Taysir Batniji: Full Bleed
LEASE AGREEMENT
BALTIMORE, MARYLAND
SEPTEMBER 27–OCTOBER 25, 2014

The recent exhibition Taysir Batniji: Full Bleed, curated by Liz Park, engaged with the themes of materiality, transience, and displacement. In the curatorial text, printed in a small handout, Park explains that the title Full Bleed refers to the process of printing and the trimming that is required to make an image that runs to the edge of the page. The image is sized larger than the page, and the portion that extends beyond the edge, or “bleed,” is sliced away in the final product. For Park, this concept is a metaphor for Paris–based multimedia artist Taysir Batniji’s experience as a Palestinian living in exile, the “bleed” signaling both the necessary loss of the image’s perimeter and the violence of the inevitable cut that echoes the precarious state of affairs in Palestine. Park conceived of and planned the exhibition in the wake of Israel’s attacks this past summer in the Gaza Strip, which killed more than 2,100 Palestinians.

The exhibition’s title, which can be read both materially and politically, took a cue from the tone of Batniji’s works. From his series Chambres (2005) to his video Transit (2004), Batniji’s examination of everyday experiences allows his viewers to arrive at larger political critiques rather than forcefully proclaiming a set of political views. Transit, which documents his journey from France through Cairo to Palestine, was one of the first works in the exhibition. The video is constructed from a series of still images that the artist snapped covertly during his travels. Photos of vans, desert roads, and airport waiting areas click past with the sound of a slide projector. Black “slides” both act as placeholders for images Batniji couldn’t take because it was too dangerous to photograph, and produce delays that signal the passage of time. One section of video footage interrupts the rhythmic lull of still images, with the tense voices and motion of immigration officers who call out family names and then throw passports through the air into a mass of waiting travelers. The geopolitical conflict between Israel and Palestine determines every step of Batniji’s journey, from the route he follows to the time it takes him to arrive at his destination, but this larger statement is implicit within the work rather than explicit. Batniji focuses on the transitional moments that make up the long trip, the waiting, the precarious nature of traveling across borders with certain passports, and the roadblocks he encountered.

The video was accompanied by a selection from a larger photographic series, Chambres, which depicts the rooms Batniji stayed in while an artist-in-residence at the Ecole des Beaux-Arts in Le Mans, France. Each photograph is taken from the doorway of one of the unoccupied, sparsely furnished rooms, and shows the moment of his arrival into its space or the moment of his departure. These photos register Batniji’s transience, but also reveal traces of previous occupants in the varied selection of furniture and décor. The final work in the exhibition was Untitled (1998), a suitcase of sand placed in front of three of the photographs from the Chambres series. Within the context of the other works in the show, and specifically in relation to the Chambres series, the sand-filled suitcase brought to mind evocative questions and associations about borders and belonging: What might it mean, for instance, to imagine taking some of the contested land of Palestine into exile? Do we always bear some trace of our previous destinations? Do these geographic spaces, like the rooms Batniji documents in Chambres, retain the traces left by us? How do we hold on to the idea of home when we are no longer situated within its space? What is it we bring with us when we leave one place to live for a time in another?

Park’s selection of images and objects emphasized the blurred ground between intimate connections and public identifications, between moving and settling, that underpins Batniji’s work. The unique context of Lease Agreement—which is also the first-floor living area of Adam Farcus and Allison Yasukawa’s home—was also evoked in these themes and in Park’s self-reflexive relationship to the space: she is the first guest curator to put forward an exhibition there. This delicate network of hosting and collaboration is nicely captured in the take-away exhibition pamphlet, which contains Park’s curatorial essay and two more of Batniji’s works. Printed recto and verso on the exterior are photographs of keys Batniji used in Gaza before leaving for Paris, and his remake version of them in glass in Untitled (2007). Park’s exhibition statement is printed in another fold, and when the 11 x 17” sheet is fully opened, selections from Batniji’s Transit #2 (2003), drawings made from memory before his video work Transit, appear in a grid on the inside. It is these last two works about transience and displacement that continue to travel with the viewer long after they have left Lease Agreement.

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