

PROJECTS

'Graphic Witness' at Drawing Room, London

010 / 16 June 2017

When images of conflict and protest can be so easily captured on mobile devices, why translate them into graphic representations? How does the translation into graphic form change the act of witnessing, fabricate commentaries on instances of injustice, and persuade people to consider their role in prompting social change?

Graphic Witness, which runs at London's Drawing Room until 09 July 2017, includes artists from different generations and from different parts of the world who have chosen drawing to create vivid representations of troubling subject matter. In a typically anti-authorial gesture, Rirkrit Tiravanija employed young Thai art graduates to make *Demonstration Drawings* (2006), which are copies of newspaper images. Stirred by the increasing number of political gatherings, in 2003 Tiravanija began to snip cuttings from the *International Herald Tribune*, particularly of protest occurring in south east Asia. Each drawing is inflected with the author's particular investment in the subject of the protest and even their physical participation in it.


Nidhal Chamekh was born in Tunisia into a family of political activists. He uses his skills as a draughtsman to comment on the tumultuous history of his country and the fallout of the Arab Spring. *Studying Circles* (2015) is made on the grand scale and tradition of the history painting and employs devices that characterise the studies of Renaissance artists, such as *pentimenti* and unfinished areas, to depict a scene of self-immolation that took place on the steps of the theatre in Tunisia in 2013.


Mounira Al Solh was born in Beirut and grew up there during the civil war. *Are you pretending to be Jesus?* (2017) is a large-scale work in oil, acrylic, ink and charcoal on canvas. This work uses an expressive mode of drawing to depict a horrific incident that she has stored in her memory. Humour and irony are key to Al Solh's works that relate stories of upheaval and survival during the civil war in Lebanon and today, as individuals flee the war in Syria.


These graphic representations of incarceration, torture, protest, cruelty and human resilience are self-consciously fictional. They are fabricated from a combination of appropriation, observation and imagination. We can see what has been drawn, what has been erased, and what has been edited out. Each bears witness not only to actual incidents, but to the artists' investment of reflection and time. This slow consideration and execution might encourage us to think again about the stories that capture the popular imagination, and to consider the causes, rather than focus on the outcomes, of unethical political regimes. These simple graphic means suggest that we are all implicated, and each of us has a role to play in making the world a more humane place.

By Kate Macfarlane

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
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
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Graphic Witness is related to a chapter of the same name by Kate Macfarlane (curator and co-director, Drawing Room) commissioned for *The Companion to Contemporary Drawing* edited by Kelly Chorpene and Rebecca Fortnum to be published by Wiley Blackwell in 2018. The Companion is divided into three parts; 'The Condition of Drawing', 'The Expanse of Drawing' and the 'The Power of Drawing', the section that will host Macfarlane's chapter.

Mounira Al Solh



THE DIGITAL AGE, ARCHIVING AS AN ACT OF RESISTANCE

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Lara Baladi

For the last six years, I have been meeting with people who were forced to flee from Syria to Lebanon. Many Syrians have family ties in Lebanon, in the same way as I have family ties in Damascus. During the Lebanese Civil war (1975–1990), we fled and lived for weeks, sometimes for a few months, or a year at a time in Damascus. My grandmother is from Damascus, and many of our family members didn't escape Syria (as my grandmother did in 1958 after her property there was confiscated when Abdel Nasser decided to make a "Union" with Syria, which ended being more like an occupation).

In 2011, as I was pregnant, making a child in my belly, the Syrian regime arrested a few kids. Inspired by demonstrations in Egypt and in Tunis, these kids wrote expressions against the dictatorship on the wall of their school in Daraa. During the night, they were stolen out of their houses, arrested by the Assad regime and imprisoned. Needless-to-say that each person, animal and insect inside the jails of the Assad regime would be tortured. How about those children?

I grew up during the war, and that's why I used to refuse to speak about the war, for me it has always been more interesting to speak about survival strategies. When the Syrian revolution started, and after that, when it started shifting into a war, all my beliefs were turned around. I read Mahmoud Darwish (1941–2008), the Palestinian poet, who spoke about how much he favored writing about existentialist issues. When he returned

to Palestine and was confronted with the extreme situation of being besieged by the Israelis for several months, then it became impossible to write about anything else.

In fact, Beirut is a place that functions as a direct mirror of the war in Syria. The movement of the Syrian people escaping to Lebanon resembles, in terms of distances and language, internal displacement. However, since 2015 Syrians have to obtain visas to remain in Lebanon, and sometimes they incur abuse from some parts of Lebanese society. One of the reasons for this is that the Lebanese are not able to distinguish between the Syrian army which occupied and ruled Lebanon for some thirty years, and the Syrian regime which still controls the most important political decisions and positions in Lebanon. In fact the regime considers Lebanon as an oasis for Syria, not as an independent country and it doesn't recognize its borders.

I Strongly Believe in Our Right to be Frivolous (ongoing), is 1000 drawings and notes on legal paper, which began as a series of portraits, or perhaps time documents, functioning as witnesses to the current Syrian crisis. Through this work I met many individuals who had escaped death in Syria and come to Lebanon. Their distressing stories affected me so much that I had to find a way to express them, to unburden myself and share them with others. I am interested in finding different ways to disseminate these stories.

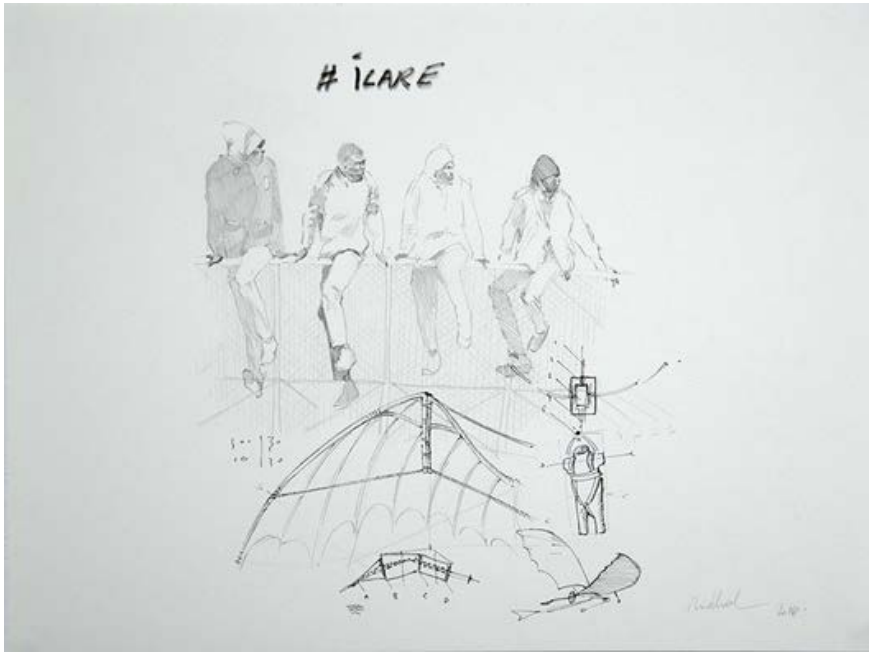
One of the most intense people I met was a man who was in Syrian jails for seven years. I began a particular friendship with him, because of his powerful stories and behavior. During those years, he was made to sleep in Saadnaya jail in a cell with Islamists, knowing that his background is communist. The Syrian regime often intentionally mixes individuals or groups who do not typically get along.

Others from the prison told me about a soldier at the checkpoint who refused to arrest demonstrators during the revolution. When he was arrested and the general accused him of letting 'criminals' away:

'Are you pretending to be Jesus, not wanting to arrest the criminal demonstrators?'

The general ordered his soldiers to crucify that man, and left him hanging until he died in jail in that position.

Nidhal Chamekh





Studying Circles is a synthesis of former works such as *Excursus* and *Study N°8* from *De Quoi Rêvent les Martyrs* series. It is one of the largest drawings till this point. The staging bears to the cinematic, in the way painting draws on history. But instead of a still image as in so many previous drawings, it is a halted action, as if the actors' performance is suddenly frozen in the presence of beholders. Action is interrupted by the presence of an outsider, or the beholder is partaking in the staged action, or a reversal even as to "what we see and who looks at us", the beholder is then the only actor, the "culprit", while the drawn group bears witness to the act.

The gaze is never fixed, an image calls another, an assembling of space and time and a dismantling of history by way of dissociation and association. Every motion, every gesture escapes the letters' significations, setting free the act of reading from the purely linguistic model. Terrestrial and celestial movements and gestures. In this, violence or the ruling tension partakes in this process of an image-drawn knowledge, words flop in front of such a tragedy; and instead, a world of images is disclosed, spectral and open. Reading the image also means connecting images. *Reading before any language, inside the wombs, in the stars or in dances* writes Walter Benjamin.

While the figures surrounding the burned and charred young man seem to be caught in their own chores, the gaze directed at us and equally amputated from the scene drowns the drawing in the strident silence. The image is the sole and unique reality, as interpellated by the group of actors, as drawn, but especially as "performed" by the beholder.

Studying Circles is based on a newspaper photograph documenting a real incident that took place two years ago on the main street in Downtown Tunis. On 12 March 2013, a twenty-seven-year-old cigarette vendor set himself on fire down the steps of Municipal Theatre on Habib Bourguiba Avenue, bringing back memories of similar incidents that swept the country in the wake of Mohammed Bouazizi's self-immolation in 2010 – an act that sparked the Tunisian uprising.

Rirkrit Tiravanjia



Rirkrit Tiravanija's *Demonstration Drawings* are an ongoing series of commissioned drawings derived from photographs of demonstrations published in the *International Herald Tribune*. While public protests and mass demonstrations have often been associated with the leftist politics of the 1960s, Tiravanija's project reconsiders their relevance in today's political climate. For the *Demonstration Drawings*, Tiravanija has commissioned Thai artists, often former students (many of whom may have themselves participated in some of the depicted demonstrations), to create a series of photorealistic pencil drawings depicting multifarious responses to power, oppression, and global capital.

A strong sense of ambiguity present in these drawings is in part owed to multiple acts of removal. The omission of the original captions, leaving no markers of time or place and lifting the original images from their journalistic context underscores the problematic nature of contemporary dissociation. Tiravanija's translation of photojournalist depictions of acts of political spontaneity into a medium itself characterized by immediacy, both psychological and material—turns ephemeral images of strife and social conflict into documents of political aspiration that can be understood as contemporary expressions of a complex set of collective responses to the neoliberal order. Finally, the artist's refusal of authorship, the resulting artificiality and the ways in which the images of the *Demonstration Drawings* reject the realism of mimesis, bring out the underlying reality far more hectically and convincingly than many more conventionally realist depictions are capable of doing.

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