

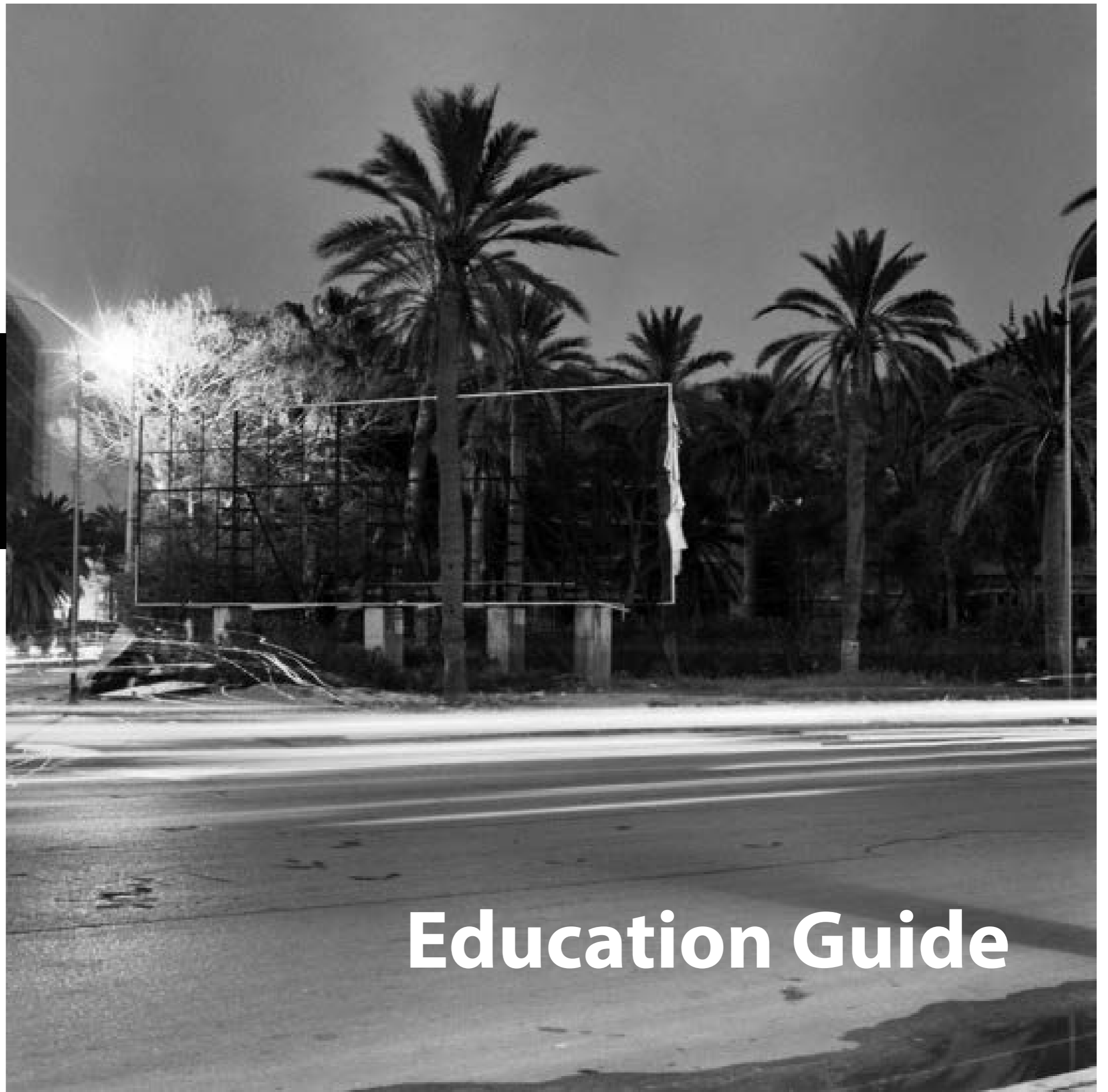
Traversing the Past:

ADAM GOLFER, DIANA MATAR, HRVOJE SLOVENC
JANUARY 18 - APRIL 1, 2018

This guide serves as a viewer's supplement to the exhibition *Traversing the Past* and contains information about the works on view, questions for looking and discussion, and suggested readings. You may download this guide from the museum's website at:
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Education Guide

Diana Matar, *Evidence II*



Hrvoje Slovinc, *Still-life with Christmas Tree*

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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 the 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 violence 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 a 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 began as 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 was a meditation on an absence shrouded in mystery. It was, 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

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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* (2006-10), 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) 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 violence 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.



Diana Matar, *Evidence IX*, 2012

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.

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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 Slovinc, 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 estimations, state-sponsored violence shatters 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.

Questions For Looking and Discussion

- What role does text play in each of the artist's work? Would you be able to put together a story in the same way without the text or without the images?
- How is war portrayed without images of violence or combat?
- Consider how the work is displayed. How does the installation add to the overall tone?
- Can you sense the feeling of dislocation in the work? Point to examples.
- Are there clues in each artists' work that point to a specific place or time?
- What do these indicators of place—or lack thereof—say about the artists experiences or intentions?
- In what era were the pictures taken? Are the subjects contemporary?
- How does nostalgia future factor into each artists' work?
- Each artist explores structures of power differently. How do their approaches differ? How is power expressed, depicted, or symbolized?
- How have the artists used photographic strategies to transcend typical representations of conflict? Are these strategies effective?

Map of portrayed areas:



- Libya
Diana Matar
- Croatia
Hrvoje Slovinc
- Israel
Palestinian Territories
Adam Golfer

Adam Golfer

American, b.1985



Adam Golfer, *Dachau (Red Tape)*, 2008

Adam Golfer explores the overlapping histories of violence and displacement connecting Europe, Israel, and Palestine. Mapping his family history—beginning with his grandfather's experiences during the Holocaust, his father's relationship to Israel in the 1970s, and arriving in the present to face his own complex feelings toward Israeli occupation of Palestine—Golfer uses snapshots from his family's archive, text, and digital ephemera to map contradictory histories.

Questions for Looking

- Golfer states that his series “questions how we understand global conflict and trauma in light of our individual experience.” How are some ways your personal experiences have shaped understanding of certain wars?
- How do images in the media shape our perspective of wars, specifically in the Middle East?
- What types of archives is Golfer working with? What role does his found imagery have in the exhibition?
- What word would you use to describe the mood of these images? Why?
- Consider the title of this series, *A House Without a Roof*. Why did the artist choose this name for the project?



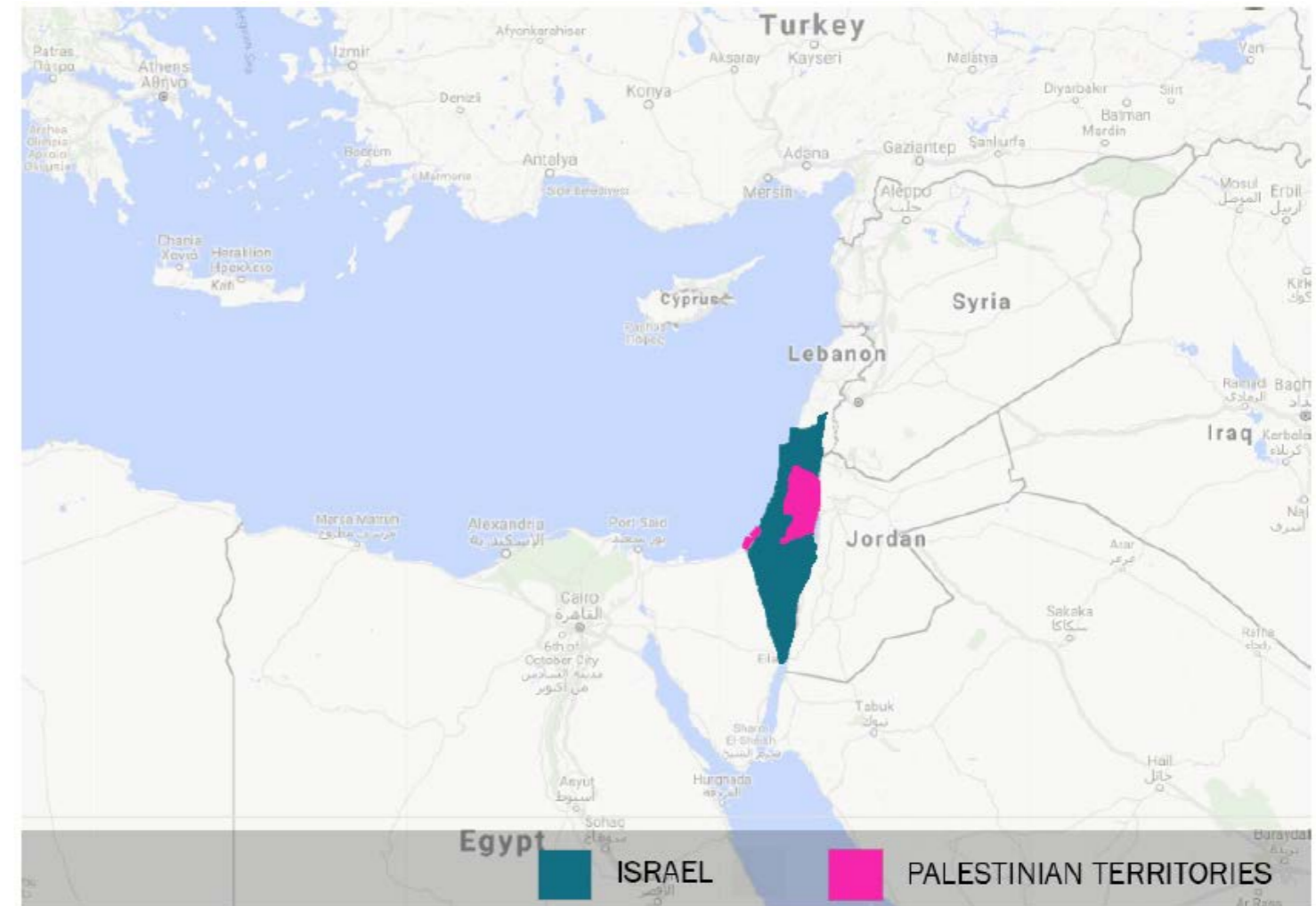
Adam Golfer, *Hisham's Palace (Jericho)*, 2012

Historical Context for the Isreal/Palestine conflict:

The Israeli-Palestinian conflict is an ongoing dispute between two parties, Israeli Jews and Palestinian Arabs, who both lay claim to the areas in the map to the right. Israeli Jews argue the land has been promised to them from God as a shelter from anti-Semitism. Palestinian Arabs argue that the land belonged to their ancestors and should remain under their ownership.

Some historians argue that the fall of the Ottoman Empire after World War I and the subsequent Palestinian Mandate (1920-1948) signaled the earliest beginnings of the conflict as it is known today. The Palestinian Mandate was created by the League of Nations as a way of assigning British rule to the region which was left without clear borders after WWI, with the goal that the Mandate would exist until the countries could govern themselves. It also called for Britain to create a Jewish national homeland, though that goal was not realized.

With an influx of Jewish refugees and immigrants at a gradually increasing rate after World War II, sectarian violence between Israelis and Palestinians quickly escalated. The violence became so prevalent that the United Nations intervened and divided the area into three sections: an Arab state (Palestine), a Jewish state (Israel), and the Special International Regime for the cities of Jerusalem and Bethlehem. Following the Arab-Israeli War of 1947-1948, Israel took control of the territory that Palestinians had previously laid claim and the area further shifted into its current configuration: Israel, Gaza, and the West Bank. The disputed regions remain under Israeli control, with continuing unease erupting into open hostility as recently as 2014's Israel-Gaza Conflict.



Map as of 2018



Adam Golfer, *Nabi Saleh*, 2012

Diana Matar

American, b.1962



Diana Matar, *Still Far Away IX*, 2012

Diana Matar investigates topics of **immigration, displacement, and memory** using photography and archives. This work is the culmination of a six year-long exploration of the life of her father-in-law, Jaballah, and his disappearance under the Gaddafi regime in Libya. Despite never meeting her father-in-law, Matar is deeply affected by his life and disappearance. Her images, diary entries, and letters portray a family hesitantly grieving a loss not yet confirmed amid endless questions. Matar is both witness and participant in the work, actively searching for answers in her text and images, but also observing a family and a country in the process of coping over time. Using varied photographic styles--abstract to representational-- Matar's long investigation is made across the globe. Her text mirrors her diverse approach to photographing, shifting between facts and feelings, discoveries and further questions. The overall installation is a complex portrait of a family piecing together one man's life and disappearance while simultaneously grappling with a history of atrocities and dictatorship in Libya.

Questions for Looking

- The writer Hisham Matar, who is also Diana Matar's husband and son of Jaballa Matar, believes that there is a "power of stories, and how through them we can travel through time and share, at least in our imaginations, former aspects of ourselves." How authentically can we tell stories of others without living the experience ourselves? How well does Diana do this?
- Why might some of Matar's images often be out of focus or distorted in appearance? How does this help the narrative?
- Consider the artist's choices in color. Why might the early pictures only be made in black and white and later pictures shot in color?
- How would you describe the text passages in this work? Is it poetry? Is it journalism? Is it something else?



Diana Matar, *The Chair*, 2010

Brief History of Libyan Conflict:

From 1951 until 1969, Libya operated as an independent monarchy under the leadership of King Idris. Large reserves of oil were discovered in 1959 and the country was brought from having little resources to considerable wealth. Resentment for the monarchy's affluence and tension between the elite and working classes grew and, in 1969, Muammar Gaddafi—then only 27 years old—took down the king with just a few others in a coup d'état. Gaddafi, along with 12 others, called themselves the Revolutionary Command Council (RCC) and established the Libyan Arab Republic. He promoted himself overnight from colonel to Chairman of the new government and commander-in-chief of the armed forces. Initially declaring intentions to liberate, socialize, modernize, and unite Libya, the revolution quickly turned into a police state using heavy surveillance to identify dissenters. Those accused of dissenting were publicly executed or imprisoned for decades without trial. Gaddafi continued to build his power and dictatorship until the 17 February Revolution in 2011, when he was overthrown and killed, thrusting the country into civil war. Libya remains in civil war to this day.



Diana Matar, *The Bird*, 2010

Jaballa Matar, Diana Matar's father-in-law and inspiration for her photographs, was known as a key leader in the opposition and was a leader in the National Front for the Salvation of Libya (NFSL), which was formed in 1981 to bring democracy and free press and elections to the country. Matar was a wealthy businessman with the power to recruit and build a resistance, thus a sizeable threat to Gaddafi's rule. He and his family members were heavily monitored and threatened, causing them to flee in exile to Cairo in 1979. Jaballa Matar was abducted by Egyptian security agents in 1990 and sent to Tripoli's Abu Salim prison, a notorious torture site. His wife and sons received a few letters from him during the first few years of his imprisonment but to this day do not know his fate.

Hrvoje Slovinc

Croatian, b.1976

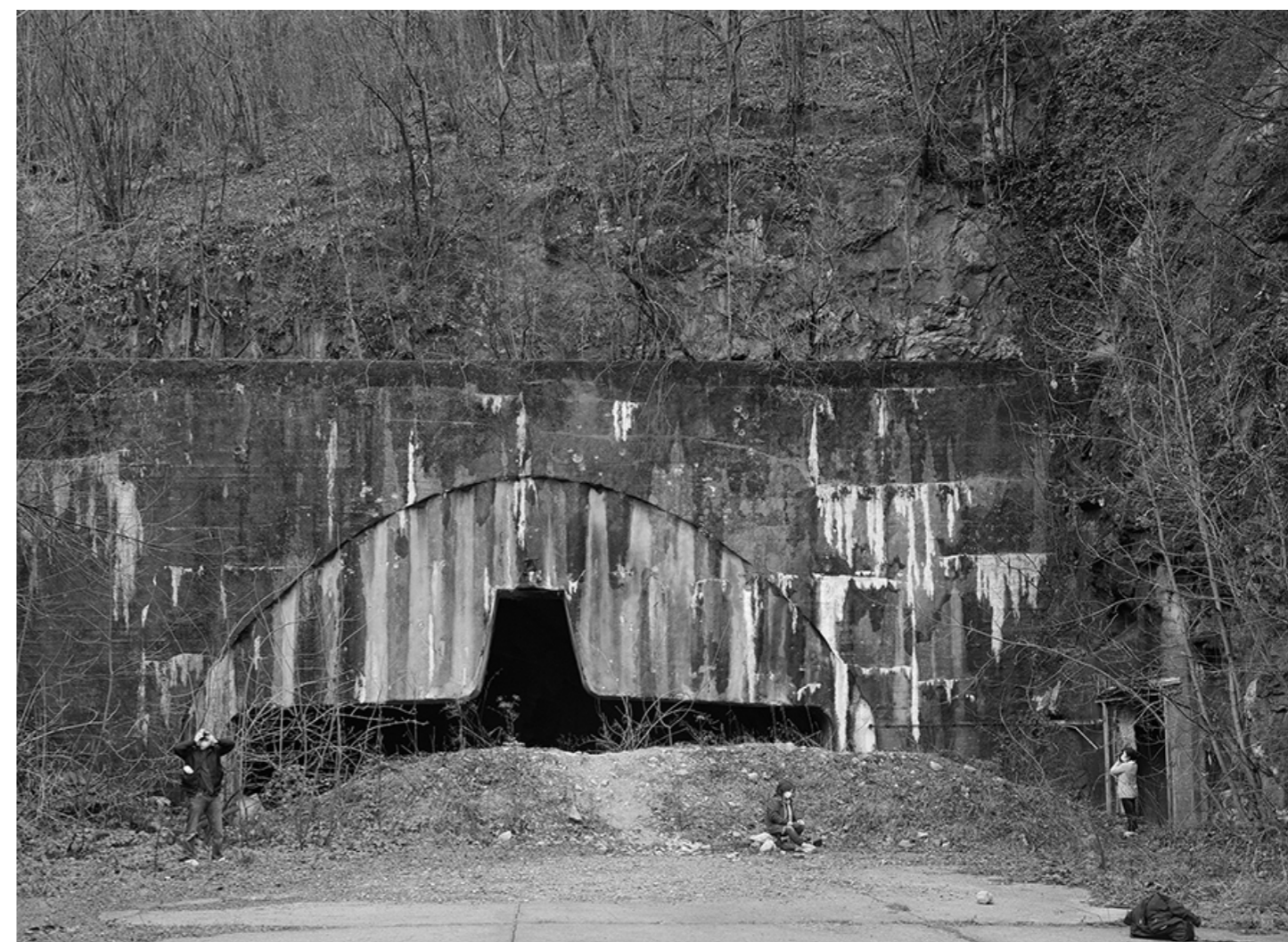


Hrvoje Slovinc, *Still-Life with Snake and Pedestals*, 2015

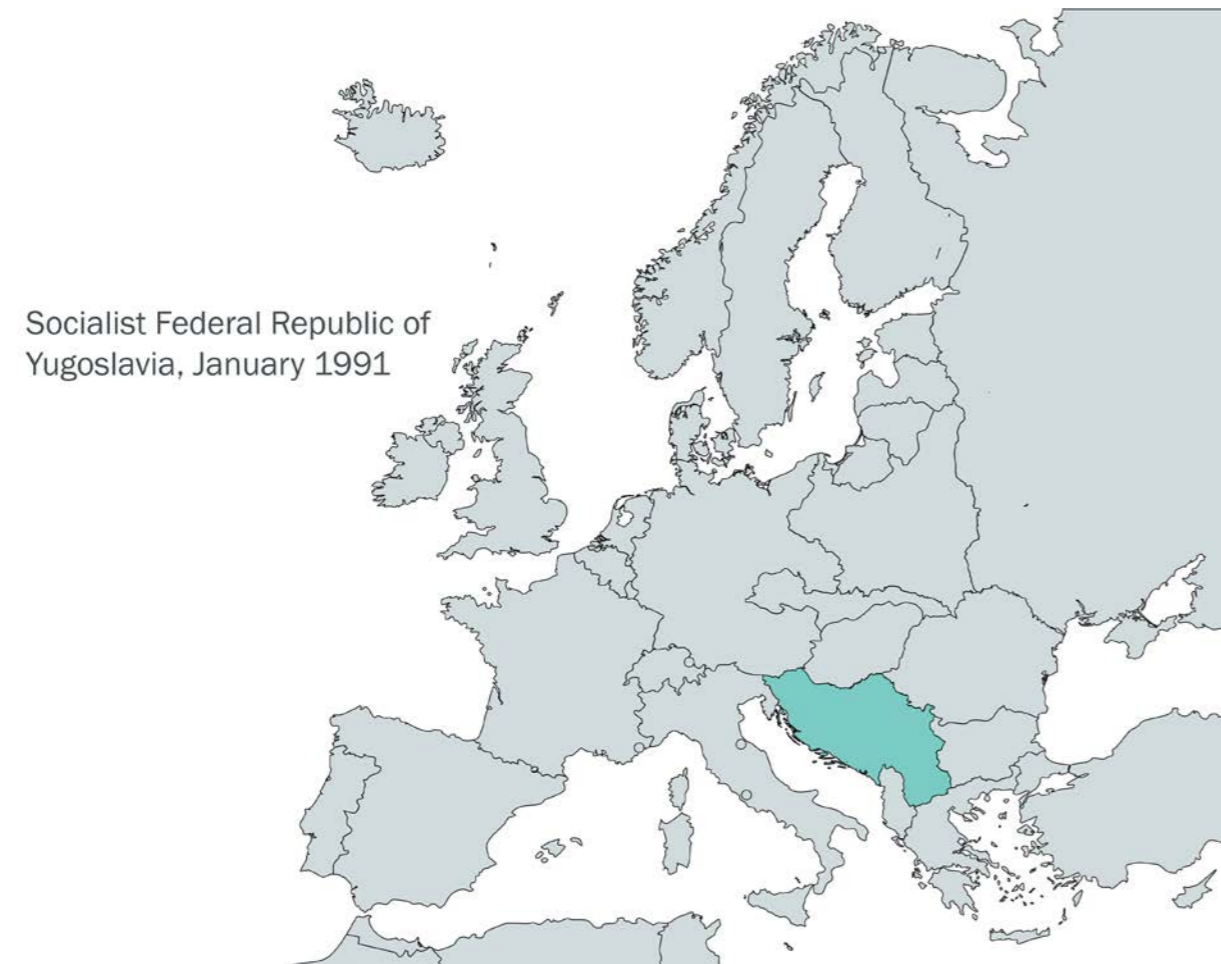
Hrvoje Slovinc's project *Croatian Rhapsody: Borderlands* underscores the turbulent past of Slovinc's homeland during the Croatian War of Independence and its aftermath, as well as his experiences as a young, queer Croatian immigrant in New York City. Using three-dimensional and video components and various materials, Slovinc's work grapples with **dislocation, identity**, and ultimately, the permeable **borders** that govern nations—and ourselves.

Questions for Looking

- Slovinc uses found imagery, collage, and constructed images to create his pictures. How does his use of mixed media add or detract to the overall tone and message?
- Can you sense the artist's motivation in making the work?
- Ask students to spend some time reading Slovinc's poster. How does the experience of reading differ from looking at photographs?
- Slovinc says he was "born in a country that was ravaged by war and no longer exists, [has] a passport from another, and [lives] in a third" and his series is an attempt "to reclaim the specificity of the place we come from and how to articulate its effect on what we have been and what we are." How are some ways your country or city of origin has impacted your identity?
- What metaphors might the artist be using in the text or images?



Hrvoje Slovinc, *Tourists at Zeijava Airport*, 2015



Historical Context for the conflicts surrounding the Former Yugoslavia:

By the end of the 1980s the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia was comprised of the republics of Bosnia and Herzegovina, Croatia, Macedonia, Montenegro, Serbia and Slovenia. It was the largest and most developed country in the Balkans. Yugoslavia encompassed a diverse ethnic population with Christianity and Islam as the main two religions. With the collapse of communism in 1989 the former Yugoslavia was put into political and economic crisis. The subsequent political battles broke up parties and gave power to those calling for the division of republics. Nationalistic rhetoric and ethnic tribalism fueled mistrust among the population, escalating into the demise of the Republic. On June 25th, 1991, Slovenia and Croatia declared independence. Although Slovenia's departure from the republic was mostly peaceful, Croatia's separation was not. Its Serb minority rejected the new leadership and refused to recognize Croatia as an autonomous state, choosing to stand with Yugoslav authority. The Yugoslav People's Army, Serbia, and Croatian Serbs rebelled against the minority leading to a bloody ethnic cleansing of the Croats and other non-Serbs. A UN ceasefire intervention in 1992 slowed the fighting, however, the Croatian authority refused to withdraw. 1992 is also the year Croatia joined the European Union. The fighting ultimately ended in 1995 after the Croat military held three of the four areas created by the UN.

- Slovenia
- Croatia
- Bosnia and Herzegovina
- Montenegro
- Serbia
- Kosovo
- Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia

CONNECTING TO THE COLLECTION:

Below are artists in the Museum of Contemporary Photography's permanent collection and the Midwest Photographers Project who make work about similar themes or concepts in this exhibition. You may schedule a viewing to see these works as a group or individual by visiting <http://www.mocp.org/education/tours-and-print-viewings>

Family:

Priya Kambli
Barbara Diener

Displacement:

CHIM (David Seymour)

War:

Ashley Gilbertson
Dmitri Baltermants
MRK Palash
An-My Lê
Curtis Mann
Rachel Papo
Anthony Haughey
Guillaume Simoneau
Apichatpong Weerasethakul

Memory:

Shimon Attie
Barbara Diener
Binh Danh

Online gallery:

<http://www.mocp.org/info.php?t=objects&type=group&gid=2963&group=Collection+response+to+Traversing+the+Past%3A+Adam+Golfer%2C+Diana+Matar%2C+Hrvoje+Slovenec>

A **Public Print Viewing** of some of these works and others inspired from the exhibition will be led by Curatorial Assistant, Shawn Rowe, on February 13th at 6pm.

CLASSROOM EXERCISES:

- Divide your class into pairs. Within each pair, have each student share a personal story with their partner. Ask the listening students to create a sequence of photographs interpreting their partner's personal story. How did not having a personal connection to the subject change your act of photographing? Of looking?
- Pick a notable event from history and portray the story in 20 photographs, mixing various styles such as landscape, still life, and portraiture. How can you use the camera, often a medium used to record, to interpret a past time?

FURTHER READING:

Hashim Matar, *The Return*, Viking-Penguin, 2016, ISBN 0-670-92333-8

Council on Foreign Relations, *Israeli-Palestinian Conflict*, <https://www.cfr.org/israeli-palestinian-conflict>

Palestine, Israel and the Arab-Israeli Conflict: A Primer (Middle East Research and Information Project)

http://www.merip.org/palestine-israel_primer/intro-pal-isr-primer.html

Ante Gugo, *In the Eye of the Storm: Political, Diplomatic and Military Struggle for Croatian Independence*, CreateSpace Independent Publishing Platform, 2016, ISBN-10 1535118687