

*Was yesterday like today?* Resolution remains demonstrably out of reach, but the scenes/scents pictured here reflect the artists' (and their interviewees) *Heresy* of a traumatized site—*My border*, humble and shared—where openness is the greatest source of both conflict and invitation.

The work gathered in this exhibition is not about forgetting or denying records, nor is it about wandering without coordinates or purpose; it is about re-calibration, re-orientation, and the acute need to temper received thinking with personal cartography. By inviting the viewer to locate their bearings and readings in the local rather than that which is archived

and upheld, an alternative frontier unfurls. In recognizing the imperialist foundations of our existing knowledge and networks, we can see, hear, smell, and touch an ethics of human-centric engagement that Azoulay argues will loosen the strictures of historical injustice, and nourish a politics of repair. Whether scents, sounds, or stories, the work of Leo and Surani sidesteps focal points to swim in the fleeting alloys of impressions and empiricism. In so doing, they navigate scarred and heavily politicized terrain with humility and pacifism—replacing polarities, walls, and absolutes with palimpsest, mutability, and the vernacular. Yesterday, today, and tomorrow.

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**STEVEN MATIJCIO** is the Director and Chief Curator of the Blaffer Art Museum at the University of Houston. Prior to this he served as Curator at the Contemporary Arts Center in Cincinnati, Ohio (2013-2019) and Curator at the Southeastern Center for Contemporary Art in Winston-Salem, North Carolina (2008-2013). Matijcio achieved an MA from the Center for Curatorial Studies at Bard College, New York and an HBA from the University of Toronto. He has held positions in a number of important galleries and museums including the Plug In Institute of Contemporary Art, the Power Plant Contemporary Art Gallery, the Art Gallery of Ontario, and the National Gallery of Canada.

**NINA LEO** is a Canadian cross-disciplinary artist. She has shown her work in galleries and public institutions internationally, including the Beyond/ In Western N.Y. 2010 Biennial, Kunsthau Santa Fe (Mexico), Nuit Blanche (Toronto), The Lobby Gallery (Chicago), New Zero Arts Space (Yangon) and Al Fanoun Gallery (Abu Dhabi). She has received grants from The Canada Council for the Arts and The Ontario Arts Council as well as the 2013 Eric Hoffer Grand Prize Award for Short Prose (USA). She has participated in residencies including the Banff Centre for the Arts (Canada) and the Ventspils International Writers' Residency (Latvia). Over the past five years, her olfactory research has developed through associations with the Monell Chemical Senses Center (P.A.) and the Institute for Art and Olfaction (L.A.). She has presented and published her research in Canada, the U.S, Italy and the U.A.E. Currently, she is an associate professor within the Sculpture/ Installation department and a member of the graduate studies faculty at OCAD University in Toronto.

**MOEZ SURANI**'s writing has been published internationally, including in *Harper's Magazine*, *Best American Experimental Writing 2016*, *Best Canadian Poetry*, and the *Globe and Mail*. He has received a Chalmers Arts Fellowship, which supported research in India and East Africa, and he has been an artist-in-residence in Finland, Italy, Latvia, Myanmar, Switzerland, Taiwan, the Banff Centre for the Arts in Canada and at the MacDowell Colony in the United States. His visual and performance works have been shown in Toronto at Theatre Passe Muraille, Nuit Blanche, Videofag, Red Head Gallery, and internationally at the Cross Gallery in Taipei, the New Zero Arts Space in Yangon, Palazzolo Acreide's city hall in Italy and he is a member of the artist-run centre Gallery 44 in Toronto. He is the author of three poetry books: *Reticent Bodies* (Wolsak & Wynn, 2009), *Floating Life* (Wolsak & Wynn, 2012), and *Operations* (Book\*hug, 2016), which is comprised of the names of military operations, and reveals a globe-spanning inventory of the contemporary rhetoric of violence. A new collection of poetry, *Are the Rivers in Your Poems Real* (Book\*hug, 2019) was published in fall 2019. In an investigation of mediation, image and contemporary politics, he is currently collaborating with Nina Leo on a collection of installation work.

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YESTERDAY  
T O M O R R O W

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**BY STEVEN MATIJCIO**

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The institution of nation-states and their corresponding borders are as much a product of settlement, politics, colonization, conflicts, and treaties, as they are mythology, ideologies, and projection. Where lines are drawn and where citizenship begins, and ends, are human constructs that have become entrenched and enshrined over time—hardening into practices, allegiances, and beliefs that are defended to the death. We're told we need these invented jurisdictions to uphold peace, protect a way of life, locate culture, quantify economics, and to keep the other/enemy out. The notion of an essential "heartland" congeals within this context—unique to its respective country, yet similar in its performance the world over—and frequently weaponized for protectionist causes. Those who once migrated across borders (with colonist encouragement) to span frontiers, settle lands, and build better lives, are now habitually treated as unwanted agents of encroachment. Alarmist narratives of danger, trespass, and parasitism frequently coalesce around those seeking asylum, and swell via popular media and populist rhetoric—creating psychological barriers as dense and debatable as their physical counterparts. Artists Nina Leo and Moez Surani seek to interrupt this insidious ossification by creating poignant moments of poetry, dissonance, and intentionally ambiguous geography. Speaking humbly, but earnestly to the subjectivity of both place and passage, they collect and present microcosms to perforate the numbing abstractions of the macro. Activating multiple moments in time—past and present—as well as senses beyond the visual—including both audible and olfactory stimuli—they pierce enduring ideological gestalts with synesthetic and anachronistic clearings. In the process, outside the reign of received knowledge and dehumanizing discourse, Leo & Surani forge generative niches where people can once again be found. Positioning scent as a "revolutionary force" able to bypass language, time, and physical borders, Leo and Surani orchestrate an ongoing series of custom perfumes under the banner of *Heresies*. Created in conjunction with partners they call, "resident perfumers from essentialized places," each scent represents a firsthand reflection of traumatized cities that carry international stigmatization. *My Baghdad, My*

*Hiroshima, My Waco, and My Barcelona* have been translated into scents thus far, with more perfumes, partners, and poems still to come. In each, whether it be warm vanilla notes, floral citrus blends, or the meeting of car fumes and cigarette smoke with fresh cut grass, one's expectations of how that city should "smell" are almost invariably detoured. Eschewing the impossible assignment of distilling an entire city into a singular bottle, each perfumer is instead given the opportunity to convene the aromas that speak most familiarly to their personal geography—creating intimate cartographies that Surani calls "lyric poems." The private thereby becomes public, expanded further by Leo and Surani's future plan to take *Heresies* to market and the intersection of, in their words, "tactical media, public art, and consumer product." Whether the unusual scents will sell in a commercial arena is up for debate, but their very presence in spaces both for, and not-for profit, conjures scholar Jessica Eberhardt's model of "friction" as a foil to implicit bias. In an era where speed equals progress and technological advancements accelerate communications, transactions, and virtually every form of exchange, the application of prejudice—both conscious and unconscious—can be a pernicious passenger. To reclaim the space of reflection and recognition, Eberhardt calls for outlets, obstacles, and disruptions that produce moments of pause, and a needed site for second thoughts. By placing personal and paradoxical burrs into the slick machinery of commerce and consumption, Leo and Surani position *Heresies* as "tools of resistance," that speak most directly to our emotion and memory. Outside immediacy, exacting coordinates, or caption, these scents willfully and radically meander in evocation.

Friction within chronology, patriotism, and the relationship between sight and sound, intersects in the performative photo *Was Yesterday So Much Better than Today?* as Leo and Surani interrupt the seductive forces of nostalgia with what they call, an "enhanced sense of presence." In this humbly heroic image we see a female figure from behind, standing near a cliff and wearing headphones as she looks out across a body of water, framed by wistful branches and grasses, under a pale sky brushed with clouds.

We do not know the location of the photo nor the identity of the figure but learn through the exhibition text that she is listening to a recorded soundscape of the water and wind at this site, from the *previous* day. In this amalgam, the artists purposefully skew the alignment between visual and audible, as well as past and present, to forge a Foucauldian heterotopia "where," in their words, "properties of both realms can be interrogated." The graceful beauty of this contemporary Caspar David Friedrich-like vista is thusly interrupted by the sonic abrasion of ambient sounds and anachronistic reckoning—obscuring the time-honored union of image and indoctrination. *Was Yesterday* consequently inhabits an uncomfortable intersection as it resists the nationalistic invitation it references; fomenting instead as an allegorical spur in the nation-state's romantic sublimation of its past. By obscuring the increasingly widespread call to make a country "great again" by exalting ersatz histories and justifying nativist policies of the present with a renovated past, Leo and Surani present the "contrapuntal voices" that Ethicist and Psychologist Carol Gilligan implores us to hear. Finding revelatory value in that which is so often dismissed as contradictory or dissonant when listening to people speak about their experiences, Gilligan champions noise, restraint, and replacing our instinctual urges to categorize with "a space for surprise, and thus of discovery." Much like this transgressive image, by listening for difference and the rifts between, and within human documents, we reveal and re-map the obfuscations of rhetoric.

The re-appraisal of countries and borders via floating foils of smell, sound, and subjectivities culminates in *The Irrefutable Border* series, where Leo and Surani survey the semiotic impact of the Canadian-U.S. border upon both residents and migrants. They look especially at the Quebec-Vermont crossing: walking along and methodically observing seemingly tranquil terrain that is, in actuality, one of the most heavily trafficked and protested sites in Canada. Part of the research that informs their path is a parallel series of interviews conducted with border guards, asylum-seekers, and members of immigration advocacy groups as a means to collect stories that pierce the sensationalizing

narratives perpetuated by mass media. We do not see or hear these words, but in keeping with Gilligan's credo of contrapuntal listening, these varied accounts form the implicit architecture of *The Irrefutable Border*—re-routing our expectations of explicit accounts with a cumulative meditation. Seeking to highlight moments "without," in Leo's words, "the ideological overlay," the ensuing photos are quiet, contemplative, and conspicuously unassuming. Free of figures, skirmishes, or climactic action, these modest musings of the land reflect the underlying human contract that author Ariella Azoulay outlines in her 2012 book *Civil Imagination: A Political Ontology of Photography*. Positioning said photograph as a "skill" that requires the acknowledgment of relationships and forms of belonging that transcend national boundaries, Azoulay seeks to expose and (re)open the exclusions, restrictions, and differentiations she collectively titles the "Imperial Shutter."

To combat the enduring violence and segregation she sees framing and editing history like a hegemonic camera—prematurely cropping the capacity to tell us how things *might* have been—Azoulay appeals to our faculty of imagination in her illuminating 2019 follow-up book *Potential History: Unlearning Imperialism*. Rather than looking for a "new future" that perpetuates existing models of sovereignty and separation, Azoulay urges us to "rewind history and unlearn our imperial rights"; In so doing, we can make present what was invented as "the past," and in turn, seek the "still-present potentialities" that linger. Such is the case in *The Irrefutable Border*, where—much like *Heresies*—Leo and Surani eschew the anticipated flashpoints of walls, checkpoints, and barbed wire in favor of clotheslines, rail tracks, gravel roads, and neighborhoods that meander, and speak to an extended in-between. In the more dramatically lit photos of trees, grass, bushes and weeds along the border (with only a gossamer suggestion of a fence), much of the composition in these already porous ramparts is given over to shadow, suggestion, and the ghosts of past travelers. Like history pooling in the cache of chiaroscuro, the interviews archived by Leo and Surani echo behind their eyes as the artists gaze upon this border and survey its present.