world, would be to conceal the force of systematic displacement they so resist on every physical and affective register. Instead, we need only simply notice the discreet labor of Abbas and Abou-Rahme’s inculcating gestures—starting with the filtering of external sunlight with a pink-violet gel onto the Hayden Gallery’s central glass wall, queering the notion of a rose-tinted perspective to prime our perception of their archive.

A two-channel soundtrack of syncopated synthetic beats and howling alarms draws us through the gallery before we even see its source, emanating from the three-channel video installation Only sounds that tremble through us (2020–2022). Along with the tinted light that fills and reverberates through the space, we are compelled to move toward the video installation, past the initial exhibit Where the soil has been disturbed (2023) despite its immediate visibility at the entrance of the gallery.

Abbas and Abou-Rahme effectiv ely create an inescapable sensorial field, even if one averts one’s gaze. It is useful here to think with their precise artistic strategy: contamina tion.* Despite the seeming impossibility of inculcating an “other” into the unending grief of decades-long dispossession and ongoing genocide, Abbas and Abou-Rahme operationalize the sonic as a form of intoxication. This pervasive contamination is evocative of Mel Y. Chen’s notion* of the non-dualistic toxic spectacular and toxic ordinary, specifically the tension of artuming to slow, ongoing structural violence over absolute and apparent devastation. We are lured into the depths of the gallery, made to move through the various scaffolding of the installed work, now positioned to receive a sliver of everyday reality.

As with most installations of Abbas and Abou-Rahme’s work, such as earlier works And yet my mask is powerful (2016) and Oh shining star testify (2009), the MIT List edition of Only sounds that tremble through us places disaggregation to the fore. There is not a single untroubled surface, with eroded steel and concrete panels usurping the projection screens in receiving solid images, casting shadows and aspersions on their coherent form. This compulsion for the image to riff and tear is rooted in their internal motion, the videos themselves recalling online-sourced recordings of vernacular Iraqi, Palestinian, Syrian, and Yemeni performances. At moments all three screens are synced, displaying the same images, and in others they allow Abbas and Abou-Rahme’s choreographer collaborators to converse and channel their desire to return home from three diffactive angles. Every contemplative beat slips into uncontainable rocking, pounding, revolt, in every scenario; longing over arid landscapes, raving in the domestic abode, synchronized in moving between land and sea. This liberation from restraint is reflected in other installation elements: The projector key is intented aligned to allow images to spill onto the floor; stills extracted from the corpus of May amnesia never kiss us on the mouth archived videos flutter in their chiffon banner form in the installation of Lou cloud hum (2023).

We are clued into Abbas and Abou-Rahme’s physical manifestation of a desktop documentation in the exhibition’s installation form, into a viewing paradigm where these images are actively conversing with one another. Where the soil has been disturbed indexes the processing of traumatic experience on a computer, with digital-image prints of mourning poems represented with their text-box software frame. These planar interruptions render a landscape that is decidedly anti-perspectival, or more precisely anti-spectatorial, placing the viewer in the active mode akin to Abbas and Abou-Rahme’s sitting through their accrued archive.

Sedimentations of everyday performance are never isolated phenomena; they are tethered to a continuous, echoing collective. Such a presentation of predomi nantly moving-image work is pleasantly intuitive, resembling our many-windowed interfacing with online-circulated videos, a far cry from dictatorial cinematic black boxes.

We are under no illusions that these moving images are transmitted as a direct broadcast from
“Signed, Sealed, Delivered: Envelopes Addressed and Mailed by Type Designers and Notable Graphic Designers” at Katherine Small Gallery by Poppy Livingstone

KATHERINE SMALL GALLERY wants you to pay attention. Its angled front stoop stirs into a small world of particularities. There are graphic design catalogs to peruse, handsome books to pore over, and a venerable zoo of typographic specimens to consider and compare. Michael Russem, a book designer of good humor and singular tastes, owns and runs a private library. Aiming to share his collections with like-minded designers and introduce non-designers to the omnipresent and accessible nature of graphic design, Russem’s exhibitions often serve as exercises in comparison and close looking. An early show placed book covers by Dick Bruna next to twentieth-century Japanese matchboxes. Another displayed pieces by Milton Glaser and Corita Kent alongside gum wrappers and ephemera Russem found on the street. Here, the design stories of everyday objects are treated with the same reverence as seminal works of typography and design.

The latest installment in Katherine Small’s biannual curriculum is “Signed, Sealed, Delivered: Envelopes Addressed and Mailed by Type Designers and Notable Graphic Designers.” Drawing largely from Russem’s collections and correspondences, the exhibition explores how thirty-six masters of modern design approached the once daily task of addressing the envelope. Envelopes pose an exceedingly simple and familiar design problem. The return address must slot into the top-left corner. The mailing address must be printed legibly in the center. Though there is room for decoration and experimentation within these constraints, these core features are universally shared. In this way, the envelope is uniquely suited for the kind of comparative design thinking that Katherine Small Gallery fosters.

“Signed, Sealed, Delivered” is housed in two large flat files containing five drawers each. One file is nestled in the alcove of the space’s generous bay windows; the other sits along the gallery’s left wall between a well-stocked bookshelf and Russem’s desk. Given Katherine Small’s emphasis on the overlooked, this presentation is fitting: to view the envelopes, one must open and peer into each glass-covered compartment. The repetitive act of glissading a drawer along its tracks calls to mind the action of opening a long-anticipated letter. It conjures a sense of anticipation, recalling a time when correspondence was a tactile process rewarding patience and close reading.

The oldest letters in the exhibit illuminate the lost art of letter writing. Languid arcs of cursive mark the postcard of illustrator...