

EVERYDAY UNDERGROUNDS: A CONVERSATION WITH SHADI HABIB ALLAH

Shadi Habib Allah interviewed by Michael McCanne

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Drawing on extensive fieldwork, Shadi Habib Allah sifts through intricate social and legal relationships to find their aesthetic traces. His work distills complex alternative economies into video works and spare sculptural pieces. Habib Allah's solo exhibition, "Put to Rights," is on view at the Renaissance Society in Chicago through November 4. Along with three older videos about illicit subcultures, the show features new work that explores how corner stores in Miami's Liberty City neighborhood use false records to track and cover up the trade of cash for food stamps. These pieces document the physical manifestations of this clandestine economy, while subtly critiquing the social policies that force storeowners and recipients of public benefits into mutual dependence. Habib Allah also has an audio installation and a sculpture based on his Liberty City research on display at the Hammer Museum in Los Angeles through January 20.

Born in Palestine, Habib Allah studied at Bezalel Academy of Arts and Design in Jerusalem and received an MFA from Columbia University in 2010. He is based in Miami. His earlier work explored such disparate subjects as Bedouin smugglers in the Sinai Peninsula, ghost stories in Jerusalem, and the trade in stolen electronics and auto parts in Miami. Habib Allah spoke to me via Skype while putting the finishing touches on his Chicago show and then again by phone while installing the project in Los Angeles.

Michael McCanne: *Tell me about your new work: 70 Days Behind Inventory and "Dropping the Tenth Digit."*

Shadi Habib Allah: *70 Days Behind Inventory* is a 750-square-foot vinyl floor taken in its entirety from a corner store in Liberty City, Miami, and placed in the gallery at the Renaissance Society. It's part of my research into how these stores' relationship with their neighborhood changed from selling groceries to providing alternative financial services, including gambling, loans, and food stamp scams. "Dropping the Tenth Digit" is a series of photos that documents the manual records storeowners use to track each food-stamp-for-cash transaction and make the charges to the food stamp cards look plausible for the city or the food stamp agency.

MMcC: *What was the genesis of these projects? How did you get access to the stores?*

SHA: I got to know some of the storeowners when I was first living in Miami, many years ago. Whenever I would go back to visit those stores, the owners would ask me to stand behind the cash register for five minutes while they went to the bathroom. Then customers would come and give me their food stamp card and say: "I want twenty." "Give me some cigarettes and fifty." But I didn't know what they were talking about. With food stamps you can only buy groceries: no alcohol, no cigarettes. But some stores will exchange food stamps for cash, charging fifty percent for each transaction. You lose fifty percent of the value but at the same time you get cash, and a lot of the beneficiaries need cash: to take a bus to go look for a job, to pay a phone bill, and so on. The storeowners keep the card for seven or ten days and they keep charging the card in sums that correspond to merchandise in order to empty the card.

The title of "Dropping the Tenth Digit" comes from the method the Florida welfare agency uses to inform beneficiaries when they are going to get their money deposited on their card each month. Benefits are made available from the first to the twenty-eighth day of every month, based on the eighth and ninth digit of the ten-digit case number. The recipients know how to interpret the numbers to determine when the month's deposit will be made available.

MMcC: *Are these kind of scams happening just in Florida?*

SHA: I'm sure they're happening all over, not just Florida. And the project is not about a specific locale. I'm not trying to make a portrait of a specific community. The work addresses bigger questions and how certain policies impact communities.

MMcC: *What draws you to work with alternative economies as subjects?*

SHA: I'm mainly interested in how systems and laws seem to affect certain people more than others and how this creates alternative economies that are continually changing and calibrated to appear legitimate to the government. I'm interested in how they exist visually. For example, right now I'm making a film about a pimp and the girls living with him—seventeen girls in a super fancy house. I'm trying to capture how they mimic acceptable norms. It reminds me of the soap operas from the 1980s and '90s. Everyone's together. They have family values, which are important. Everyone is wealthy but you're never shown what the business is.

MMcC: *So less than the systems themselves you're more focused on their appearances?*

SHA: Yes. I am still interested in the systems but the legal facades they produce is a very important part of my work.

MMcC: *Your work also seems to focus on how commodities circulate outside legal channels. I wanted to ask you about your video Daga'a (2015), which really explores this theme.*

SHA: *Daga'a* was shot over a period of a year and a half in the Sinai Peninsula, which is under Egyptian governance and mostly inhabited by Bedouin. The desert part of the Sinai has become very politically significant, especially as the main source of smuggled goods for the Gaza Strip. The film traces routes that the Bedouin use in the desert to smuggle goods and avoid the Egyptian army.

MMcC: *How did you get started on this project?*

SHA: There's an area in the south of Sinai on the Red Sea called Sharm El Sheikh. Following Israel's occupation of the Sinai Peninsula in 1967, Sharm El Sheikh, which had been a small Bedouin fishing town, started developing as a tourist destination. Since the 1980s and after Israel evacuated Sinai in 1982, Egypt continued to develop Sharm El Sheikh as a major resort town. A lot of Europeans go there, as well as a lot of people from Israel and Palestine. I went for the first time ten years ago, at thirty, which was quite late. Usually if you are from Palestine you go there when you're eighteen. You cross the border at Eilat and have to hire a cab to get from the Israeli border to Dahab or Sharm El Sheikh. One time I was riding with a Bedouin cab driver and we started talking politics. Bedouin in that area work mainly as taxi drivers. They don't consider themselves Egyptians, although they used to. They fought alongside the Egyptians under Nasser and Sadat but still the Bedouin are not treated as equal citizens.

Two years after Hamas won the 2006 parliamentary elections, Israel and Egypt blockaded the Gaza Strip. Since then, most of the supplies going into Gaza have been smuggled through tunnels from the Sinai. I was interested in how the Bedouin move things through the Sinai into Gaza. I brought a camera and slowly I started filming them. It took a long time. On one trip I would get deep into the desert and then meet someone else who would become my contact. Sometimes they would take me by boat to another part of the desert and tell me that my contact would be there. But I didn't know who the contact was. There were no phones, no nothing. I'd meet the person and just stare at them as they looked back at me. I was scared of them because I was alone there, cut off from everything. At the same time, they were probably a little bit hesitant because they didn't know if I was working for the government or something.

When I wanted to start filming in 2013, the Egyptian president Mohamed Morsi was overthrown and General Abdel Fattah al-Sisi took power. The Egyptian army invaded Sinai and the Bedouin launched their own resistance. It was very scary because even journalists were not allowed in. I had to smuggle the cameras with someone else through Jordan.

MMcC: *Do you think the Bedouin you were traveling with understood what you were doing? Did you explain it to them?*

SHA: I said that I was doing a film about Bedouin culture and traditions. But I think after a while, without me telling them, they understood my intentions. They realized that I was on their side, that I was against the government.

MMcC: *As I was watching Daga'a and some of your other films, I wondered how much you collaborate with your subjects.*

SHA: Some of the scenes are scripted but not fully. If I wanted to shoot a scene with a few specific lines, I would work with one person and give them the lines beforehand. When we were shooting they would repeat the lines but in their own words and the people around them would react to the lines in different ways. I did this with my film *The King and the Jester* in 2010. Parts of it were scripted, others not. Another film showing at the Renaissance Society, *S/N: 8FIGNA0021* [2012], was more scripted because I worked with an actor. For me, the scripted dialogue feels too artificial, because the actor was, you know, an actor.

MMcC: *You work a lot with marginalized communities and I wonder how you navigate the risk of exploitation.*

SHA: You have to have a sympathetic approach. But at the same time there is always the question of how much to tell your subjects. I tend to reveal more towards the end. I think it becomes natural because you spend time with them. And I also tend to develop relationships with the subjects. I don't just work on a project and then pull back and look for something else. For example, I still have relationships with the Bedouin. Whenever I go to the Sinai, I hang out with them.

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