

**Art that is like a detective report or a communiqué from a secret agent**

Just after dawn, on the morning of April 13, 1300, Dante enters the Earthly Paradise at the top of Mt. Purgatory. There, amid an angelic procession, a prophet sings a line from the Song of Solomon, "Come with me from Lebanon and be crowned." Beatrice then appears and speaks to Dante. The poet is overcome by her presence; he weeps

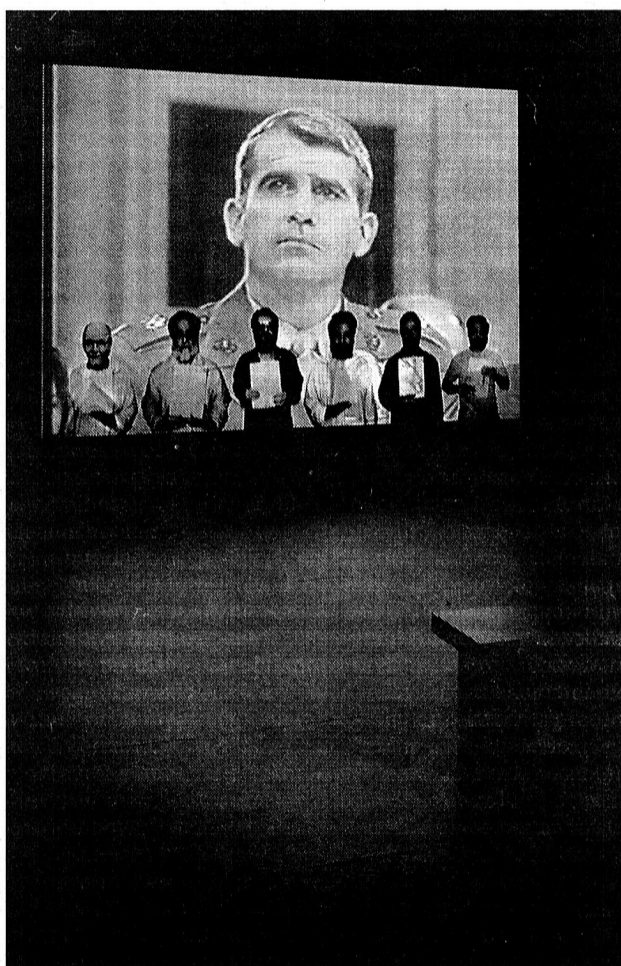
and stammers. Of this impossible but sublime meeting in the 64th line of the 64th canto of *The Divine Comedy*, Jorge Luis Borges wrote, "Beatrice existed infinitely for Dante; Dante existed very little, perhaps not at all, for Beatrice." Borges ruefully concludes, "To fall in love is to create a religion that has a fallible god." Walid Raad, founder of the semi-fictional Atlas Group, a collective that archives ephemera from Lebanon's civil war, shares both Borges's proclivity for elaborate fiction laced with apparent fact and Dante's rhetoric of exile. Raad transforms his native Lebanon into a kind of Beatrice, or lost love.

For Raad, Lebanon is a Gordian knot of notaries, dentists, professors, and mechanics—a principality of would-be revolutionaries, marginal characters, and heartbroken souls. Instead of the totality of war, Raad fixates on its parts. He lets us know that there were 3,641 car bombs detonated in Beirut between 1975 and 1991. In seven collages titled *Notebook Volume 38: Already Been in a Lake of Fire*, an invented character named Dr. Fadl Fakhouri presents pictures of cars and Arabic writing. One image reads, "Silver Volvo; August 20, 1985; 56 killed; 120 injured; 100 kg of TNT; 24 cars burned; 11 buildings burned." Raad/Fakhouri fetishizes the facts of violence in Beirut the way Henry Darger recorded the weather in Chicago. Elsewhere, he gives us the serial numbers of engines that were blown from car bombs, how far each motor flew, and where it landed.

In *Hostage: The Bachar Tapes*, Raad, 38, recounts what he calls the "captivity narrative" of five American hostages held in Lebanon in the 1980s, adding a fictitious Arab who describes nocturnal homoerotic encounters. In *Miraculous Beginnings* we see a hallucinogenic 52-second film made

**INTERROGATION NATION**

BY JERRY SALTZ



Photograph by David Allison

**Hostage: The Bachar Tapes (#17 and #31)**

by Dr. Fakhouri in which he exposed a frame every time he thought the war had come to an end. It's an abstract image of lost hopes and wishful thinking. In *I Only*

**WALID RAAD/THE ATLAS GROUP**  
 The Dead Weight of a Quarrel Hangs:  
 Documents From the Atlas Group Archive  
 The Kitchen  
 512 West 19th Street  
 Through March 11

*Wish That I Could Weep* we see furtive views of sunsets filmed by a Lebanese army intelligence officer posted to monitor a boardwalk in Beirut.

Borges wrote about the "pleasure of useless and out-of-the-way erudition." Rather than taking pleasure in arcana, Raad's work exudes a mania for minutiae that turns melancholic and openly joyless. His art is like a detective report or a communiqué from a secret agent: Facts are related, occurrences indexed, detachment and delusion mingle with obsession.

Yet for all his pseudo-scientific esotericism and his ultra-educated post-structuralism, Raad (or at least his character) is a textbook romantic: a man in search of the miraculous, a knight-errant taken with political intrigue, social estrangement, and emptiness—someone preoccupied with connections and affinities, real or not. As with all romantics, Raad is homesick. Lebanon for him is a refuge and nightmare, a utopia and a cult. Raad's

vision of his war-torn country is part apparition, part anxiety attack, and part healing fantasy. You can almost feel the incubus of history squatting on his chest and recit-

ing Lucian's description of the passage to the Isle of Dreams: "As we approach, it recedes, and seems to get further and further off." This is Raad's relationship to Lebanon's civil war.

As poignant as several of these pieces are, I'm not really sure Raad is an artist. He's more of a social scientist using art or examining power—which is fine. He mixes Joseph Beuys, Marcel Broodthaers, and David Wilson's Museum of Jurassic Technology, but there's not a lot of alchemical energy to what he does. His work is smart, doctrinaire, and poetic, but formally it's very nth generation conceptualism. You wonder if all this fictionalized fact, factualized fiction, and secret-intrigue business is even necessary. Sometimes it feels wooden and hokey. His melodramatic Bas Jan Ader-like titles and his talk about "authority" and "authorship" suggest Raad is suave but has a latent pedantic streak.

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Also, nearly every work here dates from between 1996 and 2000 and has been seen in international exhibitions. He needs to do some new work.

In the end, Raad submerges you in the lyrical ethos of Lebanon's 14 seasons in hell. Tellingly, he omits certain figures. The war left approximately 144,240 people dead and 197,500 wounded. Another 17,415 went missing, 1 million people left the country (including Raad's family), nearly that many were rendered refugees. Raad—who splits his time between Brooklyn and Beirut and who teaches at Cooper Union—is the opposite of the slash-and-burn artist Thomas Hirschhorn, whose show is currently up at Barbara Gladstone. Both men deal with war and memory. Hirschhorn's work grabs you by the collar and says, "Pay attention." Raad is more Machiavellian. He's like a figure in a Renaissance painting pointing to something in the picture. He stands between worlds. When this strategy works, Raad summons the plaintive spirit of heartache. When it doesn't, you just end up with paragraphs of explanation. Fortunately, it works often enough.

**SAILING**

**SALLY SMART**  
 Postmasters  
 459 West 19th Street  
 Through February 25

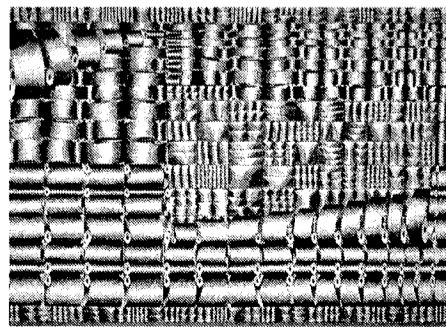
Applying longitudinal and latitudinal lines to the walls, Sally Smart, the Australian having her natty New York debut, turns the gallery into a walk-in cartographer's dream. We see the imagined journeys of a group of so-called "female pirate ships." These large-scale galleons are marvelous collaged visions made of canvas and clothes, among other materials, and evoke artists as wide-ranging as Kara Walker, Matthew Day Jackson, Arturo Herrera, Wangechi Mutu, William Kentridge, and Ed Ruscha. Smart may rely too heavily on projected imagery and veers a bit close to Walker and Kentridge, but she still sails into some tantalizing territory. JERRY SALTZ

**A stellar topographer in an introspective, foxy mood**

**JOE ZUCKER**  
 David Nolan Gallery  
 560 Broadway  
 Through February 18

**SAINT PAINT**

Joe Zucker's quick-witted just-closed exhibition of muddy-colored paintings at Paul Kasmin began with an art-historical wink and a scatological nod: Just inside the door was a canvas turned toward the wall, à la Magritte, with the words "My Stool" written on it. It was a fitting acknowledgment of paint's primal connection to feces, art's paradoxical public and private nature, and Zucker's philosophically wry relationship to both Zucker's



Nolan/Eckman Gallery

**Container Ship**

strong two-gallery show, the second part of which is still up at David Nolan, finds this stellar topographer of paint in an indexical, introspective, typically

foxy mood. At Kasmin, he exhibited a series of diptychs titled *Open Storage*. Each work consisted of one poured monochrome abstraction next to a painting of a piece of furniture. Zucker gave us two modes of representation, two schools of aesthetic thought, and two ways of seeing the world.

The David Nolan show feels freer and less sepulchral. We see an opalescent series of paintings and watercolors collectively titled *Container Ships*. Each Léger-like work looks like a scratchy grid that has organized itself into a vaguely recognizable configuration. Squint and huge ships with hundreds of gigantic rolls of paper or canvas might come into focus. It's an artist's mirage or nightmare. These boats may carry this artist's life's work into the afterlife, or they may be future floating museums of Zucker's wild work. Either way, it's gripping to see an older painter openly thinking about what he might do with all the work he's made that never sold. JERRY SALTZ