

### David Birkin: Mouths At The Invisible Event

16/01/15-28/02/15

## the mosaic rooms

David Birkin (b. 1977) is an artist based between New York and London. He was a fellow at the Whitney Museum's Independent Study Program and is a graduate of Oxford University and the Slade School of Fine Art.

Birkin started out photographing subjects on the periphery of conflict, such as the training of female journalists in Kabul, the founding of Afghan Film, and conscientious objectors during the 2006 Israel-Lebanon War, before curating a series of talks on art and politics. He was awarded a bursary by the National Media Museum in 2009 and a graduate scholarship by the Arts and Humanities Research Council. Birkin was the recipient of the 2010 Sovereign European Art Prize (Barbican, London) and the 2012 Celeste Prize for Photography (Museo Centrale Montemartini, Rome), and was an artist-in-residence at Yaddo and at the Art & Law Program in New York. He has performed in films by Nathaniel Mellors for the ICA, Tate Triennial, British Art Show, Venice Biennale and Hammer Museum, Los Angeles, and narrated the English translation of Chris Marker and Alan Resnais' 1953 film Les statues meurent aussi at the French Institute in London.

Birkin has participated in group exhibitions at the Courtauld Institute, the Photographers' Gallery and Saatchi Gallery, London; the Solyanka State Gallery, Moscow; Tallinn Kunstihoone, Estonia; Dumbo Arts Center, Brooklyn; MoMA PS1's Rockaway Dome and the Whitney Museum of American Art in New York.







"...the 'war on terror' [is] quite literally a war against an emotion (like 'pity' or 'love' or 'hate'). It is thus a war on a projected spectre or phantasm, a war against an elusive, invisible, unlocatable enemy, a war that continually misses its target, striking out blindly with conventional means and waging massive destruction on innocent people in the process." WJT Mitchell in The Life and Death of Images: Ethics and Aesthetics

The Mosaic Rooms, London, are pleased to present the first public solo exhibition by artist David Birkin, bringing together a series of works centred around surveillance, censorship and the legal and linguistic frameworks underpinning contemporary warfare. Reflecting on not only the failure of images, but also the failure of truth and the manipulation of legislative language to suit political expediency, Birkin's recent research focuses on the use of indefinite detention and targeted killing in the "war on terror" and the contrived ambiguity of political and military rhetoric.

Severe Clear (2014) was a skywriting performance that took place on Memorial Day weekend, for which the artist had the words "EXISTENCE OR NONEXISTENCE" written across the New York skyline. The phrase was extracted

from a letter sent by the CIA to the American Civil Liberties Union rejecting their Freedom of Information Act request for records relating to the government's classified drone program. Images were uploaded to social media sites from people across the city, and the event went viral just days before the CIA's public relations department officially joined Twitter. Severe Clear is a term used by pilots to denote ideal flying (and bombing) conditions. A follow-up performance on Veterans Dav saw a small plane circle the Statue of Liberty's torch towing a banner that read, "THE SHADOW OF A DOUBT". The phrase refers to an unattainable burden of proof and a jurisprudential ideal.

Cyclura nubila (2014) sees a legal argument visualised through a series of commissioned drawings of Cuban iguanas by Janet Hamlin, the appointed courtroom sketch artist at the Guantanamo Tribunals. Protected under the 1973 US Endangered Species Act, the island's largest species of terrestrial reptile helped persuade the Supreme Court to hear the case of a group of GTMO detainees being held without charge or trial. Attorney Tom Wilner argued that extending the court's jurisdiction to include the iguanas but not the inmates would effectively grant the lizards more rights than the people.





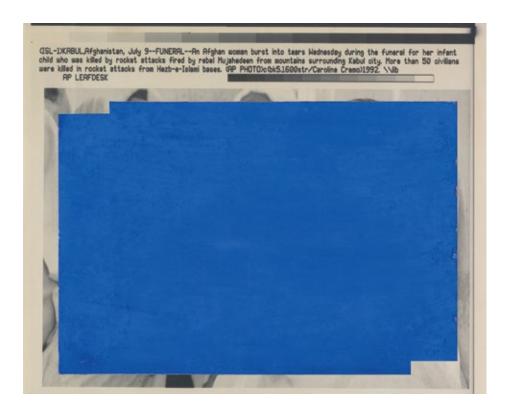
Eyes Only (2014) is a two-screen video installation juxtaposing a sequence of night-vision drone footage of a couple kissing on a roof with news coverage of Michelle and Barack Obama dancing at the 2008 presidential inauguration. One depicts a moment of intimacy between a couple watched by an audience of hundreds of millions, the other between two people unaware they are being watched. The work's title is a bureaucratic abbreviation for a top secret security classification, while "the skies above are blue" — a lyric from Etta James' At Last covered by Beyoncé at the inaugural ball — hints at the anticipatory fear foreshadowing clear skies in regions most severely affected by drones.

The Evidence of Absence (2015) is a looming 30 foot scaled replica of a US Army surveillance blimp, floating above the gallery and visible from several miles away. Deployed by the military in Iraq and Afghanistan, these helium-filled behemoths are now earmarked for use in the US as early warning sensor systems, though civil liberties organisations have been quick to point out their potential for civilian surveillance. The piece references a remark by Donald Rumsfeld relating to the search for Saddam Hussein's alleged weapons of mass destruction: "The absence of evidence is not evidence of absence."

Zenana (2015) is a sound piece based around a recording of the murmur of drones buzzing overhead. Literally translated as "pertaining to women", Zenana refers to the private rooms reserved for family in a South Asian home. It has also become a term for unmanned aerial vehicles in the Gaza strip. both for its onomatopoeic quality and its pejorative connotations in Arabic slang for a relentlessly nagging wife. The recording is overlaid with the sound of an electronic tanpura: a digital device that mimics a stringed instrument used to produce a tonal "drone" for accompanying vocalists and sitarists. Often played by women, it is a key component of the Hindustani musical tradition prevalent across northern India. Pakistan and Afghanistan.

Presented alongside this new body of work are a series of older photographic works relating to the unseen in war, with an emphasis on the way media representations vacillate between aestheticised spectacle and image-saturated ambivalence.

Pietà (2012) traces the history of ultramarine back to the lapis lazuli mines of Badakhshan, Afghanistan, where the precious stone has been extracted since 700 BC. More expensive than gold, this rare pigment was used in Renaissance paintings to denote the figure of highest significance, typically the Virgin Mary in depictions of the Madonna and Child. Here, an image of a woman at the funeral for her infant child in Kabul is veiled in blue pigment. With a gesture that both respects the Islamic prohibition on anthropomorphic imagery



and forces the viewer to construe meaning from the caption alone, the work is redolent of Western photojournalism's recycling of Christian iconographic tropes.

Profiles (2011) considers the visibility of civilian casualties of the Iraq War and the paucity of such images. The series entailed inserting identification numbers from the Iraqi civilian casualty database into photographic software to generate a chromatic "value" for each person. These colours were then exposed onto 8x10 inch transparencies and displayed on X-ray light boxes discarded by British and American hospitals. Due to an idiosyncrasy in the encoding process, the colours are all dominated by red. As failed photographs, these monochrome portraits point to blanks in the visual record. A related work from the series Embedded (2011) involved inserting names from the Iraqi civilian casualty database into the JPEG code of an image depicting American flag-draped coffins being repatriated from Iraq. The original photograph was censored following a Bush-era edict prohibiting the publication of images of US casualties.

I Was So Entranced Seeing That I Did Not Think About The Sight (2012) takes its title from Helen Keller's description of the New York skyline from atop the recently built Empire State Building in 1932. In a lyrical response to the dialectics of looking and seeing, visibility and vision, the artist embossed a braille transcription of her words onto photographic paper and exposed them to the light from the spot where Keller stood eight decades previously, while facing south toward the newly rebuilt World Trade Center. Framed without glass, the resulting Malevich-black photogram is at once tactile and invisible.

Mouths At The Invisible Event quotes Hamlet's final soliloquy as he observes a hot-headed Fortinbras preparing his army to fight a hubristic and frivolous battle. The phrase speaks to the brazenness of military policy in an increasingly automated era, and its voiceless victims: the fleshy reality of Baudrillard's virtual war





# Winter Highlights at The Mosaic Rooms

### TALKS Artist Talk Thursday 22 January

Thursday 22 January, 7pm

Artist David Birkin discusses his work in the exhibition and his wider practice and research with Michaela Crimmin, Culture + Conflict.

**FREE** 

#### Unmanned Thursday 5 February, 7pm

Panel discussion on the use of drones in counter terrorism and military operations, looking in particular at cultural and philosophical responses to the drone programme.

FREE

#### From Above and Below Saturday 28 February, 12pm

A series of lecture performances which observe the shifting parameters and perspectives of contemporary warfare, from the machinic view above to the human experience below.

FREE

#### LITERATURE Raja Shehadeh Wednesday 25 February, 7pm

The award-winning author discusses his new book which explores the politics of language and the language of politics in the Israeli Palestine conflict.

FREE

#### FILM DRONE

Wednesday 28 January, 7.30pm

New documentary investigating the human consequences of the US drone war. It follows drone victims, as well as pilots, who struggle to come to terms with the new warfare.

Tickets £5, buy online or rsvp@mosaicrooms.org

#### War at a Distance Wednesday 11 February, 7.30pm

Documentary by Harun Farocki which seeks to define the relationship between military strategy and industrial production, and shed light on how the technology of war finds applications in everyday life.

Tickets £5, buy online or rsvp@mosaicrooms.org

# COLLABORATIONS The Sick Man of Europe: The Painter 4 February-12 April 2015 ICA, London SW1Y 5AH

ICA presents a new installation by artist Dor Guez, in collaboration with The Mosaic Rooms. Part one of a series reflecting on the military history and current political climate of the Middle East through the creative practices of soldiers from the region.

Visit www.mosaicrooms.org for full event listings and to book tickets. Email rsvp@mosaicrooms.org for free events.

#### The Mosaic Rooms — Contemporary Culture from the Arab World

#### VISIT

The Mosaic Rooms 226 Cromwell Road London SW5 OSW www.mosaicrooms.org

Nearest Underground station: Earl's Court, Earl's Court Road exit Buses: 74, 328, C1, C3

Parking: One disabled parking space is available by prior arrangement; parking meters are available in Lexham Gardens behind the building.

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#### THE MOSAIC ROOMS BOOKSHOP

Our bookshop provides a fantastic resource, stocking celebrated and new writers from the Arab World, art books, and films, in both English and Arabic. Open Tuesday—Saturday, 11am-6pm.