

CHISENHALE INTERVIEWS: MANDY EL-SAYEGH

Cite Your Sources

12 April 2019 – 9 June 2019

Ellen Greig: Perhaps we could start by talking about the title of your exhibition, Cite Your Sources?

Mandy El-Sayegh: The title relates to how I see art education as a process of interpellation. You become a subject in this field through a mutual recognition between the subject (the art maker) and the institution. My experience in art education mirrored my failure of identification in other social fields, but made it clearer as a phenomenon. In art school I felt that there was a specific type of presentation that was expected of you; a certain framing of a gesture from an accepted reference point, be it Minimalism, Abstraction etc. In art, there are pre-imposed conditions for understanding. I felt that there was a whole set of systems that I did not know, like a joke that I didn't get, which is part of a whole system of interpellation, one where you are recognised and where you are not. In my work, I have always thought of 'the spread' as my own kind of formal display method – something that bypasses compositional rules – like gasses filling up a space. A kind of immersive space with multiple registers at one time, which goes against this kind of definitive specificity of content and material.

I started thinking of what my then tutor, Patricia Bickers (who is incredible), made us learn before we started her contextual studies course. She got us to learn the correct pronunciation of all the Italian Old Masters' names; the double 'c', how that is pronounced for example. She said she could tell if an essay would be a good read just by looking through the bibliography. She would say to "always cite your sources". It sounded like an injunction, an absolute. That's how I internalised it, like you are legitimised through citing your sources and those sources are judged on a scale based around a centred system or framework of reading. While this makes total sense in writing, I see an art practice as a type of writing with this same injunction embedded into its reading. There is often a focus on the specificity of a given subject, which can be unpacked conceptually and traced back to its given origin, but actually for me there is always multiplicity and deference.

This deferring, or multiple, also relates to how history is written and consumed. Ornamentation is read as ethnographic evidence, but that history is also one of miscegenation and borrowing. For example, I'm interested in the idea of artefacts not as ethnographic evidence but as a portable ecology – they move, they travel, they contribute to cultural hybridity rather than cultural homogeneity. All these elements are constantly remapping how we read history and how we consume the present; constantly deferring to different spaces and times and you can't always pinpoint a definitive moment or subject. You can't, because it's always contaminated.

EG: So, the title resists the need for, or points to the complications of, citation? I'm interested in this in relation to the material frameworks you use in your work, from painting, print, drawing and the object-based works installed in vitrine tables.

MES: All these forms bring about questions of legitimate and illegitimate readings of culture and context. Painting, with a capital P, for me, is a coveted space, and by that I mean how Painting is historically constructed to allow space for pure abstraction. I went to the Royal College of Art (RCA)

and did painting because that was the closest thing to drawing. There I had a sort of bitty practice that never had a body. It was like a failing body with lots of different parts and I couldn't give it, or them, integrity. Painting then became a ground to put these fragments into. This ground – whether that is the ground of a painting surface, a table or the walls and floors of the gallery – becomes a space to usher in secrets that also get integrated, accepted into a zone where they may not usually belong.

Many of the pieces in this exhibition include objects and images that become suspended in the 'wrong space'. I wouldn't call it assimilation, but more like an ushering in. The series of vitrine table works, *Boundary Works*, include various objects and images installed within steel tables of various sizes. These works are quasi-archives that mobilise highly specific fragments into a play of free-association; they are pseudo archives that from above lose their meaning and slip into compositions/horizontal paintings. The logic is unclear but associative, and invites investigation.

EG: You've described this before as 'merging'.

MES: Yes – a merginess. A contamination, or a violation of a boundary. Where does painting become a sculpture and tables become compositional? It's a hybrid that cannot settle. This in-betweenness is the object, that which cannot be integrated into a system coherently.

How can I give a consistency to the work? It's actually quite a formal question. This is why much of my work has a structure that I follow – a series that I keep developing over time that allows me to work through these questions of contamination and categorisation.

EG: What is your source material, then? Is it the human body?

MES: What if there is no one source, no originary moment, but rather a complex web of many contingents at once, which is constantly shifting? The philosopher and art historian Georges Didi-Huberman speaks of the fantasy realm that an originary moment creates in relation to the Shroud of Turin and the alleged blood stains that mark the cloth. I'm interested in a human desire for verification of the past and how this relates to how anxiety is formed. We can apply this to Brexit, the fantasy of a 'once was' or 'before', which gives consistency to a current trauma that pacifies social anxiety. If there is no definitive cause, anxiety ensues.

Anxiety is formless, a collapse of consistency. A fragment. How can I give integrity or agency to this fragment, and how can I give it body and strength? How can it have a space that has more power and freedom than something that already exists and is legitimatised? This also relates to the body as a subject without context, where context isn't granted or it is denied. Which, of course, can cause extreme anxiety and alienation.

This relates to an ongoing concern in my work that looks to the body in pieces, which in psychoanalysis is a concept of the psychotic body. In psychosis the ego isn't fully constructed, so the psychotic experience of the body is in pieces and in this sense, they don't feel like a 'gestalt' – a whole. I see the body arising as fragmented with free floating affects in all its absurdity. For me, this attempt of giving form or narrative to this anxiety, or fragments, highlights absurdity.

The body is the problem we are constantly failing to integrate which is why it poses both historical and formal questions in the figure-ground relation. Through my work I am questioning on what ground does the body exist? And on whose ground?

EG: You explore hybridity in your ongoing painting series Net-Grid (2010 – ongoing). How do you make these large canvases?

MES: I used to collect fragments from conversations, or rip off lyrics from songs, and take words here and there from my then partner, who was a singer/songwriter, and we would make a song out of it. When I was working as a support worker, you have a lot of dead time during shifts. So, I created a very small amount of space to do my artwork in. I would work with all these fragments in my notebook, and try to put them together like a crossword, to find other resolve. I was interested in how I could make meaning out of ten random words and images – in an attempt to give them structure, whilst exploring how meaning disappears or can be reinforced or recede through repetition. It was an unformed drawing/writing practice that looked to erasure or reassertion and slippage. As I got more and more space, I started to think about how can I merge these materials and narratives more to see what it was doing. So, I thought about a field – having a field or a ground that gives these materials a structure, and then the structure that already exists as the grid.

The physical process of making the *Net-Grid* series starts in response to the white, primed ground of painting, which is a really physical act. At art school, the process of priming was just something you did; you work with rabbit skin glue, which you have to prepare, and that's laborious in its own right, and then you have to apply so many layers, layers upon layers of white, you have to wait for them to dry in between before you can even get started. So, you already have an over-investment before you even arrive at this kind of 'neutral space'. I thought that this was such a physical act that it could be the final thing in itself. This white ground is not just an abstract space but a physical sedimentation of material; that's why I like it to be textured and the whiteness to become a skin, not just a background. Everything is made on the floor, sometimes on table arrangements too.

When I look at a canvas, I see the thickness of the canvas. I'm floating between what it's supposed to do and what it is. The thickness of it is like the thickness of flesh, versus the surface of skin from afar. I'm always between these two ways of seeing. On that white surface I set out my fragments, and that could be collaged parts of older works: single words, secrets, really sentimental poems, silkscreened images from the archive that I've blown up, repeated words, rags that I have cleaned up the floor with. Whatever I have around me in my periphery. Then comes the grid, which is interesting because it's not just a straight superimposition it's always different densities in relation to the ground. Because of the ground being so uneven, the 'stain' that is there, you can never get to where you want to get in a straight line. It's a failure of unification. This trauma, this disruption in the ground is like a scab. Here, the status of figure, ground and fragment are unclear and interchangeable.

EG: What is your interest in the grid?

MES: One of the reasons I use the grid in my work is because it is a repeating motif in my memory from childhood and one is a symbolic emblem of the grid in relation to Modernism in Western art history. Those two reasons are held together by an integrity. I like the idea that my hand is

approximating a 1cm square across an expanse of canvas. That rigidity highlights nuance. The grid is like the connective tissue in the body, which nobody thinks about when dissecting a body – they think about all the organs, the bones, muscle, fat, but it actually takes a lot of energy to cut through a body because of this sheer amount of connective tissue, or fascia, in between everything. It's the strongest element, rather than the parts themselves. I like to think about it in regards to that, to how something can be held together when it's vulnerable. Thinking about the body, or the figure of the father, for instance.

EG: In this exhibition there is a tension between controlled space and spillage – from the paintings, to the framed prints, to the spread of The Financial Times newspaper across part of the gallery.

MES: I see everything as a spread, as opposed to a composition which is a conscious thing you do – you need to know where and when to stop. While I am always filling up a space. That's how I see the spread, as trying to get to a place of equilibrium through repetition – these are the constant motifs that are in my unconscious and that I'm attracted to.

In the *Net-Grid* works I implement a fixed border, or size, of 225 x 235 cm and in the table works I work to the boundary of the vitrine. Within these orders, I'm interested in how meaning mutates, how it can become released from its rigidity, while simultaneously being kept to a boundary, which I see as a kind of violence. The content of the table works that bleed into the grid paintings and then back out again through the latex and through the rot... I'm interested in this tension between the whole spectrum of materials fighting and responding to each other. There's lots of grills too, which I see in relation to grids.

EG: The grill and the grid both block vision while simultaneously being able to see through them.

MES: Yes, like a vent. A vent is a border but it allows for things to go through. It's both. You can't say it's one or the other. A state of being both.

EG: Let's talk about the large installation, Figured Ground (2019), that comprises pages from The Financial Times newspaper applied directly onto the wall and floor of part of the gallery. You've then overlaid the pages with silkscreen prints.

MES: I often think that the idea of the body in fragments is the genesis of my work. Much of my work is concerned with the body as an actual problem; as in posing a problem contextually, politically, formally. I explore this problem by elevating it, or centring it within my work. If you accept the white space of the gallery as a neutral space, I want to introduce a problem to this space. If I'm thinking of the grounds, I want to introduce a stain. I want to work through the failure of unification and cohesion.

Applying *The Financial Times* to this white space is a way of creating an intensity to highlight this failure. And then on top of that there is another density of silkscreened motifs that have a very strong specificity, but they somehow lose their context through the saturated ground of what is already there. In this work there is a back and forth between the registers of reading compositionally, materially and textually. I often talk about the experience of commuting on a train and you look at

someone reading and then you start reading what they are reading and then they look at you... This motion of always zooming in and out of different experiential registers of looking, and I want that feeling in this work: questioning and complicating how we are reading and what we are reading and interrogating that.

EG: What is the significance of using The Financial Times in this work?

MES: One of the obvious reasons I like to use it is because of the colour of the paper, it has that distinctive yet generic premixed 'flesh-tone', which reappears in the Imperial Leather soap that I use in the table works. The paper also has a design layout that I like, a good ratio between image and text, so the body of text is in a nice harmony with images. When patterned together the squares of images and text appear to be always moving – there is kind of a flux to it, a movement that I really like. But also thinking about what it is: *The Financial Times* is supposed to be a trusted voice of global finance. I'm interested in using it as a ground, literally putting it as a ground and playing with it – putting it up for question.

EG: Could you also talk about the images that you have silkscreened onto the wall and the floor?

MES: This process usually starts by going through my archive of material, mostly these things are in my studio in loosely ordered piles – sometimes I can barely see anything because it's so messy. I already know each pile will be limited by what I want to exclude, not what I want to include: piles that are maps; ones of just my dad's work; one of logos. In this installation at Chisenhale there are silkscreens of calligraphy work by my father on a *Women's Health* magazine and calligraphy work from my uncle on my mother's side, which are Chinese proverbs and blessings. Some of the other motifs come from Daoist magical symbolism and diagrams – they look map-like. Others are also taken from fashion branding. And then there is a map, an aerial view, of an excavated site by the British in Gaza, Palestine. I think of everything as an aerial view – if you zoom out it becomes a whole grid, like the whole exhibition would be a grid.

EG: I'd like to see an aerial view of our show. Coming back to what you were saying earlier about free association between the materials in your work, how does your interest in psychoanalysis inform your practice?

MES: People are usually turned off by psychoanalysis because they think of all the historically contingent problems with Freud, gender and sexuality, the doctrine and the pathologizing. This obfuscates the paradigm of productive ambiguity sought in the methods of free association. When you go to an analyst, they function as the blank onto which you project your speech. They are looking for the kind of slips and the blanks in your discourse, so not what you're saying, but the repetitions, the glitches; which I believe is a way to think through the convention of identification.

I'm interested in this idea of a citation in the direction of an enigma. What does that mean? It's the opposite of giving an explanation, which is where I place biography and narrative – this is both musicological and ethnographic. Even though I may have to assert my identity and familial history in certain places, where it's been, or being, suppressed in this formal space within my work, I can go in an ambiguous and intuitive direction of how materials can be multiple and mutable.

Having a formal framework for my practice allows me to work through the same concerns with multiple outcomes. This allows space for different ‘bruises’ to accumulate without thinking. For example, in my *Net-Grid* series, the stains are always different because the texture of every surface is always different. And in the series of printed poster works, I use a similar repeatable framework that references the size of The London Underground advertising poster frames. They are a constant multiple that allows for differences in the repetition. This repetition reveals how slight changes have big effect. In the logic of advertising, placing one image, or word, next to another creates meaning, a slight font change or a different tone can alter its power. I apply this logic to how to develop my spreads.

EG: Could we talk about this in relation to the table works included in the exhibition? In one of the smaller tables, there is an object made out of a flesh-like material with little pumps coming out of them. Inscribed onto these objects are the words: Mole, Cricket, 19, which is also the title of the work. Could you talk about this work?

MES: There are nine tables in the exhibition. In one of the tables I’ve made this assembly that I think of like a death machine. On the flesh like material are the words ‘Mole Cricket 19’. I’ve directly pulled these words of an Israeli military operation called Mole Cricket 19, active in the Lebanese Civil War in 1982. They were attacking the Syrians who had sided with the Lebanese during the civil war, and I think the Israelis destroyed their weapons. I see the small pumps that are attached to this object as a kind of auxiliary lung, activated by certain words and certain energies and narratives. I really like how each assemblage has so much content, like you just need to look it up. Everything in there, every source in there, is Googleable, but goes off on absurd tangents that take on their own life.

It is like a spell, and that spell has power. It is a bit mystical, and it has magical thinking in it. I feel like there isn’t a discourse that apprehends ‘other’ methodologies of thinking about a spirit, about suffering. We have these discourses we learn, but there is also this other space, and I think art practice is that. It’s giving a language, a logic to these intensities and questions that don’t have a set meaning. In this sense, I’m interested in how words have a certain charge. How can they signal danger or hope? How can they go off and change meaning through miscommunication, translation or ignorance?

EG: And you treat this seemingly unrelated content with the same weight and space.

MES: Yes, giving it that space to reform. That’s why I like painting – you can do that through painting. I enjoy that irreverence in painting from the Cologne scene in the 1980s. For example, how Albert Oehlen sources this great insipid ‘stuff’, and how that stuff can have a certain frequency in relation to the weight of painting.

EG: Often the bodies that you paint, or pull from tabloids or pornography, are of women. Is that a conscious decision?

MES: No. It’s just because I like them. They are also easier to source. They are around. I really hate the fact that I have to talk about that.

EG: We don't have to talk about that. We've never talked about it before in fact.

MES: No, it's true, we haven't. But people do. I remember this woman saying "I don't need to see another vagina. Do you realise what you are doing?". It was really disheartening. Images of women's bodies are in this mesh of image circulation that I am attracted to, but on a huge scale. You can say the brown body is often objectified in the same way. How do I put that into play? Put into what I call 'the elevated form'? How can a body be confrontational enough to return the gaze? What are the mechanisms to blind someone if they are looking at you? I really see my painting practice as addressing this. So, instead of being this question of, "do we need to see that again?", it is more a question of how can representation of a body become a confrontational power in its failure to integrate, to continually persist in its own excess? Academic, Gareth Longstaff, describes a symbolic stutter that emanates from pornographic bodies in circulation which poses a resonating unease outside their intended field.

These images of bodies prod you, instead of having direct agency. Death or the depiction of the body in Arab culture is problematic, because of visual histories of iconoclasm and images of corporealised brown bodies are disproportionate and over-visible in news media. Enter the body anywhere and you have a problem with the idea of the 'universal' form. I like to stay with that problem because that problem will create a certain enquiry and a certain movement – it's the stain, it's the stain of the work. I think a problem is a practice, and how you apprehend that problem is the work.

EG: Can we talk about the two small anatomical drawings filled with text that you have included in the exhibition?

MES: These two images are sourced from a very old book of anatomy diagrams. These images were taken from real-life studies of the dead, back when they didn't have the means of reproduction that we have now to create digital depictions of the body. I'm really interested in the history of the depiction, reproducing this median body in medical literature and education, because there you can really explore how culture constructs a body – this language tries to represent the most neutral body, for the purpose of using it as a teaching aid. The stages of removal from the original reference, i.e. a real person, a cadaver, goes through a distancing process of interventions: from the original drawing, to a lithograph, then paint is applied and the image is cropped. The final image that gets put in circulation retains a persistent uncanny quality as it resists full symbolisation. I had these images for ages in my archive, and then I was thinking about a good friend who had breast cancer, she inspired the first work in this series. Everything starts off from a personal kernel and goes through a process, a subjective to a 'universal'. I made the decision to use white paint to blank out the cavity section of the main body and insert my own fragmented words within it. These words are taken from a Richard Serra work, *Verblast* (1967-68), which refers to his idea of the actions that can be applied to paper. Here, they also resonate through the body, there is consequence to the flesh, to the cut, to the tear, to the split, that made me rethink the focus on 'the gesture'. They also refer to the slippage of meaning between the words 'two' and 'to', like the net-grid spectrum. Two states that have a particular but universal resonance.

EG: In the exhibition we have left a wall of white space beyond The Financial Times installation. What is the significance of this blank space?

MES: Initially I was always talking about the white space in relation to this density of the fragment, and I wanted to do that in the exhibition with a painting from my *White Ground* series, but then I realised that actually it's doing it all by itself, which is how I felt – feel – in these spaces anyway. Here, the white gallery walls become a clinical energy of a certain frequency, instead of a neutral space.

EG: *It is a good place to view the exhibition from. Like you said, it is like a medical theatre.*

MES: Yes, this slice of white space becomes charged. The things that are around it, those fragments frame it, instead of the whiteness framing everything.

Interviewed by Ellen Greig, Curator: Commissions, Chisenhale Gallery, on Friday 5 April 2019 at Chisenhale Gallery, London. Chisenhale Interviews, series editor, Polly Staple, Director, Chisenhale Gallery.