



Curatorial essay

With an instinct for justice

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Elise Rasmussen, video still, *A Poetic Truth in a Pathetic Fallacy*, 2015-18

This essay accompanies *With an instinct for justice*, an exhibition with Shadi Harouni and Elise Rasmussen, at the Doris McCarthy Gallery from May 5 - June 30, 2018.

With an instinct for justice brings together two projects that reveal acts of collective resistance and the poetic, lingering impact that individuals working together can have on systems of power. Elise Rasmussen and Shadi Harouni's works offer intimate portraits of pushback. Addressing the economic, political, and social arenas in which citizens take action against oppressive forces, each project directly registers the political and the global on human, individual, and personal scales. Conflict is at the core of these oppositions, but the works within this exhibition also offer a sense of catharsis, empowerment, and perhaps even resurgence. *With an instinct for justice* makes us acutely aware of the embodied nature of resistance and the emotional investments that counteractions demand. Both Rasmussen and Harouni document social subjects within contested contexts of commodification, resource extraction, and political power. While Harouni's works frame a resistance to erasure, Rasmussen directs our attention to corporeal resistance. The resonances that linger between these two projects talk us through intimate and mighty acts of refusal.

Elise Rasmussen's *A Poetic Truth in a Pathetic Fallacy* (2015-18) takes as its conceptual starting point the Dürer Rhinoceros (1515), a woodcut inspired by a rhino that had been gifted to the King of Portugal by the Indian sultan. Because this was the first time a rhino had been seen in Europe since the Roman Empire, it was received with great pageantry. The rhino, however, did not stay long in Portugal. It was instead quickly regifted to the Pope in an act meant to elicit political favour for the imperialist nation in which it was originally received. Further adding to the woodcut's allure, Albrecht Dürer had never actually seen a living rhino and based his drawing on a sketch and letter describing the animal. It is estimated that in his lifetime Dürer sold between four thousand and five thousand copies of the rhino print. His success as an artist was largely owing to his ability to mass-produce this and other works through the then-new technology of woodcutting.

Rasmussen's two-channel video briefly and subtly pictures the Dürer Rhinoceros: a reference to her interest in the mythology of art histories. As with several of her works, *A Poetic Truth* represents objects taken out of context, deconstructing the mythologies in which they are imagined. Here that object is a taxidermied rhinoceros from the National Museum of Ireland's Natural History Museum. Like the Dürer Rhinoceros, this stuffed rhino points outside of itself to politics of trade, conquest, and



Elise Rasmussen, *From the Cradle I Collect 1 - 4*, 2016-17

the commodification of nature. The video moves slowly across the rhino's textured hide and pans steadily across the museum to expose various elements of its biological collection and archives. Stripped of its own agency, the rhino becomes a surrogate for how museums have historically and continuously ordered the natural world according to colonial and imperialist ideologies of ownership and ascendancy. These concerns are further explored in four images that accompany the video. Featuring still lifes of feathers, skulls, rocks, and other objects collected from the Cradle of Humankind while Rasmussen was on an artist residency in South Africa through the Nirox Foundation, the images also reflect on museological and anthropological impulses to collect and contain, and a long-standing practice of laying claim to biological diversity. Rather than idle here, Rasmussen extends her inquiries beyond collections and museums.

Shifting from lifeless to extant rhinos, the video introduces us to one of the rhino's most recent defenders, the Black Mambas. This nearly all-female anti-poaching unit in South Africa was founded in 2013 to protect the boundaries of the 52,000-hectare Balule Nature Reserve, part of the Greater Kruger National Park. The paramilitary unit of women recruited from local communities combats rhino poaching and illegal hunting expeditions by tourists looking to consume "bush meat." Rhinos in particular have been targeted among big game

animals for the unverifiable health properties of their horns.¹ Even as environmentalism has grown, wildlife protections have remained precarious and often unenforceable. The Black Mambas, therefore, play a critical role in resisting poaching, often at great personal risk.

Rasmussen notes that the Black Mambas are accustomed to media attention and posing in front of the camera, so it was important to find an alternative visual language in which to produce the work. She does so through carefully constructed images of the uniformed Mambas occupying the frame by way of heedful movement – patrolling, assembling, training. Rasmussen also narrows in on the educational mandate of the Mambas, something that appears to be consistently overlooked by media accounts of the anti-poaching unit. Spending a long period of time with the Mambas, while on the same residency mentioned above, provided Rasmussen with the chance to document the group's outreach efforts within various schools. The artist's juxtaposition of schoolchildren with images of tourists, rhinos, and members of the Mambas elides the many actors who are implicated, whether by choice or not, within the global drive to commodify the natural world. This entanglement of actors also unsettles the troublingly familiar view of environmentalism and a commitment to responsible stewardship of the land as a white undertaking.



Shadi Harouni, video still, *The Lightest of Stones*, 2015

While *A Poetic Truth* extends Rasmussen's interests in the mythologies of art histories, it equally speaks to her concern with women's labour. She notes in her artist statement that the video "considers ways in which human-kind has been fascinated by and has misinterpreted the rhinoceros, exploring the urgency to keep this genus from extinction while considering the lingering effects of colonialism and collection... This project is a multi-layered investigation into the link between globalization and extinction, using the rhino as a stand-in to speak about the relationship between bodies, labour, desire and misconception."² Indexing the various ways rhinos have been figuratively and literally consumed locates the video within a larger politics of place and economy. Within this framework, the Black Mambas' resistance to "sport" hunting is perhaps equally a refusal to accept colonial legacies and oppressive geopolitics. The Mambas alert us to the fraught histories of extractionist commodities and in the process articulate the urgency of their labour within greater contexts of defiance.

Shadi Harouni likewise complicates histories of – and contemporary conditions related to – labour, embodied experiences, commodified natural resources, and resistance. Her 2015 video *The Lightest of Stones*, shot in a pumice quarry in Iranian Kurdistan, brings together a group of men whose employment at the quarry has been made profitless due to trade sanctions imposed against Iran. The

American-sponsored sanctions have been in effect in various capacities since the 1979 Iranian hostage crisis. Several of the men in the video are Marxist dissidents, and all are displaced individuals who are unable to work in the professions they have been trained in, as economic conditions have excluded them from pursuing such employment.

The group watch as Harouni, her back to the camera, attempts to carve through the mountain by hand. Looking on, they discuss the artist's task, their precarious working conditions, ISIS, dragons, Jennifer Lopez, and how they are misrepresented by the West. This dialogue and the artist's unavailing performance renders the film both sombre and comical. *The Lightest of Stones* references the political and economic realities in Iran but also how, in difficult circumstances, being in front of the camera talking, teasing, reminiscing, and joking can become a form of resistance in and of itself. Harouni's one-person mining operation might further reveal the ways in which she approaches her work as a process of sifting through marginalized and silenced histories of refusal.

This idea finds additional traction in *I Long for a Game of Football* (2017). Framed as an extension of *The Lightest of Stones*, the video follows a group of miners as they play soccer within the stratified rock walls of a quarry. The game was specifically set up for the video, and the makeshift soccer field was



Shadi Harouni, video still, *I Long for a Game of Football*, 2017

flattened by the players themselves. Harouni is here, too, sometimes playing, sometimes watching. In what is perhaps not an overt act of refusal, the men here resist being excluded from their own histories. They do so by taking up space, by being seen, by refusing to be barred from commonplace activities. For Harouni there is also something significant about directing our attention toward people simply waiting around and playing that resists the kind of fetishistic and flat representations that all too often accompany individuals from the Middle East.

Quarries are important places for Harouni, as several of these sites have become refuges for displaced and excised revolutionaries. *I Dream the Mountain is Still Whole* (2017) focuses on a dissident remembering his struggle as a Marxist resister in pre- and post-Revolutionary Iran but also hopefully recalling his ideals and his past, while carefully negotiating the moonscape-like terrain of the quarry. He recalls, among other difficult memories, being forcefully relocated and driven out of his chosen profession – teaching – and into “all manner of hard labour.” The weight of this past and the precariousness inflicted on those who live through these histories are reflected in the video’s momentary sidesteps, in which a pair of hands arduously balance large stones. Hidden from view behind a nondescript wall, the hands seem to trouble how certain resistances, in some instances, are involuntarily confined to invisibility or anonymity.

Sunken Garden: Section 33 (2018) similarly offsets the relationship between visibility and invisibility. The series of photographs speaks to Harouni’s interest in erasure: “I collect facts and fictions on how power attempts to erase and abolish, and on the kinds of ingenuity and strategy the individual employs to resist full erasure. I’m interested in this history of resistance formally, emotionally, and politically.”³

Shot discreetly on a recent trip to Tehran, the images of paved-over graves read as abstracted decay. The tonal nuance of the images, however, insist on legibility. The plots Harouni documents in Behesht-e Zahra Cemetery hold the bodies of dissidents executed by the Shah’s regime, prior to the 1979 revolution in Iran. As Harouni explains, shortly following the revolution, the graves were mysteriously (or not so mysteriously) covered over in cement. Resisting their own erasure, the graves’ stone markers have been breaking free and showing signs of their former form, as expressed by this new series of images. Harouni notes that she saw flowers “left on top of these nameless amorphous forms. It seems many families continue to have the maps of these plots embedded in their memory. They can still locate the names and bodies of their loved ones, or perhaps they are content to leave flowers on the graves of their comrades, never certain what lies beneath the pavement.” Unlike most gravesites, these cannot offer signposts for the dead or living. Instead, Harouni’s images bring into relief the poetic ways



Shadi Harouni, detail, *Sunken Garden*: Section 33, 2018

that resistance can manifest and the ways in which this poetry is taken up by those who might need it for their own deeply personal acts of refusal.

With an instinct for justice considers elegiac and very real defiance but also the relationship between debt and resistance. Debt tends to be framed as a purely transactional concept involving debtors and creditors. The exhibition, however, compels larger questions around how we might conceive of social debt. What kind of conceptual and psychological borrowing and lending are required of resisters? What kind of incalculable obligations reside within acts of resistance? While Rasmussen and Harouni do not explicitly construct their projects in terms of social debt, the conditions in which the specific resisters shown here take action complicates issues of responsibility and liability. Their works do not necessarily answer these questions, but they pose them nonetheless. This is not to say that resistance is exclusively tied to capitalism or acts of refusal aimed at that system, but it is to wonder at the social contracts writ into certain acts of opposition. Conceiving of social debt might help us further clarify that resistance exists within, although not always, larger systems of exchange – sometimes these are financial and economic, but they are also certainly emotional and physiological.

Perhaps social debt is also an invitation toward thinking through *indebtedness*. Not in terms of

the definition of the word that focuses solely on money owed, but the secondary and more relevant definition, at least in this context, that denotes a feeling of gratitude. In this way, indebtedness might impart a broader understanding of refusal as tied to relationships, because as Rasmussen and Harouni suggest with their nuanced and considered images, resistance operates differently and uniquely in every situation, but it might be fair to say that it is persistently human, personal, and intimate.

ENDNOTES

1. Gavin Bell, “Meet the Black Mambas: South Africa’s All-Female Anti-Poaching Paramilitary Team,” *Telegraph*, March 7, 2017, <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/travel/destinations/africa/articles/black-mambas-anti-poaching-all-female-team-africa/>.
2. Elise Rasmussen, “A Poetic Truth in a Pathetic Fallacy,” <http://www.eliserasmussen.com/a-poetic-truth-in-a-pathetic-fallacy> (accessed January 20, 2018).
3. Shadi Harouni, “Artist Statement,” Rema Hort Mann Foundation, <http://www.remahortmannfoundation.org/project/shadi-harouni/> (accessed December 3, 2017).

Note: The title of the exhibition is borrowed from a longer quote in *I Dream the Mountain is Still Whole*.



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