

Related Events

In Conversation: Maeve Brennan and Sheyma Buali

Thursday 13 July, 6.30–8pm

£5/£3, booking essential (free for Associates)

Maeve Brennan discusses her film *The Drift* with Sheyma Buali, Director of BBC Arabic Festival and Commissioning Editor at Ibraaz Channel, with reference to experimental documentary and ethnographic film practice. A screening of *The Drift* takes place prior to this event at 5.30pm (duration 51 mins.)

The Artists' Feature Film with Dan Kidner

Saturday 16 September, 10am–5pm

£40/£30 concessions, booking essential

A study day with curator and writer Dan Kidner exploring the artists' feature film and its relation to other histories of experimental narrative film and video. Drawing on his own recent writing and exhibition projects Kidner will lead an introductory seminar session with participants, screen a number of films and chair a roundtable discussion with leading artist filmmakers and theorists, including Ben Rivers, Margaret Salmon, Erika Balsom and current Spike Island exhibiting artist Maeve Brennan.

The day ends with a special public screening of Margaret Salmon's *Eglantine* (2016) at 6.30pm.

Book for events online at www.spikeisland.org.uk, call 0117 929 2266 or visit reception.

Exhibition Guide

The Drift Maeve Brennan

8 July to 17 September 2017

Spike Island

133 Cumberland Road, Bristol BS1 6UX

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Visitor Information

Gallery open Tuesday to Sunday, 12–5pm (during exhibitions only).

Admission to the gallery is free.

Café open Monday to Friday, 8.30am–5pm
Saturday and Sunday, 10–5pm.

Spike Island aims to be a fully accessible building.



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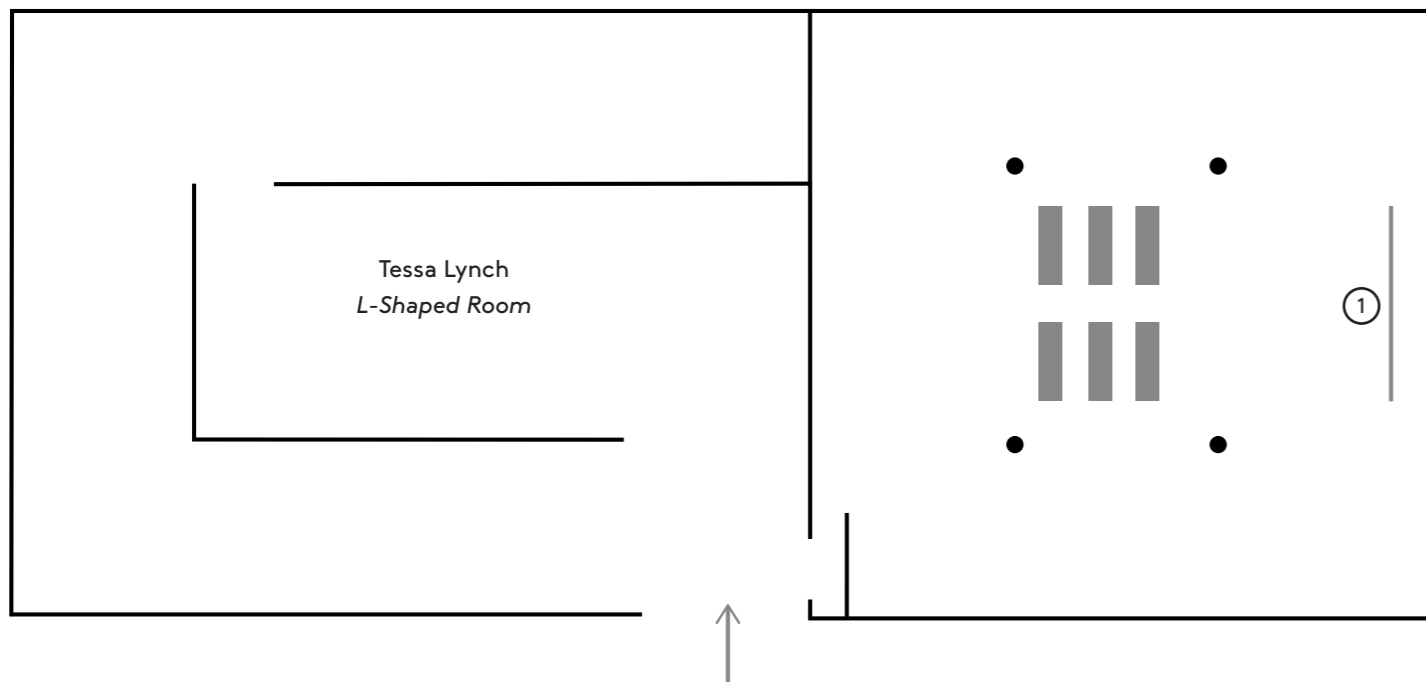


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1 **The Drift**
HD video with sound, 50' 29"

Screening times:

The film is 51 minutes and screenings begin on the hour from 12pm, with the last screening at 4pm.

Please take care when moving around the gallery due to low lighting and uneven flooring.

The Drift is produced by Spike Island, Bristol and Chisenhale Gallery, London and commissioned by Spike Island; Chisenhale Gallery; The Whitworth, The University of Manchester; and Lismore Castle Arts, Lismore.

The Drift is supported by The Arab Fund For Arts and Culture – AFAC and Arts Council England Grants for the Arts.

With thanks to:

American University of Beirut: Department of Archaeology, Beisour Joyriders, Bryony Bond, Poppy Bowers, May Calil, Toby Christian, Maya de Freige, Directorate General of Antiquities (DGA), Lebanon, Agnes Eshak, Raffi Gergian, Olga Gribben, Mary Griffiths, Katie Guggenheim, Paul McAree, Ghassan Maasri, Eamonn Maxwell, Municipality of Britel, Lebanon, Municipality of Niha, Lebanon, Paul Newson, Abbas Saleh, Helga Seeden, Sabine Sidawi, Helen Stalker

Maeve Brennan

Maeve Brennan (b.1990, London) lives and works in London and Beirut. Recent exhibitions include: Jerusalem Pink, OUTPOST, Norwich; Rough House, The Glue Factory, Glasgow; At the Seams: A Political History of Palestinian Embroidery, Dar el Nimer, Beirut (all 2016); KURZ / DUST, Centre for Contemporary Art Ujazdowski Castle, Warsaw; Video Works, Metropolis Empire Sofil, Beirut (both 2015); and A Museum of Immortality, Ashkal Alwan, Beirut (2014). Brennan was a fellow of the arts study programme Home Workspace Program at Ashkal Alwan in Beirut (2013-14).

The Drift **2017**

Conceived and Directed by

Maeve Brennan

Produced by

Ali Roche

Executive Producers

Helen Legg, Polly Staple

Associate Producer

Ellen Greig

Line Producer

Jinane Dagher, Orjouane Productions

With

The Mechanic Mohammed Zaytoun

The Gatekeepers Fakhr El Fakhry
 Tanios El Fakhry
 Najem Ghanem
 Naameh Rmeileh
 Tanios El Najjar

The Archaeological Hashem Ghali
Conservator

The Collector Abou Ali

The Smuggler Anonymous

Camera

Mark Khalife
Maeve Brennan

Editor

Sue Giovanni

Supervising Sound Editor

Tom Sedgwick

Focus Puller

Marie Warde

Assistant Camera

Ali Hadi Al Zounji

Sound Recordists

Emmanuel Zouki, Tatiana el Dahdah

Key Grip

Elie Baayno

Lighting

Bassel Guilliana

Production Assistant

Ali Saleh

Production Translator

Micheline Ziadee

Dialogue Consultant Editor

Carine Doumit

Narrative Consultant Editor

Ariadna Fatjo-Vilas

Colourist

Jason R Moffat

Assistant Sound Editor

Benjamin Hurd

Translation

Micheline Ziadee

Additional Translation

Umama Hamido

Subtitles

Adelphi Studio

Production Drivers

Bilal Atwe
Anwar al Shami

Catering

Zahra Saleh

Title Design

City Editions Studio

Camera Equipment

Final Cut, Beirut, Lebanon

Filmed in Lebanon

American University of Beirut: Department of
Archaeology
Roman temples, Niha
Roman temple, Hosn Niha
Scrap Yard Hafez, Taybeh
Scrap Yard Zaytoun, Britel

Maeve Brennan and Helen Legg, Spike Island director, 5 July 2017

HL: Let's start at the beginning. What was the genesis of *The Drift* (2017)?

MB: I was led there by *Jerusalem Pink* (2015), my previous film, for which I went to Palestine to research my great-grandfather, Ernest Tatham Richmond. He was an architect who was invited to Palestine during the British Mandate and made an architectural survey of the Dome of the Rock, an ancient Islamic shrine in Jerusalem. In his book there are objective, scientific descriptions of the structure and decoration of the building but there is also an introduction that politicises its repair and restoration. He talks about the efforts made over the fourteen centuries of the building's existence as having political agency. He argues that as long as the building is sustained, then something of the Palestinian existence is also sustained. I was interested in how forms of maintenance and repair might gain a particular agency, specifically in Palestine and the surrounding region. Lebanon, Israel/Palestine and Syria have all undergone periods of recent conflict and these images dominate the media. *The Drift* presents an alternative image. I moved to Lebanon in 2013 to attend Ashkal Alwan's Home Workspace Program (an arts study programme) with these ideas in mind. I lived in Beirut for three years and during this period, I became very aware of the prevalence of archaeological sites and ruins in Lebanon. There are so many they can't possibly restore and sustain them all. At the same time, I was also aware of a car salvage culture that's very visible in the suburbs of Beirut, and especially on the road that leads to the Roman ruins of Ba'albek in the Beqaa Valley (eastern Lebanon). Whenever I would visit the ruins I would pass vast scrapyards of broken cars and car parts. These two sites of fragments – the ruins and the scrapyards – started to overlap. There was also a presence of joyriding culture that I first encountered in Beirut. It was associated with scrapyards because joyriders do up their cars with parts they scavenge from them. In the Beqaa Valley, a place that's so historically rich, I found that image of youth culture interesting. It was something I wanted to document.

HL: How did you set about approaching the subject?

MB: I usually approach subjects with a view to spending time, allowing things to change during the process. During these extended periods of research, I meet certain people who lead me to other people. I let myself be redirected. It's a documentary approach, but there's a looseness to it.

In *The Drift*, we meet three main characters: Fakhry, the guardian of the temples of Niha; Hashem, the archaeological conservator; and Mohammad, the young mechanic.

I was living in Beirut at the time of the murder of Khaled al-Asaad, the caretaker of Palmyra, in neighbouring Syria. He was killed because he refused to give up the locations of valuable artefacts. During this time, when heritage sites were being destroyed in Syria, I had a conversation with my friend, an archaeologist from the Beqaa Valley (which borders Syria). She told me about a string of Roman temples there that were rarely visited and quite unknown. Each temple was protected by a guardian, which spoke to this story of Khaled al-Asaad. I went to look for them and I met Fakhry, the first of the three main characters we encounter in the film. Fakhry's father was also a guardian of the temples in Niha – the role is usually inherited – and the temples are often located right within the villages. They're very much incorporated into day-to-day life so the presence of history is completely unavoidable. People grow up around these ruins..

There's a sense of these spaces being alive. Fakhry has a vineyard and fruit trees beside the temple and the guardians tend to the land, clean the stones. They carry out constant maintenance in order to preserve the temples. Their presence is also a deterrent to looting and theft. During times of conflict there is a major risk of people taking valuable historic artefacts to sell them, just like in Palmyra.

I met Hashem, the conservator, when I first moved to Beirut and the encounter stayed with me. I was taken to his cavernous, basement office at the American University in Beirut, where he was sitting with a table of fragments in front of him awaiting repair. The back room was full of the reassembled clay artefacts you see in the film. I was struck by the quantity of objects and the amount of work that had gone into their reconstruction. Many of the repaired artefacts were still full of holes, which was compelling. You spend all this time reconstructing

an object, a history, yet it's forever incomplete. Hashem had been doing this for 25 years.

Other forms of reconstruction kept appearing during my research. Fakhry worked on the reconstruction of the temples in Niha in the seventies, which was amazing. He talked about using authentic Roman building techniques in a way that seemed to flatten time. He feels deeply connected to the Romans, often referring to them as his cousins. He would deride archaeologists for not knowing what he knows, things he had learned from working closely with the stones with his hands. Between him and Hashem there exists a kind of knowledge gained through a proximity to materials and objects. The film tries to look at that.

HL: Does your own approach to filmmaking share an affinity with the practices of Fakhry and Hashem?

MB: Yes. For instance, my early projects often looked at geological practices. I was always interested in making history or time or other overwhelming concepts tactile. A geologist once showed me a core sample which was two thousand million years old. He used this chunk of strata to explain the movement of the earth. I held it and it was the most beautiful thing I had ever seen – the whole world right there. Although my method is film, I feel that there's always an interrogation of objects and materials going on. *Jerusalem Pink* was an interrogation of stone, documenting stories that could narrate and animate an inanimate thing. It's the same with *The Drift*; I delve into the landscape and its ruins through people's different understandings of those sites.

Mohammed, the young mechanic, has a similar connection to an object – it's just a very different kind of object. His world speaks to how times have changed, the cultural object now being an imported BMW from Germany. His car is his object of desire, the thing he wants to take care of. Dressed in his Nike cap and Adidas shoes, he speaks to the interconnectedness of everything. Fakhry is very located: as he says, 'I grew up here and will die here'. Mohammed is constantly moving as far as he can go, to the edges.

HL: And the constituent parts of Fakhry's monument, the stones, originate in that landscape, just a little further up the hill, while the parts of Mohammed's are produced in multiple foreign

countries...

MB: And that's reiterated in the role of the smuggler and the way he speaks about the kind of artefacts that we've seen Fakhry and the collector talk about in an intensely located way. The smuggler speaks instead of their circulation and economic value, so you're reminded of this outside world that's seeping in through his mobile phone and WhatsApp deals. *The Drift* isn't just conjuring a historicised image of Lebanon, there's also a very contemporary understanding of objects and places particularly in relation to the younger characters in the film.

HL: The film is structured on two axes: the vertical, related to history, archaeology, rootedness and the ground, and the pacier, more contemporaneous use of the horizontal, represented by Mohammed as he speeds across the landscape. The poetry of the film seems to be built around these twin poles.

MB: I think it's implicit in the roles of the characters (the archaeologist and the joyrider-cum-mechanic). It's a methodology for understanding a place. It combines two physical ways of learning about a landscape – a horizontal exploration in Mohammad's BMW and an excavation of the layered histories beneath, with Fakhry and Hashem.

Mohammed brought a different, very contemporary attitude that I wanted to incorporate, another kind of relationship to that rich history. In the film, when he talks about the Romans, he says 'all they left me was bones and broken pottery. I swear I don't forgive them.' You get a sense of his daily life, growing up in a typical town in the Beqaa Valley, which is known to be economically underdeveloped. He gleans what he can. History has a presence, but he is more interested in what he can salvage.

HL: How does *The Drift* situate itself in relation to the genre of documentary film?

MB: I would never call *The Drift* a pure documentary, though of course it makes use of that form. Someone told me that the characters aren't burdened with a particular judgment or reading, that they seem to appear as and for themselves. This is something I was really conscious of during the edit and it's something that I think comes through time. There really is time spent on the actions and words of the people that appear in the film. It tries to get close to its subjects, for instance in the slow scanning shots of the car, where you're forced to

take in every detail, or when we stay on Hashem's hands slowly contemplating which fragment will fit against which edge. This is an approach I always adopt in my editing. Pacing is very important. I stay with a shot when you might expect it to cut and this encourages a different kind of engagement with the subject matter.

I initially set out with an idea of shooting some staged scenes. I wanted to have this character of the joyrider moving through the landscape and another character of the restorer rebuilding objects at the same time, but I always wanted them to be real people, so this idea of staging was not so literal. It's about getting at reality through a more composed image, which I think allows the actions of Hashem and Mohammed to resonate more than if I had filmed them haphazardly. The accentuated use of sound and the lighting creates a focus and a concentration on their particular words and actions.

HL: What about you as a subject – what is your own position within the film?

MB: A lot of people have asked me about the fact that everyone in the film is male while I am a woman and I find it a hard question to answer interestingly. It's not really at the crux of the work, it's simply that I only encountered men in the roles I was researching. More pertinent is the fact that I'm not from Lebanon, I'm from somewhere else. This comes into the structure of the work when I acknowledge my own experience of being shown around various places. The film adopts the form of the tour at points, like when Fakhry beckons to me and says 'come', in the trees behind the temple, and when Mohammed asks 'Do you want to take a turn in Britel?' And this is directed at the audience too, many of whom won't have seen these places before.

This structure of the tour also lays the groundwork for the generous encounters with Fakhry and all of the characters, the knowledge and stories that they share. There is a specific dynamic with each character. Mohammed would show off, saying these smart one-liners, like when he took me to the Hezbollah car bomb monument but ended up talking about stealing the tyres! You can't control what people will say, so these very true moments happen on camera. Towards the end of the film, we see Fakhry's younger cousin hesitate then pick up a rock and walk back towards the camera. He

holds the rock up to show a small insect stranded there, all the time glancing insistently at me. This was such an intimate and tender moment, it's one of my favourites in the film. Someone told me that the insect on the rock is just like Fakhry walking on the ruins of Niha. That insect surviving on the stone speaks to all of us.

HL: You only adopted the title of the film, *The Drift*, towards the end of the editing process. It's a term used in joyriding culture – why did you decide to use it?

MB: The film ended up being called *The Drift* once I realised that Mohammed was going to be such a central character. He said something very poetic which ended up as the climatic point of the film. 'So we go and drift on the main road, in the fields, the mountains. Wherever we are, we drift. We must leave our mark, a souvenir.' This gesture of the controlled skid resonates with archaeology as it is also a practice of left traces. This kind of trace disappears in a second, it's made in the dust: there's a necessity for it to disappear because it has an illegal status, but it's a way for Mohammed to assert himself in the landscape momentarily.

A few people have talked about the circularity of the marks both relating to the circulation of objects and this feeling of moving and not really going anywhere. This was interesting because, in fact, Mohammed is very restricted in his movements. Britel, the town he is from in the Beqaa Valley, is synonymous with crime (stolen cars, smuggled artefacts) and the surrounding main roads are populated with army checkpoints that he cannot pass through.

So Mohammed's options are quite limited there. This is why he works on his car. It's not only that the characters in the film are sustaining these objects, the objects also sustain them. There's a complete necessity to be close to and to care for these objects in order to survive the turmoil of the rest of their circumstances. Fakhry was there during the civil war, there were bombs falling around his temple. This constant disruption and instability is so present, but then there is this object that remains with you.