

Basma Alsharif at the MOCA

By Rashana Youtzy / Opinion / March 19, 2019 / Arts and Culture



The Museum of Contemporary Art in Toronto recently opened its doors again in the fall of 2018, and with the opening came the impression that Toronto's desire for contemporary art would be satiated once more. The *Believe* exhibition (closed January 6, 2019) was promising, but the current exhibition featuring Basma Alsharif's works leaves that thought stunted and shriveled.

The show, presented at MOCA, weaves together four works, each of them displayed on a staged setting in an array of media (literature, images, and video). The intention is to lead us on a journey into the collective subconscious—exploring the tools we employ to understand the “ghosts of history” with a narrative based in Lebanon, through 1935 Palestine, and into the New Kingdom Egypt. The exhibition claims to investigate how we understand the past, including memory, deteriorating histories, and geopolitical dynamics through an inviting, intimate, and domestic staged setting.

My first impression of the exhibition was sincerely underwhelming—almost as if the artist and curator had been collaborating on a successful marketing scheme for their exhibition proposal but forgot about rendering the exhibition true to the concept. As soon as I entered the exhibition space, I asked, “Is this the right floor?” I felt so lost, not only in terms of physical disorientation but also on a mental level. My heart just wouldn't engage with the exhibition. In terms of exhibition design, it's characterized by its flaws: the didactics in the space are integral to understanding many of the works; however, their placement is not conducive to interpreting the space effectively, as is the case with Alsharif's film *Girls Only* (2014). The work is a senseless rhyming game, using the Panathenaic Stadium in Athens, created to play with the representation of power and the authority of universally accepted histories. Meanwhile, at the core of the exhibition is the exploration of collective subconscious through storytelling and the idea of participatory learning in a familiar and domestic setting. That idea is not realized with this exhibition—there is an expected shortcoming to building a “home” atmosphere within a gallery, but patrons cannot escape the artifice that permeates the space. For example, in an attempt to build a home, the placement of artificial grass and a number of plants offer some semblance of décor, but it feels halfhearted. Unfortunately, I actively struggled to see the artist's commitment throughout the space.

Admittedly, I thought my first impression was too negative, that I was taking the artist's creativity for granted, or maybe I was in a bad mood and let that affect my perception of her work and experience of the space. So, I went back a second time, and my original impression held steady, but I was better able to judge and justify my claims. The exhibition's lack of the domesticity and intimacy that should accompany the telling of histories, especially ones relating to collective memory, was still a fact that I could not deny. Further, the exhibition is disorienting in the way it retells history: there is no cohesive fluidity. However, this is not necessarily a fault in the exhibition since it does hold true to the notion that we can learn about inherited trauma without truly understanding it.

I should also note that the artist is successful in certain aspects of the exhibition. For instance, there is a span of wall that, at a glance, is reminiscent of photo collections adorning the walls of distant, older family members' homes that feature relatives who they “haven't seen or heard from in umpteen years.” Though the primary difference here is the fact that the faces within the photographs are censored or erased, a reality in diasporic histories where the remembrance of individuals often fails to be maintained, this erasure can also be applied broadly as a reminder that we gain an anonymous identity as our existence fades in others' memories. This further relates to an idea mentioned within the exhibition about implementing the look of the “salon,” directly related to the Western art canon through the sheer abundance of visual material being hung. Though this point was explicitly made on a text within the space, I failed to understand why it was important. Perhaps leaving Western identity in the periphery of this exhibition would be more successful—outside of recognizing how colonialism has created dominant paradigms and projected stereotypes of the Middle East. Once again, it was necessary for me to look at the didactic in order to understand the importance of the images. The central work, “Trompe l'Oeil” (2016), features three images belonging to the T.E. Lawrence Collection of the Imperial War Museums archives. Each of the images shows people enslaved by Arabs, hung on walls of a Spanish colonial-style home in Los Angeles. They are re-photographed and displayed. The work is intended to function as an experiment in disrupting how we understand and read the past, though it relies on engaging with the work with an already established knowledge to recognize the imagery at hand.

Though I entered the space on two different occasions and left it feeling unsatisfied, my opinion should not serve as a warning to avoid the exhibition. I have my own expectations about how to communicate domesticity and collective memory, which have certainly played a role in how I perceived Alsharif's work. Please do visit the space, be mindful of what you are viewing, and think critically about what is successful or unsuccessful in the works you are engaging with.

Museum of Contemporary Art Toronto Canada

158 Sterling Road, Toronto, ON, M6R 2B2

Floor 3

February 14 to April 14, 2019

Saturday through Monday: 10 am to 5 pm

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