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Zarouhie Abdalian’s work lives on the threshold of invisibility, yet is capable of conjuring up such significant alterations as to undermine the concept of a site’s integrity. This apparent normality and sudden discovery of the change is precisely what disorients the viewer and offers the experience of something new. Hence the artist’s interest in places, in studying the unique characteristics of a site and, in a broader sense, of a landscape. Jens Hoffmann explored how places and events have influenced Abdalian’s recent work.

LANDSCAPE AS MATERIAL

A conversation between Zarouhie Abdalian and Jens Hoffmann

Jens Hoffmann (JH): When I saw your work for the first time I had to think of artists like Ceal Floyer or Rivane Neuenschwander, maybe a bit of Trisha Donnelly or Luisa Lambri. I know these comparisons are always difficult but do you see connections?

Zarouhie Abdalian (ZA): My work is most generally about landscape. I think of landscape as a material site but also as a nexus of images that accumulate around the site itself. Currently, the work takes two forms: studio based works such as projections, drawings, and prints; and site-specific installations. But to answer your question, yes, I do see connections with the work of these artists. I have particular affinity for work made from modest, unfussy materials but with a strong conceptual bent. I also like experiencing shows that aren’t materially restricted and don’t over explain things but that provide a space for or prompt an experience. Also, I’m interested in ways of working that are open such that the materials and the process of interacting with them either form part of the finished work or dictate what the work might be. I recognize this in some of the work of both Floyer and Neuenschwander particularly.

JH: The work often operates on the verge of being invisible. Can you say a few more words about that?

ZA: When working site-specifically, I begin with an element or a material preexisting at a site. I think the work flirts with invisibility because I work in this way: performing sometimes-subtle shifts to what is already there. Through the exaggeration of an element—this could be a shape, sound, physical substance—I stage an alteration. By making these

works, it is my intention to defamiliarize a site as a means to prompt its reviewing. Perhaps a shift in a viewer’s perception is more likely to happen when the art is integrated and almost invisible.

JH: Some pieces require quiet a bit of technology. Is that something you are interested in?

ZA: Though I use various electronics in the making some works, I am conscious of the risk of sleight of hand illusionism and also resist work that privileges the complexity of technology over the complexity of its effects. Most tools and materials I use are actually fairly simple, consumer products. In fact, the site-specific pieces are usually low tech and often made using industrial materials available at hardware or plastics stores. When I choose to incorporate electronics, I do it both as a means to make a work behave in a certain way and also because the materials fit the work. For instance, I employed the use of bass shakers (tactile transducers that are often used in home theater or car audio systems) to make the stretched mylar panels in *Flutter* shake. Though I could have employed motors to achieve the same effect, the bass shakers made sense for this work because they were an item that I could easily acquire at custom car audio stores in the neighborhood where the piece was installed. In work that employs the camera, I am similarly conscious of my use of materials, and I often seek to skirt illusionism by using devices that are flawed consumer-grade products that reveal themselves because of their limitations. These limitations become integral to the work itself. When making a video, for instance, I use the physical properties of a location and the properties of the mediation device, the camera, to stage a test or evaluation. These “tests” are often subject to chaotic behaviors resulting from interactions between the device, the landscape, and my hand. In my view, the successful results are those that reveal latent or obscured qualities that are essential to the place considered.

JH: You lived in New Orleans for most of your life. How has living in the South effected you?

ZA: Being from New Orleans has molded my sense of place and of landscape and my understanding of time. In New Orleans, and more broadly in the American South, the persistent memory of what is past is unavoidable. Further, the history of the land and its people is lived in the present. Anyone who has read Faulkner has some sense of this. I believe that the landscape itself, at least in part, dictates this experience. Specifically, the Mississippi River, which bends and twists through New Orleans, profoundly affects the spatio-temporal experience of those who live on its banks. What has past, happens again in the present, and leaves its sediment behind. This experience of repetition and the layering of time affects how I enter other landscapes and also

influences how I work with time my videos. New Orleans, which is former swampland, also palpably sinks and shifts. Concreted, built up, gardened, it always feels somewhat wild and in constant play with nature. My experience of the land and water of the city and of the quickly eroding Gulf Coast of the United States has influenced significantly what I see in other places. Thus, when responding to other sites, I often draw attention their vulnerability, and my alterations suggest moments when the integrity of a location might be threatened.

JH: How was your experience living through Katrina? Has that changed the way you think about art?

ZA: Katrina, the storm and its aftermath, dramatically changed both me and my work. I was displaced from my home and moved to Philadelphia. In the year following the storm, I made very little art but began collecting images mostly from official, government archives. I started to know New Orleans through facsimile. My relationship to images of New Orleans has evolved over the past five or so years to a point where it primarily includes my own photographs and video but is still supplemented by archived photographs. These images, rather than the objects and scenes they record, become the subject of some of my work. Before the storm, I was concerned with the experience of place, but Katrina narrowed my focus to landscape. Further, the storm inextricably linked landscape to my perspective on catastrophe. My interest in catastrophe is that it reveals the instability of a material site.

JH: Please tell me more about some of your most recent works such as *Flutter* (2010) or *Set for the Outside* (2010).

ZA: *Flutter*, 2010 is a window installation made for a gallery space across from City Hall in downtown Oakland, California. It consists of panels of stretched mylar that quiver at varying frequencies. Inside the gallery was a companion text piece. The work began when I was walking around Oakland after business hours, looking in the windows of shops, offices, and restaurants, many of which were closed, empty, or abandoned. Also at this time, the energy in Oakland was anxious and intense as the city braced itself for the verdict in the trial of a white policeman who fatally shot an unarmed black man. Some windows displayed protest posters, and other windows were boarded up completely because of the fear of rioting. I gathered some materials that I saw in the windows of these buildings – specifically tinted films and mirrored plastic. It was in part through the manipulation of these materials and through discovering their intrinsic properties and strengths that I arrived at the work: the mylar seemed to lend itself to motion. Structural uncertainty, experienced in the out-of-control oscillation of the window installation in *Flutter* and evoked in the reading of the text, is the subject of this

piece. Chaotic behavior undermines the integrity of a space. When I return to New Orleans and the Gulf Coast, I am constantly playing with different low-end cameras and making videos that I mostly think of as sketches. Sometimes something interesting happens, usually somewhat unintentionally and that I only get by viewing the recording – in other words, I don't go around setting up shots knowing exactly what I'm after. *Drift*, 2010 is a 6:19 minute, single-channel video projection that I came to in this way, by making open-ended sketches with devices and locations that interest me. As a finished projection, *Drift* presents a failed attempt to capture the subtle movement of natural materials, switching between artful framing of the complex movement of detritus along a riverbank and the incidental motion of the video capture itself. In this work, I am interested in the elision between the instability of the handling of the camera and the camera itself as a mediating apparatus in documenting a place. *Set for the Outside*, 2010 is a response to the San Francisco campus of California College of the Arts (CCA). The art school is located in a redesigned bus maintenance facility and abuts a lot on which a dilapidated bus-wash stood. A wall of windows at the back of CCA's main building offer a panorama often ignored by the school. In the work, I directly quote two rows of broken windows from the bus-wash, transposing their shapes onto two rows of windows of CCA using a material called "frosted privacy window film" and graphite. *Set for the Outside* encourages a re-viewing of the panorama behind CCA and consideration of the school's position within it and relationship to the community beyond its walls.

JH: You have recently been invited to participate in 12th Istanbul Biennial. What do you expect from a large-scale group exhibition like that?

ZA: I will be making a site-specific work for the exhibition. Group exhibitions for which I've made site-specific works in the past have largely been somewhat unruly mixes of artwork with little or no curatorial framing. Thus, in the past, I have focused on the physical space of the exhibition location, its history, representation, etc. when developing my work and only generally considered the fact that the work would exist as part of an art show. For Istanbul, I have the opportunity to consider how my work might operate in relation to the work of other artists in the show, within the broader curatorial framing of the biennial, and within Istanbul itself. These challenges have influenced the type of research I am doing for the exhibition and will no doubt have some influence on the work I make.