

Traversing the Past:

ADAM GOLFER, DIANA MATAR, HRVOJE SLOVENC

Major world events are the rails on which family stories ride, causing movement, immigration, connections, separations. Wars, political violence, and other forms of trauma, in particular, can have strong impact on our family narratives, often in inextricable, inexplicable ways. Indeed, suffering can last for decades and echo for generations after the original event.

Our society organizes itself around the idea that the past is fixed, the future is open, and the present moment is constantly fleeting. But these notions of time are illusions. The past is at once an individual invention and a collective agreement. We traverse the past in our memories, our sense of identity, in ways that are not usually linear. Backward, forward. Clear, fuzzy.

Each of the three artists in this exhibition—Diana Matar, Hrvoje Slovinc, and Adam Golfer—looks at their life experiences, and the ways their sense of identity is linked, both directly and indirectly, to state-sponsored violence. Probing the Muammar Gaddafi regime's 42-year rule of Libya, the war in the former Yugoslavia in the 1990s, and the legacy of World War II and the current conflict in Israel/Palestine, respectively, these artists demonstrate the ripple effects of political brutality and conflict. Along the way, they explore the stories and emotions that accompany such trauma—narratives and feelings that often span multiple generations of societal and family lore.

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The foundation of Diana Matar's (American, b. 1962) work is the mysterious disappearance of her husband's father, Jaballa Matar. A Libyan opposition leader, Jaballa Matar was kidnapped in 1990 from his home in Cairo where he was living in exile. Five years later his family received a letter in his handwriting telling them he

had been smuggled out of Abu Salim prison in Tripoli, a maximum-security facility that a year later became infamous for the mass killing of more than 1,200 prisoners. The event remains largely unexplained, despite the efforts of many families and the organization Human Rights Watch to access information about the identities of the deceased. Jaballa was never heard from again, and the Matar family never learned what became of him.

Much of Matar's practice as an artist is an exploration of the effects of a missing person on a family, and on that family's experiences with mourning, speculation, hope, and searching. It is a meditation on an absence shrouded in mystery. It is, as Matar states, an exercise in *unknowing*.

Matar's black-and-white and color images of objects, landscapes, and architecture skew more toward impressions than information. Indeed, in her words, she seeks to express the *emotion* of absence rather than any concrete manifestation of it. Hence, she employs photography mainly as a tool for allegory, despite its predilection for literal representation. Her photographs range from soft-focus personal observations imbued with dynamic light and shadow to sharp images depicting places of politically motivated violence. They are void of people except for those who appear in photographs of photographs, together an apt metaphor for the illusion of presence that is tantamount to memory.

From the beginning, Matar knew that she wanted her very personal body of work concerning the Matar family, *Disappearance* (2006-10), to expand into larger national and international concerns. After the Arab Spring of 2011 Matar and her husband traveled to Libya—she for the first time, her husband for the first time in 22 years. She began to photograph the places where the regime carried out violent crimes to create her project *Evidence* (2012), as well as images that reflect the couple's process of simply discovering, and rediscovering, the country of Libya.

Matar pays homage to other Libyan dissenters in her series *Witness* (2012-13) with pictures made in Rome where the Gaddafi regime attacked dissidents living abroad,

by photographing the closest living thing that still exists in the place where the bloodshed occurred, in this case, trees. Matar makes images in post-Revolutionary Libya that reveal its dictatorial past in *Still Far Away* (2012), and explores the complexity of living underneath an oppressive political regime in *Martyrs and Dictators* (2012), where she juxtaposes representations of various martyrs with images of Gaddafi found on walls in public spaces.

Within her images Matar inserts brief accounts of moments of her life, steps taken in the search for Jaballa, and reflections on relationships, nation-states, politics, and memory. Ultimately, all of her projects blend seamlessly together to reveal secreted stories of history from a personal perspective, as Matar poetically examines the effects of trauma on personal and shared history.

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Always containing acute social commentary, Hrvoje Slovinc's (Croatian/American, b. 1976) work probes the human propensity to constantly reconcile, reinvent, and often repress identity, sometimes for the sake of mental and physical survival. His project *Croatian Rhapsody: Borderlands* (2015–17) broaches the turbulent past of Slovinc's homeland, specifically the Croatian War of Independence (1991–95) and its aftermath, as Slovinc investigates issues of identity through the lens of someone who left his country at a time of unrest and rebuilding and now returns to experience his birthplace as at once familiar and alienating. His work also explores his experiences as a young, queer Croatian immigrant in New York City, and underscores the fact that assimilation is often elusive and can be fraught with expectation.

An important distinction of Slovinc's *Croatian Rhapsody: Borderlands* is the short story that accompanies the installation. Ostensibly written by a young woman, the text describes her experience in a mountain village decimated by the war. She reveals how depressed the village is; the men are drunk and controlling, the landscape harsh, and the people forlorn. She narrates her experience at a carnival in unsettling, raw language that subtly shifts descriptions of benign, usually happy experiences of carnival rides and barbecues into violent and gruesome affairs. Describing mob mentality and male dominance in the village, she hints at sexual

assault, acts of aggression, and death. The story enhances the experience of the images in the installation, where, for example, a long row of the backs of men's heads evokes a set of mugshots in reverse, suggesting the dangers of group mentality, and by extension the perils of polarizing rhetoric. The men are implicated, but find protection in the anonymity of the group, abstracted in the way enemies often are.

Other images suggest varying states of objectification, struggle, and assault on the human body. A snake, typically a symbol of desire or rebirth, is trapped in a plastic bottle. Sexualized bodies of pin-up girls collide with a large photograph of phosphorescent cells, alluding to the difficulty of distinguishing between biology and indoctrination. Elements such as a drawing based on a map of a battle plan from 1697 communicate the timelessness of central themes including the conflict between nation-states, the quest for power and dominance, and the love of homeland, and butt up against more flamboyant, joyful images of colorful interiors and disco balls. A multitude of thematic access points—history, war, brutality, sexuality, vulnerability—are augmented by a variety of mediums, including three-dimensional and textile components. Slovinc uses various materials—images are on paper, drywall, silk, and rugs—resulting in a complex and highly dynamic installation.

Suggesting a lament, the title *Rhapsody* refers to the form of the epic poem exemplified by Homer's *Odyssey*. Odysseus pines to return to his homeland only to find that experience problematic and the place unrecognizable, while Slovinc's *Croatian Rhapsody: Borderlands* addresses identity as existing on a spectrum of ties to two different countries, alternately weighted in one direction or another, and constantly in flux.

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Adam Golfer (American, b. 1985) grew up in Silver Spring, Maryland, in the 1980s hearing accounts of his Jewish Lithuanian grandfather's experiences in World War II concentration camps and his father's sojourn in a kibbutz in Israel in the 1970s. As an adult, Golfer's firsthand experience photographing in Germany, and later Israel and the occupied West Bank, helped him connect the dots between his family history

and the interwoven, often contradictory narratives of bloodshed and displacement that link Europe to Israel and Palestine. He realized that some of the historical accounts he had taken for truths were debatable, and that many of his family's stories were contrary to other people's points of view. His project *A House Without a Roof* (2011–16) delves into these tensions, and the echoes of violent experiences across time.

Between 2011 and 2016, Golfer photographed and visited archives in the Baltic states, Israel, the West Bank, Germany, and the United Kingdom. He documented places of personal significance, such as the house in which his grandmother was born in Lithuania, which was seized by the Nazis. He also photographed landscapes of conflict in both Israel/Palestine and Germany, such as the Olympic Park in Munich, where Israeli athletes were massacred in 1972, and where the hills depicted were built using rubble resulting from Allied bombing during World War II.

The collision of fact and fiction is a favorite trope for Golfer. In his installation, his own photographs hang alongside family snapshots, ephemera, and images that have been culled from government archives. An aerogram his father wrote to his parents from the kibbutz is collaged with a found photograph of a man handing another man a rifle, partially obscuring the letter's content. Iconic symbols of the past surface in banal and unexpected ways. In one instance, a screenshot of a Facebook page suggests that Anne Frank is someone Golfer "might know." Snippets from twelve short stories Golfer wrote appear on walls illuminated by slide projectors. He describes these stories as events that "either did happen or could have."¹ To accompany the installation, Golfer has a small booklet that imagines a fictional archive comprised of his and his father's belongings. A video, *Router* (2015), creates ambiguous links between a Nazi reenactor named Chris and a New York performance artist and pianist named Constance who obliquely refer to tragedy as they move through the worlds of their performances and private lives.

The banal and the significant face off as past and present abut and collide, reflecting both the lightness and gravity of life. In the stories a discussion of Israeli/Palestinian

politics is tempered by the presence of children, and a Palestinian demonstrator bluntly questions Golfer's honesty and intentions as he joins them with his camera at a rally near Ramallah. To these elements he adds photos from tourist attractions like David Ben-Gurion's home, which remains intact in Tel Aviv, and ephemera Golfer collected from the Zionist State Archives—including staged images—which for Golfer “reflect how the State of Israel has constructed its own foundation myths.”²

Pictures hang high and low on the walls, big and small, framed and unframed, accompanied by a video and the slide projectors—all to engulfing effect. As visual analogy to the complex intermingling of representation, identity, and memory, we are left to map our stories for ourselves within the framework Golfer provides. We must reconcile our own, perhaps vague, understanding of these issues with the details of lived experience that he provides, as well as with more poetic imagery that reflects the ambiguity of historical record.

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In the works of all three artists—Diana Matar, Hrvoje Slovec, and Adam Golfer—histories overlap as the mythologies and memories of personal and political narratives become entwined. By exploring narratives of love and loss, and violence and displacement, their works remind us that borders are approximations, state-sponsored violence wrecks individuals and families, sometimes for generations, and power is a dangerous elixir.

Karen Irvine

Deputy Director and Chief Curator

¹ Adam Golfer, email to the author, November 29, 2017.

² Adam Golfer, email to the author, September 25, 2017.