

CORNERS OF SOCIETAL OBSERVATION: SHADI HABIB ALLAH

Text by Allan Gardner
Mousse, Issue 68
Summer 2019

Shadi Habib Allah's artistic production traverses a spectrum of media, including sculpture, drawing, film, and installation. The materiality of the works is determined on a project-to-project basis, participating in a dialogue motivated by research, illustrated by material, and activated by viewers. The works are defined by physical engagement, and unified in their desire to suggest modes of navigation across disparate networks of people, places, objects, images, technologies, and economies. This comes with a view to examining, deconstructing, and understanding the structures of these networks, identifying signifiers of value and use within them.

In his video *Dag'aa* (2015), Habib Allah deconstructs a landscape and experience often overlooked. Filmed in areas south of the Egyptian tourist destinations Sharm El Sheikh and Dahab, it documents the activities of people in remote areas of the Sinai Peninsula, primarily militarized zones. The area is utilized by (and home to) Bedouin peoples, some engaged in smuggling operations, which the artist considers a by-product of the Egyptian government's reticence to engage with these nomadic people and its continued exploitation of what are traditionally Bedouin territories. During the initial filming, Habib traveled with and between Bedouin groups, moving from the southern area of the peninsula farther into remoter regions of the Sinai desert. With works like this, it can be challenging to illustrate the sheer scale of the subject matter. Before consideration is given to critical context, discursive properties, or semiotic language, perspective must be established on the vastness of what Habib Allah is filming and experiencing. His juxtaposition of shots—moving quickly from subtitled discussions, rapid movements, and driving across open desert to a singular man lying down or scrambling up a rock face—illustrates the duality of life in this unique environment. When it's quiet, it's a

thick, heavy quiet—a hot quiet that appears to sit on top of the people and push time to its slowest movement. As viewers, we can almost picture the sun slowly crossing the sky as the immense landscape stretches before us—an infinite potential muffled by an uncompromising environment. When silence is broken, it's shattered. The sound of an approaching vehicle is cranked to deafening volume, an artistic device focused on emphasizing the potential the vehicle represents in this context, but also in a way that one can imagine actually happening. Habib Allah mixes synthesizers with these sounds, industrial audio pushing the intensity that he creates in the work. *Dag'aa* conveys a sense of vastness, of potential, offering a perspective on the lifestyle of the Bedouin people as well as their relation to encroaching government and industrial powers. Habib Allah's current solo presentation at the Centre for Contemporary Art in Glasgow, 'Free Rein', explores how citizens in different areas adapt to changes in government-administered social welfare policies. This work is inspired in part by the embryonic counter-economies developing independently in response to austerity and the proliferation of corporate-managed chains and franchises. With particular attention given to this idea as it relates to the corner shop, Habib took influence from changes in policy that resulted in food scarcity in Miami—particularly Liberty City, where he used to live. The exhibition as a whole comes from dual perspectives in terms of social theory and lived experience. Although influenced by the alternative economies established in Liberty City, including the exchange of food stamps and welfare cards for cash, it echoes the experience in cityscapes worldwide. As austerity tightens its grip on communities and lumbering bureaucratic institutions lack the ability, let alone the inclination, to react effectively, these sub-economies develop naturally in response to the inherent violence of enforced poverty. Poor market regulation and institutional apathy toward communities most impacted will always lead to the establishment of new, alternative means of survival.

A new series of sculptures, *Measured Volume* (2018), illustrates this effectively. In Glasgow, as in New York, as in London, as in Miami, the image of the local shop that doesn't really seem to sell anything in particular is ubiquitous. Consisting of hollow plastic grocery wrappings arranged as though full and freshly delivered, Habib Allah echoes the absence of produce, the absence of commerce as it is usually defined. When entering one of these stores, we become conscious of a different experience, defined by different social markers and practices.

<https://www.mousse magazine.it/magazine/corners-societal-observation-shadi-habib-allah/>