



WALID RAAD/THE ATLAS GROUP BERLIN

wide horizontal bands of alternating dark and light grey tones. A column of parallel graphite lines falls vertically down the center of *Water Column*. A similar column engages *Nightwood* diagonally. If her earlier architectural lines were precise, these marks seem fragile and unsteady, echoing the ephemeral quality of life. Similarly composed of broad horizontal stripes on vellum, *Two Worlds*, 1998, is the most overtly political work on view, according to Mitchell. Earthy browns dominate the upper half. There, a circle filled with broken, frenzied graphite lines represents the chaos of an impoverished and deprived existence. Cooler greys reside below, where neat, parallel vertical lines define a prosperous and orderly world.

Mitchell then returned to her unfinished *Water Series*, *River Mandalas*, which she was able to resolve. She states that the emergence of a double-helix form in works such as *River Mandala I* through *III*, 1998, allowed her to unite several previous concepts, including the movement of water lapping back and forth—represented by the horizontal bars of pale greens, blues, and white—the use of geometry, and the mandala to evoke the sacred in nature. Pattern and process return as themes in her recent *Weaving* and *Labyrinth* series. Using acrylic, graphite, and chine collé, Mitchell weaves together elaborate mazes of colorful passageways with pale gray and whitewashed square chambers. Meandering seems an odd word to describe such precise, intimate, and painstaking formal investigations, yet the gold passages and graphite lines that meander through paintings like *Labyrinth for the Moon I*, 2005, reference the intuitive process of discovery that has guided Mitchell's vast and intimate work for over three decades.

—Diana McClintock

The charmingly confusing name of this Berlin venue, Hamburger Bahnhof [Hamburg train station], hails from a time when every destination had its own station. As such, all trains to Hamburg departed from this eye-catching hangar, now a roomy venue for the arts. This amiable geohistorical shuffle is quite appropriate when it comes to housing the first extensive exhibition of New York-based artist Walid Raad, *The Atlas Group 1989-2004. A Project by Walid Raad* [Nationalgalerie im Hamburger Bahnhof—Museum für Gegenwart; September 22, 2006—January 26, 2007]. According to the press release, the Atlas Group was a project conducted during this period to document and research the history of Lebanon, with a focus on the armed conflicts between 1975 and 1990. The documents on display were either found, donated or produced by the group itself.

Confusion still surrounds the actual identity of said group, but as most *ART PAPERS* readers may know, much as, summa summarum, Guns N' Roses is Axl Rose, the Atlas Group has always been Raad, in collaboration with other artists, including Beirut-based Tony Chakar, Bilal Khbeiz, and Walid Sadeq. Like many in Beirut, these artists are exceedingly sophisticated when it comes to the epistemic challenges of national history. They also deftly navigate the pitfalls of examining these challenges in an international context that is all too eager to lap up creepy stories from lands of trauma and strife. At the Hamburger Bahnhof, the material is persuasive on both counts. It also shrewdly addresses traditional notions of artistic oeuvre, curatorship, art history, and more.

I only wish that I could weep, 2002, is a video reportedly submitted to the Atlas Group by a Beirut security employee at the Corniche, the seaside promenade, who used the surveillance camera to record sunsets. Here, a universal art historical motif, the sunset, comes to tell a short, wistful story on the materiality of video and romantic notions of political testimony. *Missing Lebanese Wars*, 1989, another work that has been exhibited widely, consists of pages from *notebook volume 72*, donated by a Dr. Fadl Fakhouri, who describes a complicated horse

betting custom between historians of differing political bent. The bets focused not on the winning horse, but on wanton, minuscule imprecisions in the race's official certification. A newer work, *Sweet Talk: The Hilwé Commissions (1992-2004)*, 2004, resulted from the Atlas Group "commissioning dozens of men and women" to photograph places of significance in Beirut in 1989. Lamia Hilwé only handed in her contribution fourteen years later: nine hundred black and white photographs of buildings, juxtaposed with enlarged, colored, and modified details thereof.

From Aby Warburg to Gerhard Richter, the atlas has been used as a beloved emblem of impossible representational ambition. From Marcel Broodthaers to Christian Boltanski, the archive has been appreciated in similar terms. Today, many contemporary postcolonial artists take the atlas/archive's poetics of fact-as-process to strong political conclusions. A rare and crucial sense of narrative and scenography distinguishes Raad. So does the ambiguous function of authorial voice in his work. Teamwork and docufiction have often been used to undermine the artist's role as fountainhead of meaning and to privilege interpretation over intention. In some constellations, however, this very strategy can leave the author looming larger than ever, as the only verified common thread running through the work—the key to otherwise elusive, dramatically charged material.

Assembled in one huge space and drawing on similar economics of suspicion, all these works can leave the audience happily second-guessing the historico-biographic riddles of the Atlas Group—Hamburg artspace? Berlin station?—rather than engaging the epistemic quandaries at stake. At other moments, the roomful of mockumentation flips over into a critical mass that does debunk the noble aura of supreme subjectivity. But much as it is aesthetically impeccable and politically vital, it's not easy to tell which moment is more appropriate for the work at hand.

—Tirdad Zolghadr

ABOVE, LEFT TO RIGHT: Katherine Mitchell, *Ink Drawing with Tea, IX*, 2005, ink, tea, and gouache on paper, 29 x 21.5 inches [courtesy of the artist; photo: Jack Lawing]; Walid Raad/The Atlas Group, from the series *Sweet Talk: The Hilwé Commissions (1992-2004)*, 2004, one of thirty-four plates, 110 X 110 cm each [courtesy of the artist]



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