

jayce salloum

everything and nothing and other works from the ongoing  
video installation, 'untitled', 1999-2004

***beauty never ends..***

Mireille Kassar

*Jayce Salloum's work, ever more diversified, casts its net farther and wider as if it were ready for take-off — skies, landscape, taking flight. As Gilles Deleuze wrote, “..the beginning of thinking is flight”.*

[..] Salloum resolves, yet again, to reclaim *beauty*... A beauty that confirms itself and becomes vital, accompanying the living and the dead. For some time now the work has been like a return journey to the fundamental 'I'. Its very core shares the same philosophical and existential questions that a certain kind of art has always explored. Though he has experimented with various forms of critique within his work, it is not so much about criticism, as it is about positive action. [..]

*When Palestinians are videotaped in refugee camps, the dignity that transpires on their faces and that endures, despite their absurd ongoing plight, the elegant stance of the body, the subtlety of the spoken word, reveals a beauty and a depth that is a challenge in itself. How can this beauty survive in a shantytown amidst all the killing, past, present and future?*

If the game-like element appears in Salloum's art, it's in the mode of Mallarmé's poem '*A throw of the dice never abolishes hazard.*' It is fate and destinies that are being gambled: the dice are thrown high into the zenith of the sky and fall back in multiple combinations... the stakes have never been higher and it has nothing to do with video-art or self-absorption... games. It also has nothing to do with 'art criticism'. [...]

This digression allows me to apprehend with greater precision Salloum's approach to artmaking. He is a witness before being a critic. He doesn't avoid archetypes, he doesn't fear misunderstandings, he goes straight to what he likes and straight to what he fears. As Roland Barthes said to his students, "*We study what we desire or what we fear.*"

Salloum's work measures the dimension of deflagration, of existential amnesia and emerging particularisms. When he is confronted with the hardships in the Palestinian camp of Badawi or is listening to a refugee's story, he keeps a unobtrusive profile. I am overwhelmed with emotion every time I think of the words of Abdel Majid Fadl Ali Hassan, who (in, '*untitled part 3b: (as if) beauty never ends..*') pays a visit to his homeland, where the ruins of the family home started to speak to him. After listening to the poignant words, he tells us, "I bowed my head in shame at having returned as a visitor and not a liberator.." This must also be the intrinsic shame of being and the unassuming place of Salloum, that is confronted by those injured destinies. Does he regret visiting the refugee camps, as an artist-witness and not as a liberator? Did Goya also feel shame when he was painting the war? [...]

*Salloum's work is ultimately antifascist. His installation 'everything and nothing and other works from the ongoing video installation, 'untitled' illustrates this point beautifully, a space, different screens and points of view; multiple formats and directions of projection.. women, men, from different nations and cultures, each telling their own story which is played out in the theatre of life; the personal sliding into the collective histories, turning into what Deleuze called "...a delirium of peoples.."*



from untitled part 3b: (as if) beauty never ends..

[..] When these testimonies coming from many different regions are taken out of their regionalism and are pooled together in the context of the installation, they are, so to speak, returned to everyone.. returned to the sky and the earth. Nature, omnipresent, participates in this presence, in this space, inseparably. Orchids, fish, and skies accompany the unbearable in ‘.. (as if) beauty never ends..’, a videotape literally made in tears.. amid this emotional roller coaster, Salloum is attempting *beauty* as a project.. as a recourse.. [...] I suspect that Jayce made this tape on his knees.. contemplating the Sabra and Shatila massacre that is perpetually *reactualized* by the continual bloodbaths we hear about occasionally.

*A story is being narrated, the family house is talking to the one who's been dispossessed.. its walls, its stones, have souls.. The house asks him what happened during nightfall, when they fled, “..when the sun disappeared did the night stars guide your way?”*

[..] How can one stay true to oneself in the middle of *nowhere*? This *nowhere* is what global fascism has constructed. Perhaps we all participate unwittingly in this movement which engulfs both the material and the subliminal. We kneel obediently and offer our knaves in sacrifice [...] a ‘*soft*’ fascism. In spite of this, glimmers of hope appear, hope incarnated in the



from untitled part 3b: (as if) beauty never ends..

people of Salloum's videotapes. These subjects are trapped in the middle of a war, or have just survived one, caught in the mist of a massacre, suffered expatriation, and they are still carrying on. [..]

As one approaches the installation the first thing seen are images of drifting clouds on a monitor above, the open sky already announcing something. The multiple screens and other monitors spread around the room create an impression of movement, of journeys, of returning, of displacement, and one is engulfed with an insane feeling of hope amidst its conditionality. A wind of rebellion sweeps through the room. This whirlwind pries open the space for more stories, permutates into an ever-evolving experience. [..] The sense of revolt that is not only political, but also the inner revolt of ones being, drew me to Salloum's work. I spotted this enduring emphasis years ago in his videotape 'Up to the South/Talaeen a Junuub' (1993).

[..] *The 'frisson' of the new, like a living memory, breaths into the artist a strength; the power of humility, submitting itself to the playful antics of the cosmos toying around this possibility. The taste of a possibility, this generosity, is a kind of love that can become the path itself, a liberated and active direction that will ally itself to the forces of life. I am moved by artists who are still working and searching along these horizons.*



from *untitled part 2: beauty and the east*

Salloum's work contends with the adventurer within. He still goes on adventures; packing his bags and traveling to distant lands to tape and to witness; but the adventurer swaps seats with me, the spectator, confronted with his work. [...] It resonates with the sense of surprise, as if the other side of the visible is manifested. I have noticed this kind of freshness in Jean Rouch's films made in Africa. Rouch was a civil engineer before he became a filmmaker, but he remained a child behind the camera and an engineer behind his thinking. When asked why, unlike the *possessed*, he hadn't been affected by the Voodoo ceremonies and rituals of exorcism, he gave an unlikely answer, "*My camera protects me.*" [...]

Beyond contemporary concerns, there is a timeless aspect, that inscribes the project as much as a horizontal time frame (conflicts, defeats and resistance), and a vertical frame (provenance, transcendence). The words I use are probably not the words the artist would use to describe his work. Without any conscious voluntarism, there emerges a message that formulates itself and deploys its wings. And it is this disengagement that makes its transcendence something unexpected.

In the meantime Salloum is busy elsewhere, he modestly occupies his place under and not over his subject matter, not trying to be more intelligent than



untitled installation, Gallery 101, 2003

the situation. He videotapes a Bosnian writer, or Soha Bechara, but he does not appropriate them.. sacrificing them to the videotape's point of view. This careful geometry of proximity and distance outlines a gracefulness that promises a kind of existential ascension of his protagonists. They are exposed to us while enabling them to retain their elegance, intelligence, and complexity.

*The territory Salloum explores is the same territory that Globalization tries to format. Resistance is the elegance of life. The will of a human being to safeguard this elegance transcends the tragic destiny that attempts to reduce and deny. Salloum's subjects are the real notables; they are reality's bohemians. They are cut out of the same cloth as the heroines and explorers, the women and men who traverse the night. But in this night, they remain themselves.*

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*Translation from French by Dominique La Cloche*

## **TRIANGULATION: Three Points Made Plane in the Art of Jayce Salloum**

Trevor Boddy

See the work of Vancouver artist Jayce Salloum and see the constant interplay of politics, landscapes and ideas. Not each of these three separately, sequentially, but all-at-once — always.

Like many Canadian artists of his generation, Salloum has never had criticism equal to the power and ambition of his multi-leveled, richly-contrapuntal, almost operatic video installations, with their choirs of social movements, pained arias and hopeful trios of lost voices now found again, swooping bass lines and trombone choruses of sky and stone, and those strings, those strings of the heart.

This is not the venue for so important and overdue a project as a sustained and meticulous tri-partite reading of Salloum's opus, but here are three short stories, sometimes personal vignettes which may help understanding. I have arrayed these separately and sequentially, one-after-the-other, so as to confound my own thesis, and Salloum's:



## POLITICS

I had never seen the sense of current events ‘spun’ in real time — as the news happened — but I watched exactly this at the Canadian Museum of Civilization (CMC) press preview of Jayce Salloum’s *‘everything and nothing (from the ongoing project, ‘untitled’), 1999-2001.’* Scheduled to open in the troubled October of 2001, CMC director Victor Rabinovitch “indefinitely postponed” this group exhibition by 26 Canadian artists sharing little but their own family backgrounds as Arabs. This landmark show had been in preparation for five years and was entitled *‘The Lands Within Me: Expressions by Canadian Artists of Arab Origin.’*

Rabinovitch did this without talking to Salloum or any of the other artists. Except for fellow Canadian-born artist Jamelie Hassan, most of Salloum’s colleagues work in conventional craft and realistic painting modes, such as Vancouver calligrapher Aldin Rashid. The contested show included landscapes, winter snow scenes, even a faux-naïf view of the Chateau Frontenac — hardly incitement to any political debate.

It surprised few of us who knew his previous videotapes that it was Salloum’s work — and no other — that was contentious to Rabinovitch, and the primary source of the controversy. The scandal extended into the pages of both national newspapers, the CBC and CTV National News, CNN, and parliament, where Prime Minister Jean Chrétien compelled the CMC to open the show as originally planned. Salloum’s taped interviews with Lebanese political prisoner Soha Bechara and her colleagues were thought to be too hot for public consumption in the panicked weeks after 9-11. Salloum was brave and principled not to withdraw from the controversial exhibition, and brave and principled to face the media that day. An art careerist — and Vancouver has far too many of those these days — would have buckled under.



from *untitled part 1: everything and nothing*

After unctuous opening remarks by Rabinovitch and assorted politicians, the media rushed into the exhibition to see what the fuss was all about, the largest scrum of journalists ever to attend an art opening in Canada. The better-advised of them headed directly to Salloum's installation, where the artist patiently answered questions. Representatives of the Canadian Jewish Congress (CJC), B'nai B'rith Canada, plus a number of pro-Zionist publications immediately occupied all of the seats and all of the headphones, meaning that no other journalist was able to hear the supposedly-contentious words of Bechara and others for the duration of the preview.

As mainstream journalists finished talking to Salloum, I watched as each of them were button-holed immediately by members of this same lobby group, and informed of their alternative 'spin' on the video installation. I gave my business card to the media representative of the CJC, who then phoned me back a half dozen times that same afternoon to push his angle, knowing my impending deadline to file my exhibition opening story for *The Vancouver Sun*.<sup>1</sup> There was one absurd moment at the press preview where six journalists interviewed another CJC representative who had listened to twenty minutes of the multi-hour videos, the actual artist who had shaped the installation abandoned to the side, no-one talking to him. Without doubt,



from *untitled part 1: everything and nothing*

their performance is the fastest spin I have seen placed on a news story in 25 years of writing about culture and cities.

The event and its aftermath had an immense impact on the career and person of Jayce Salloum, and he has borne these with the same qualities of grace, humanism and optimism that are the essence of, '*untitled.*' Spend some time with this piece, visit it again and again, interrogate its motives and content. After that, I am sure you will join my shame as a Canadian in this shoddy treatment of Salloum, and more importantly, his artwork, the stifling and spinning and under-estimating of a complex and hopeful work. This is how Salloum described the situation later in *Fuse Magazine*: "In the current climate of suppression and repression of any debate and dissension, ...art can be one of the few domains left for us to express unpopular ideas.."2



*untitled* installation, Canadian Museum of Civilization, 2001

## LANDSCAPE

Nearly all of Salloum's video and photographic installations contain pastorals — lyrical, imagistic excursions into land- or sky-scapes. These are also found in the Western Front version of *'everything and nothing and other works from the ongoing video installation, 'untitled', 1999-2004.'* When the pastoral element of this artist's work is not ignored by critics, it is diminished, proposed as some sort of 'gasket' to relieve pressure from the 'real' substance of the work — ideas and politics. In other words, landscape and natural imagery is thought to be low information caesuras, included solely to increase the impact of the high information set-pieces which they flank.

Salloum quietly asserts that landscape is an integral part of his art, and I believe him. At the most simplistic level, these land- or sky-scapes occasionally serve to geographically locate the interviews and urban imagery running simultaneously on other monitors. In fact, these pastorals are sometimes shot out of literal context, a sky-scape shot over Vienna running simultaneously with a conversation with Soha Bechara, in her Paris apartment, where she talks about her detainment in South Lebanon. We are not being told this is the sky of Paris, or that it is a Southern Lebanese sky seen



*from untitled part 2: beauty and the east*

from a detention cell, but this is a sky simply and directly, co-existent with words; words and wars are impossible without skies.

One crucial function of these pastorals is to re-assert visuality into thickets of dialects and discourse, the inevitable concomitants of talking head interviews. More accurately, Salloum's are talk-to-head interviews, as he holds his video camera in front of his face, so that eye contact is maintained with interviewees through the camera, resulting in the remarkably consistent intimacy of his tapes. One reacts differently to stories of torture and disenfranchisement when clouds float by at the periphery of vision, even more so when flowers bloom and fade in rapid time-lapse. Not diminished by these visual adjacencies, not by a long shot — but changed, framed, qualified, made resonant.

## IDEAS

Salloum speaks of the difficulty of reducing his video installations to single tape versions, as no editing can re-create the simultaneity possible with the layering and over-lapping of a number of images running in real time in one room. There is one particular spatial-visual device used by Salloum in most of his installations, and that is “triangulation.”

Eisensteinian dialectic is inevitably linear — “montages of collision” resulting from the intersection of beaded image-pairs in time. Salloum’s work is more spatial, and needs at least three points to describe a plane, a surface in which there are a great many more possibilities of connection and interpretation, and argument-making that is less manipulative.

With each of these installations since the first at CMC<sup>3</sup>, Salloum has made ‘*untitled*’ more triangulated, more spatially rich. The Western Front features one projected image along the length of a wall, its trapezoidal form wrapping a corner and onto the far wall. Stand-pat, singular viewings are made impossible by this triangulated physicality, further emphasized by the tapes running out of phase, with different conjunctions of images and words available with each viewing.

These same tendencies were evident in Salloum’s 1999 return-to-British-Columbia exhibition, a wall-mounting of still photographs of storefronts in New York, his previous working base. Entitled ‘*untitled (22 oz. THUNDER-BOLT)*,’ this show at the Contemporary Art Gallery’s former Hamilton Street premises (now the Belkin Satellite) featured prints of various sizes, installed by the artist in a not-random, but not-regular hanging, ranging from knee to well above eye height.

Peripheral vision meant that no image could be seen without others hovering nearby in sight, but Salloum offered no easy rhetoric of interpretation, no quick analysis of “Well, first you look at this, and it is related to that,

but less so than this other one over here.” Every image at the CAG’s ‘..22 oz. *THUNDERBOLT*’ exhibition was triangulated. For me this triangulated hanging recalled the missing term of city itself — New York’s block patterns and heterogeneity — and I feel this show will come to be seen as Salloum’s *‘Broadway Boogie Woogie.’*

If triangulation is Salloum’s visual rhetorical device, his companion modality of political immanence is something he labels “interstitiality.” While the word literally means “between the floors” — i.e. the zone those demented repairmen crawl through in Terry Gilliam’s *Brazil* — Salloum and others use it as a political metaphor, especially for the stateless Palestinian people, caught between the floors of the modern nation-state. The same word may represent the artist’s take on the official Canadian political discourse of state multi-culturalism, with its folkloric limbo of ethnic dancing and national day celebrations in exile — anything to keep those guys voting Liberal.

“Interstitial” may also describe the current status of an artist named Jayce Salloum. He is happily caught between the floors of political journalism and fine art-making, between academe and cinematheque, between the Bekaa Valley of his grandparents, and the Okanagan Valley where he grew up. With Salloum at the controls, you are sure to get stuck at the *13th floor*, so enjoy the ride.

*Trevor Boddy is currently architecture critic and civic columnist for The Vancouver Sun, his writing on contemporary Canadian art and architecture has been awarded the Western Magazine Award and the Alberta Book of the Year prize.*

1 My news story on the show’s opening ran in The Vancouver Sun, October 19, 2001.

2 Fuse Magazine, Toronto, Volume 24, Number 4, December, 2001.

3 Versions of the installation have since appeared at Eurovision2000, Prague; World Wide Video Festival, Amsterdam; Kunsthalle Exnergasse, Vienna; Santa Monica Museum of Art, California; The Museum of Contemporary Art, Belgrade; YYZ , Toronto; Galerie 101, Ottawa; and Dazibao Galerie, Montréal.

*Jayne Salloum has been working in installation, photography, video, mixed media, and performance since 1975, as well as curating exhibitions, conducting workshops and coordinating cultural projects. A media arts philosopher and cultural activist, Salloum has lectured internationally and has exhibited throughout the Americas, Europe, East Asia, and the Middle East.*

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