

Trouble in Archive: of Counter-Memories, Breakable Memories and other Proleptic Moves into the Past in Larissa Sansour's and Wael Shawky's Arts.

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Abstract

This article focuses on the solo exhibitions of Larissa Sansour entitled “In the Future They Ate from the Finest Porcelain” and “Archeology: In Absentia” (2016), along with Wael Shawky’s “Cabaret Crusades” trilogy (2010-2014). Their exhibitions offer fascinating reflections on the archive as construction and on the articulation of memory in traumatic contexts, whether these are the Nakba and the on-going colonisation of Palestine by Israel or the Christian Crusades to regain Jerusalem.

In their films and their creations of breakable objects, such as the porcelain plate and the glass puppet, they open up new possibilities to think and write about the past in modes that take ambivalence and subjectivity at face value. Furthermore, by articulating chronotopes that are fundamentally disjunctive, not only do the artists suggest alternative and counter-modes of remembering the past, they also draw our attention on the act of narrating the past as political process. Thus, not only do they create alternative narratives drawn from other perspectives – here the Arab one –, but they also debunk the myth of the archive as a factual and objective piece of literature and foreground perspectivism and precariousness instead.

In other words, Sansour and Shawky's artistic projects do not just aim at developing an Eastern historiography of traumatic times

only, and certainly do not participate in a simplistic clash of civilisations narrative. Their works are eminently contextualised, but they also resonate well beyond the Middle-East and show what art can do with/to the archives, escaping adversarial narratives and using them to create dissonance, critical distance, personal and social transformations.

Keywords: Utopia/Dystopia, Civilizational/National Mythology, Archive, Dissonance, Precariousness.