

Press Release
15 September 2014



David Birkin: *Mouths At The Invisible Event*
16 January - 28 February 2015
Private View: Thursday 15 January, 6.30pm-8.30pm
Exhibition Open: Tues-Sat, 11am-6pm, FREE
The Mosaic Rooms, 226 Cromwell Road, London SW5 0SW



Severe Clear (2014)



Your Eyes Only (2014)

"...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 issues of censorship, spectatorship and the legal and linguistic frameworks underpinning war. 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 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 above New York. On Memorial Day weekend, Birkin wrote an extract from a rejection letter sent by the CIA to the American Civil Liberties Union in response to a Freedom of Information Act request for records relating to the government's classified drone program. Documentation took the form of images uploaded to social media sites by people across the city, and the event went viral just days before the CIA's public relations department officially joined Twitter. *Your Eyes Only* (2014) is a two-screen video installation depicting night-vision drone footage of a couple kissing on a roof, alongside news coverage of Michelle and Barack Obama dancing at the 2008 presidential inauguration. The juxtaposition of these two videos — one depicting a moment of intimacy between two people watched by an audience of hundreds of millions, the other between a couple who do not even realise they are being watched — echoes the blurring of private and public domains in the modern surveillance state. *Cyclura nubila* (2014) sees a legal argument visualised through a series of commissioned drawings of Cuban iguanas by Janet Hamlin, the official courtroom sketch artist at the Guantanamo Tribunals. Protected under the 1973 US Endangered Species Act, the unlikely reptilian protagonists helped persuade the Supreme Court to hear the case of a group of Kuwaiti GTMO detainees

being held without charge or trial. Attorney Tom Wilner argued that extending jurisdiction to include the iguanas but not the inmates would effectively grant the lizards more rights than the people.

These works, created during Birkin's residency with the Whitney Museum's Independent Study Program in New York, are presented alongside previous photographic works relating to the unseen in war, with an emphasis on the way media representations vacillate between aestheticised spectacle and image-saturated ambivalence. *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 sheets of 10x8 inch transparency film and displayed on X-ray light boxes discarded by British and American hospitals. As a series of failed photographs, these monochrome portraits point to blanks in the visual record, recalling what Judith Butler describes as our differential allocation of grief. *Pietà* (2012) traces the history of the Renaissance colour ultramarine back to the lapis lazuli mines of Badakhshan, Afghanistan. The piece comprises an image of a mother at the funeral for her infant child in Kabul, 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. *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 City skyline from atop the newly built Empire State Building in 1932. In a lyrical response to the dialectics of looking and seeing, faith and foresight, the artist embossed a braille transcription of her words onto photographic paper and exposed it to the light while facing south toward the newly rebuilt World Trade Center, at the spot where Keller stood eight decades previously. The resulting Malevich-black photogram was then framed without glass, creating an image that is both tactile and invisible. Also presented are three new works including a sound piece, a public performance and an installation based on a quote by Donald Rumsfeld: "The absence of evidence is not evidence of absence."

Mouths At The Invisible Event derives its title from 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 both the brazenness of military policy in an increasingly automated era, and its voiceless victims: the fleshy reality of Baudrillard's virtual war.

David Birkin (b. 1977) studied at Oxford University, the Slade School of Fine Art and the Whitney Museum's Independent Study Program. Birkin's work has been exhibited internationally, including at The Courtauld Institute, The Photographers' Gallery and The Saatchi Gallery, London; the Solyanka State Gallery, Moscow; MoMA PS1's Rockaway Dome and the Whitney Museum's ISP exhibition, New York. He is based between New York and London.

For further details, images and to arrange interviews contact Rosa Attwood at press@mosaicrooms.org or on + 44 207 370 9990.

Notes to Editors

- David Birkin is available for interview.
- Images and biographies available on request.
- Entry to the exhibition is free. The Mosaic Rooms are open from 11am-6pm Tuesday to Saturday.
- The exhibition will be accompanied by a public programme of talks and events.
- The Mosaic Rooms are a leading London-based non-profit cultural organisation dedicated to supporting and promoting contemporary culture from and about the Arab world. They provide an international platform for the arts, particularly new work, and create opportunities for collaboration and professional development between artists, collectives and organisations from the Arab world and the UK. They do this through their free entry contemporary art exhibitions, their multidisciplinary events, artist residencies and learning and engagement programme. They work in partnership with national and international organisations to disseminate their combined arts programme to the widest possible audience. The Mosaic Rooms' programme is run by Rachael Jarvis, Head Curator. The Mosaic Rooms form part of the A.M. Qattan Foundation. Visit www.mosaicrooms.org
- The Mosaic Rooms are situated on the corner of the Cromwell Road and Earl's Court Road in Kensington, London.



**AN A.M. QATTAN
FOUNDATION PROJECT**

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