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BRENNAN

AT

CHRISTIANITY

31 MARCH - 04 JUNE 2017

# MAEVE BRENNAN

## 'THE DRIFT'

Chisenhale Gallery presents the first institutional solo exhibition by London and Beirut-based artist Maeve Brennan and the premiere of a major new film commission *The Drift* (2017).

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

In *The Drift*, Brennan traces the shifting economies of objects in contemporary Lebanon. The film moves between three main characters: the gatekeeper of the Roman temples of Niha in the Beqaa Valley; a young mechanic from Britel, a village known for trading automobile parts; and an archaeological conservator working at the American University of Beirut.

Combining documentary footage, gathered through fieldwork, with staged scenes, the work depicts layered histories and communities. *The Drift* follows Brennan's encounters with the gatekeeper as he recounts his life's work restoring and guarding the temple ruins, while the mechanic crosses the Beqaa landscape, searching scrap yards for used automobile parts to transform his BMW car. Inside his workshop, the conservator slowly pieces together fragments of clay artefacts.

Forms of maintenance and repair are central to *The Drift* – focusing on the desire to reassemble and rebuild. Quietly underpinning the film is the urgency of archaeology in the Middle East today, particularly with reference to the destruction and preservation of heritage sites across Syria and Lebanon. Brennan's film maps converging lines between the protected relics of ancient temples, smuggled antiquities and exchanged car parts, exploring the care, circulation and shifting value of objects.

Informed by long-term investigative research, Brennan's practice examines the historical and political resonance of materials and places. Creating intimacy through proximity with her subjects, she gathers anecdotal evidence to animate sites and narratives. *The Drift* builds on Brennan's previous works, such as *Jerusalem Pink* (2015), which looks at the role of stone in Palestine in relation to her great-grandfather's work on the architectural restoration of the Dome of the Rock (1917-37), and *Core Sample* (2012), which surveys the political and geological strata latent within contested materials.

Through observing the intertwined identities, unregulated economies and shared resistance felt across the densely layered archaeological and urban sites of Lebanon, *The Drift* explores the politics of conflict through its material – and immaterial – residue.

Following the film's premiere at Chisenhale Gallery there will be subsequent presentations of the work at Spike Island, Bristol (9 July – 17 September, 2017), The Whitworth, The University of Manchester, and Lismore Castle Arts (both 2017-18).

Maeve Brennan (born 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).

## TALKS & EVENTS

### **Tuesday 4 April, 7pm**

Maeve Brennan and Erika Balsom, Senior Lecturer in Film Studies and Liberal Arts at King's College London, discuss Brennan's new commission at Chisenhale Gallery, with reference to experimental documentary film practice and its presentation within the gallery.

### **Tuesday 18 April, 7pm**

Amara Thornton, Honorary Research Associate, Institute of Archaeology, University College London (UCL), discusses Maeve Brennan's new commission at Chisenhale Gallery. Drawing on her work on the UCL Filming Antiquity project, Thornton reflects on the preservation and circulation of archaeological artefacts, knowledge and narratives.

### **Saturday 22 April, 2pm**

Previous moving image works by Maeve Brennan, *Super Mechanical* (17', 2012) and *Jerusalem Pink* (40', 2016), are screened in our studio space.

### **Friday 5 May, 7pm**

**Clore Study Room, Victoria and Albert Museum, Cromwell Road, London SW7 2RL**

Maeve Brennan is joined in conversation by Dr Paul Newson, Department of History and Archaeology, American University of Beirut, and Laura Jones, Culture in Crisis programme, V&A to discuss the destruction of cultural heritage in conflict zones, the value of preservation and illicit trade. This event is organised in conjunction with the V&A's Culture in Crisis programme, and moderated by Salma Tuqan, Contemporary Middle East Curator, V&A.

### **Thursday 11 May, 7pm**

Selected and introduced by Sharna Pax, a screening of *Blackboards* (Samira Makhmalbaf, 2000, 85') is presented in association with MUBI. Shot near the Iran-Iraq border, *Blackboards* centres on a group of displaced teachers, who wander the mountains of Kurdish Iran, and the itinerant communities they encounter. Sharna Pax is a film collective that works between the fields of visual art, anthropology and documentary and comprises Maeve Brennan, Therese Henningsen and Tinne Zenner. MUBI is an online, curated cinema. In association with Brennan's exhibition, MUBI are offering Chisenhale audiences a month free at [mubi.com/chisenhale](http://mubi.com/chisenhale).

**Friday 19 May, 9-10.30am**

An early morning viewing of Maeve Brennan's exhibition with an introduction to the work by Rachael Baskeyfield, Offsite and Education Assistant at Chisenhale Gallery. Coffee and cakes are generously provided by the East End Women's Institute.

*All events are free to attend, unless otherwise stated, but booking is strongly advised. Please visit [chisenhale.eventbrite.co.uk](http://chisenhale.eventbrite.co.uk) or ask at the front desk to make a reservation.*

*BSL interpretation for events at Chisenhale Gallery is available on request. Please contact [rachael.baskeyfield@chisenhale.org.uk](mailto:rachael.baskeyfield@chisenhale.org.uk) for further information. Please be advised that two weeks' notice is required in order to confirm an interpreter.*

## LIST OF WORKS

*The Drift*, 2017

HD video with sound (51min)

Screening times:

The film is 51 minutes and screenings begin on the hour from 12pm, with the last screening at 5pm.

## INTERVIEW WITH MAEVE BRENNAN

*Ellen Greig: In your new film, The Drift (2017), we observe various people caring for objects and places in the Beqaa Valley in Eastern Lebanon and in the city of Beirut. Who are the characters we encounter in the film and how did you meet them?*

**Maeve Brennan:** The first person we encounter is Fakhr el Fakhry who is the guard of a number of Roman temples in and around the village of Niha. He has lived and worked there his entire life, guarding the temples day and night, even throughout the Lebanese civil war (1975 – 1990). When I first moved to Lebanon, I had heard about a string of temples that lined the hills of the Beqaa Valley, which are relatively unvisited and largely unknown. A friend of mine, who is an archaeologist, told me that each temple had a gatekeeper who protects each site. So, I went to this area in the Beqaa Valley and ended up meeting Fakhry.

Then there is Mohammed Zaytoun, a young mechanic who runs a car scrap yard in Britel, another town in the Beqaa valley, close to the border with Syria. Britel straddles the road that leads to the ruins of Baalbek and whenever I went on trips there I noticed these scrap yards lining the road. There were also a lot of automobile shops with displays of car parts – Mercedes-Benz bumpers hoisted up on metal racks and shelves of car doors. This struck me as another image fragmentation on the way to see these Roman ruins. Britel has a reputation for dealing in stolen cars and more recently, has been associated with the smuggling of ancient artefacts from Syria. I was intrigued by the visible correlation between car parts and ruins so I organised some research trips there in the summer.

On one of the research trips we stopped off at one of the scrap yards and asked to film there. I was searching for a young joyrider for *The Drift*, someone who was fluent with his car and had built the object from parts. I saw Mohammad leaning against the side of the garage and asked my translator if we could interview him. Mohammad walked on camera holding a bunch of tools in his hand and leant on a half-ruined caddy. He was so charismatic on camera and it turned out he did joyriding too.

The film also documents the work of Hashem, a self-taught archeologist who I met in Beirut, in 2013. He told me he had been stationed at this basement-come-office (labeled ‘Hashem’s cave’), repairing pottery fragments for 25 years. His job is to reassemble the fragments found in post-war Beirut and also Lebanon more widely. He is constantly

reconstructing these archaeological artefacts. There is a never-ending quantity of material for him to work through, which was constantly growing as excavations continue. The destruction of the centre of Beirut during the civil war had left space for these major excavations to take place, generating most of this material.

*EG: Can you say something about the collector and the smuggler in the film?*

On one research trip to Britel, I also met the collector. He grew up around Baalbek and has an in depth archaeological knowledge of the region. In the film we see his garden, where Roman sarcophagi are used as plant pots and Phoenician columns lay between trees. He told me that he grew up searching for artefacts in his grandparents' back garden, often discovering things. His proximity and connection to the material gives him a sense of ownership over it and he has developed a certain expertise. He once told me "I can look at the landscape and see where to dig for tombs."

When I found out Britel was one of the main routes for smuggling antiquities from Syria, I decided to interview someone involved in this economy. A friend of a friend knew someone and we arranged to meet him beside a highway outside Beirut at 2am. He described the history of the 'outlaws' road' a route that leads directly to Syria without checkpoints or tariffs. It has been used for years to smuggle oil and other goods and now, due to their availability and market value, artefacts. The film observes how both collector and the smuggler complicate our relationship to these objects and their value.

*EG: Could you talk about how you worked with documentary footage, interviews and staged scenes? How did you piece those methods of filmmaking together?*

**MB:** I lived in Beirut continuously for three years and in some sense this time was fieldwork for the development of this film. For *The Drift*, I spent two months filming documentary material myself and, during this process, I met the people that feature in the work. This approach left space for ideas to change, surprises to happen and new characters to appear.

I wanted to stage certain elements of the film because I kept thinking about this image of a young joyrider moving through this rich historical landscape. This is something that I had observed in the Beqaa but it was also an image that I thought I could reconstruct. The joyrider's scenes, driving and working on his BMW, and the scenes of Hashem's work



both have a cinematic quality – they are carefully lit with enhanced sound and no dialogue. Staging these scenes meant I could approach the documentation of their work with more consideration, allowing their actions to resonate with one another.

However, I think in a very basic way the work has something of a traditional documentary intention, which is trying to truthfully relay an experience of a place. These characters are all real people, doing what they do. The staged scenes trace an experience, relaying my encounters in a way that is successful through film. In documentary I think there is some implicit doubt in the idea that everything is ‘truthful’ and it’s useful to work with this tension. Werner Herzog talks about ‘ecstatic truth’, which is an idea that sometimes you have to construct something in order to get at a more truthful representation.

I often talk about the moment when Fakhry’s younger cousin, also a gatekeeper, comes up to the camera to show me an insect marooned on a stone. This moment was completely unexpected but it became a climactic point in the film. He stops in the distance and looks back at the camera, eventually walking towards me. He held up this little insect stranded on the rock, his eyes glancing up at the lens insistently. It was both recognition of being filmed and an offering. For me, it was very poetic moment. The film is made up of people, rocks and fragments of things, all managing to survive in particular conditions.

***EG:** One of the opening shots of the film is Fakhry asking you to come with him, and there is another moment when Mohammed asks you to come on a drive with him. It is like they’re both moving you through their own worlds, which run parallel to one another. What is the importance of time and movement in this work?*

**MB:** The idea of time relates very directly to both characters. With Fakhry there is a real sense of his attachment to the area where he has worked his entire life, and a feeling of stasis or being tied to a location that he knows so well.

Fakhry is of an older generation and possesses a knowledge that comes with his intense locatedness, from having worked with the stones at the temple and from leading their restoration. In the film he emphatically tell us, “I know the place of every stone.” There is a feeling of his intense bond with these objects. He is tied to them, saying at one point “these ruins. They flow in my blood now.”

Mohammed is also taking us on a journey but his journey cuts through and above the landscape. It is contemporaneous, one of fast movement,

immediacy and spontaneity. He conveys a feeling of not wanting to be tied down, telling us, “I’m going to turn this car into a plane.” There is a sense that he wants to get above and beyond the landscape. For Mohammed the car is something that gives him agency in a space where he otherwise might not have much. The car offers him a way out, to some extent.

*EG: Can you talk about the resonance of conflict in this work, and its relationship to the objects in the film?*

**MB:** There is, of course, the impact of the recent civil war but also through the narratives that unfold there is reference to a more ancient history of conflict in the area, to the Roman and the Mamluk eras. The film gives a sense of successive empires, an ongoing record of the violence of history, as an unending cycle of destruction and reconstruction, condensed within the landscape. The film observes how conflict inscribes itself onto the relics of ancient temples, Roman pottery fragments, the looted artefacts now coming from Syria and the remnants of a BMW 525 destroyed in a car bomb in 2003. Towards the end of the film we see Hosn Niha, a Roman temple, whose rubble you might mistake for natural erosion but in fact, it was bombarded during the civil war when it was used as a military base.

*EG: The film largely circumvents direct narration of conflict – the focus is around, rather than onto.*

**MB:** Exactly. And through this approach, I think, I am able to depict something of the complexity of this place and the people that are in it, without binding them to a specific history or specific subject matter. I think this indirect handling of conflict is essential. It is not ignored, it has a presence in the film. In some ways the work could be read as an alternative image of a country that is synonymous with war for many in the West. Even the idea of repair relates to this – you only have to repair something if it is broken.

*EG: And with Mohammed when he is observing the car bomb monument. Would you like to say anything more about that moment?*

**MB:** I went there with Mohammed because I thought it was interesting that the only monument I had seen in Britel took the form of a car. The monument is for Ali Saleh, a Hezbollah leader, who was assassinated by the Israeli army in a car bomb in 2003. The monument displays the blown out shell of Saleh’s car, a physical manifestation of the violence of this event. I think it says something about the status of cars in the social fabric there, and the importance they have with regard to recent

political history. Car bombs were a significant feature of the civil war and subsequent conflict.

However, Mohammed read this monument on his own terms. He sees the car as an object of use and necessity, telling me one day he will steal the BMW's tyres, as they are brand new. For me, this moment encapsulates Mohammad's relationship to conflict.

*EG: All of the subjects of the film are male. I would be interested to hear your thoughts on the relationship between masculinity and care?*

**MB:** In *The Drift*, as well as in previous works, I have often filmed in predominantly male spaces. Entering these spaces as a woman can set up a specific dynamic – I describe it as a kind of generous encounter. Where these guys have a certain expertise that they are happy to share with me.

Although it is important to the film, the fact that all the characters are male was also because they were the people I encountered in these roles. The work sectors I entered are predominantly male – there were no female guards at the temples or mechanics at the scrap yards. Having said that, there is an idea of masculinity and violence that pervades that landscape. This is prevalent to the point where many associate the Middle East with war and its inevitability in the region – often overlooking the role of foreign intervention completely. The film presents an image of masculinity and care in a region that is predominantly represented as the stark opposite. I wanted to populate the landscape with a different kind of image than we are used to seeing in the media.

In this film, all the characters are talking about the objects they care for. There is something simple about observing someone who has a complete and almost embodied understanding of an object, like a car or a pot. There is a connection forged in the simplicity, familiarity and legibility of acts of care. There is also a feeling of respite in restoring these objects. The characters actions all share a sense of agency – the objects they are working with sustain them in some way.

*EG: We have talked a lot about your position as someone who is not from the region in relation to making this work.*

**MB:** My position towards the spaces, materials and subjects that I look at in my work is something I am constantly navigating. I shot my previous film, *Jerusalem Pink*, in Palestine. There, I was researching my great-grandfather who worked as an architect and as the head of the

Palestine Archaeological Museum (now the Rockefeller Museum) from 1917-37, during the British Mandate. Subsequent generations were also based in the region and this familial connection was part of what led me to Palestine and Lebanon.

I'm very aware of making a work in a place that is not my own. I had been living in Lebanon for two years before I began making *The Drift*. It took time to process my experiences there but of course I am always witnessing things with a certain distance. The film tries to acknowledge this position by making my presence felt – the characters often address me directly, guiding me through sites and showing me objects. This was also a way of addressing a UK audience, as many will be seeing these areas of Lebanon for the first time.

I have also made this work during a time of ongoing wars sustained by foreign involvement in Syria, Yemen and the consequences of others in Iraq and Lebanon, to name but a few. For many in the West, these wars and their consequences take place at a distance, remaining abstract. *The Drift* depicts an image of a place, populated with people and their actions. Witnessing these basic activities of repair and restoration and the stories of the people enacting them is also an attempt to close this distance.

*EG: How have you chosen to present the film in the gallery space?*

**MB:** The space is set up for a cinematic viewing experience but subtly references a car interior. The bespoke upholstered seating and carpet are both specific car fabrics. I wanted to create a sense of entering an enclosure and being taken somewhere (as you are in the film through the different characters).

*EG: And lastly, can I ask you about the title of the film, *The Drift*?*

**MB:** *The Drift* comes from the term for a car trick associated with joyriders – a kind of controlled skid. But it also refers to the pacing of the film. The way that Fakhry moves through his spaces and the way that narratives connect tangentially. There is a feeling of drifting through various lives and stories without a clear direction or any clear conclusion, except when Mohammed says, “Wherever we are, we drift.” This reiterates his position as a young, contemporary figure, how he sits on top of all this stuff that Fakhry, Hashem and the dealer are preserving and looking after.

The title, *The Drift* also has something to do with the ground and the earth, as well as with movement and trajectory. There is a parallel

between the geographical sense of the term, for instance a snowdrift, and the kinetic sense of things moving in a given direction, an impulse. The film approaches the landscape vertically and horizontally through the roles of the archaeologist and the joyrider. It's something about trying to grapple with the complexity of the layers of history that are present in Lebanon and how they impact contemporary life.

*Maeve Brennan interviewed by Ellen Greig, Exhibitions and Events, Curator, Chisenhale Gallery on Thursday 23 March 2017 at Chisenhale Gallery, London. Chisenhale Interviews, series editor, Polly Staple, Director, Chisenhale Gallery.*

# '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 Archeological Conservator	Hashem Ghali
The Collector	Abou Ali
The Smuggler	Anonymous

**Camera**  
Mark Khalife  
Maeve Brennan

**Editor**  
Sue Giovanni

**Supervising Sound Editor**  
Tom Sedwick

**Focus Puller**  
Marie Warde

**Assistant Camera**  
Ali Hadi Al Zounji

**Sound Recordists**  
Emmanuel Zouki  
Tatiana el Dahbah

**Key Grip**  
Elie Baayno

**Lighting**  
Bassel Guiliana

**Production Assistant**  
Ali Saleh

**Production Translator**  
Micheline Ziadee

**Dialogue Consutant Editor**  
Carine Doumit

**Narrative Consutant 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



**With thanks to**

American University of Beirut: Department of Archaeology

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Directorate General of Antiquities (DGA), Lebanon

Agnes Eshak

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Olga Gribben

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Katie Guggenheim

Paul McAree

Ghassan Maasri

Eamonn Maxwell

Municipality of Britel, Lebanon

Municipality of Niha, Lebanon

Paul Newson

Abbas Saleh

Helga Seeden

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## CHISENHALE GALLERY

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Opening hours:  
Wednesday to Sunday, 12-6pm  
Thursday 6 April, 4 May and 1 June until 9pm

Maeve Brennan's exhibition is supported by:

## CHISENHALE GALLERY Spike Island



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

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