

## CHISENHALE INTERVIEWS: MAEVE BRENNAN

**Maeve Brennan**

*The Drift*

31 March – 04 June 2017

*Ellen Greig:* *The Drift (2017) was shot in the Beqaa Valley in Eastern Lebanon and in the city of Beirut. Who are the people we encounter in the film and how did you meet them?*

**Maeve Brennan:** The first person we meet 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 heard about these temples lining 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 has a gatekeeper who protects the site. 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. Whenever I went on trips to Baalbek I noticed these scrap yards lining the road. There are also a lot of automobile shops with car parts on display – Mercedes-Benz bumpers hoisted up on metal racks and shelves of car doors. This struck me as an image of fragmentation on the way to see the Roman ruins. Britel has a reputation for dealing in stolen cars and has, more recently, been associated with the smuggling of archeological artefacts from Syria. I was intrigued by the visible correlation between car parts and ancient ruins so I organised some research trips there in the summer of 2015. 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*, a car mechanic who had refurbished cars from various parts. I saw Mohammed leaning against the side of the garage and asked my translator if we could interview him. Mohammed 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, repairing pottery fragments for 25 years. Hashem's job is to reassemble the fragments of clay artefacts found in post-war Beirut and also Lebanon more widely. There is a never-ending quantity of material for him to work through. The destruction of the centre of Beirut during the civil war left space for these major excavations to take place, generating most of this material.

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 lie between trees. He told me that he grew up finding artefacts in his grandparents' garden. His proximity and connection to the material gives him a sense of ownership over it and he has developed a certain expertise. He 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 – this was the smuggler. 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 the collector and the smuggler complicate our relationship with these objects and their value.

*EG: The Drift contains documentary footage, interviews and staged scenes. How did you piece these methods of filmmaking together?*

**MB:** I lived in Beirut for three years, between 2013 and 2016, and this time served as fieldwork for the film's development. 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.

The idea of staging some scenes came after seeing young joyriders driving in their cars. This was a strong image for me as it combined the enduring landscape of the area and the youth culture that populates it. This was an image that I wanted to reconstruct. Mohammed's scenes – driving and working on his BMW – and the scenes of Hashem's work both have a cinematic quality – they are carefully lit and have enhanced sound and no dialogue. Staging these scenes meant I could approach the documentation of Mohammed and Hashem's work with more consideration, allowing their actions to resonate with one another.

The work has elements of a traditional documentary intention – seeking to truthfully convey the experience of a place. The staged scenes embellish an experience, relaying my encounters through the medium of film. In documentary filmmaking, there is an implicit doubt in the idea of 'truth' and, for me, it is interesting to work with this tension. In relation to his films, Werner Herzog talks about "ecstatic truth", which is the idea that sometimes you have to construct something in order to get at a more accurate representation of reality.

There is a moment in *The Drift* 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 holds up this little insect stranded on the rock, his eyes glancing up at the lens insistently. It was both a recognition of being filmed and an offering.

*EG: One of the opening shots of The Drift shows Fakhry asking you to come with him, and there is another moment when Mohammed asks you to accompany him on a drive. It is as if they are 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 location that he knows so well.

Fakhry is of an older generation and possesses a knowledge that comes from having worked with the stones at the temple and from leading the restoration of ruins. In the film he tells us emphatically, "I know the place of every stone." There is a feeling of his intense bond with these objects. He is tied to this place, 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 there are also references 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 Drift* 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 by a car bomb in 2003. Towards the end of the film we see Hosn Niha, a Roman temple, whose rubble might be mistaken 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 a direct narration of conflict...*

**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 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: There is a moment in the film when Mohammed is observing a monument that marks a car bombing. Would you like to say anything more about this?*

**MB:** I asked Mohammed to take me there 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 a car bomb detonated by the Israeli government in 2003. The monument displays the blown-out shell of Saleh's car, a physical manifestation of the violence of this event. 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 in the film are male and many are shown caring for objects. I would be interested to hear your thoughts on the relationship between masculinity and care?*

**MB:** In *The Drift*, and in previous works, I have often filmed in predominantly male spaces. Although it is important to the film, the fact that all the characters are male was also because the people I encountered in these roles were male. The sectors I entered are predominantly male – there were no female guards at the temples or mechanics at the scrap yards. Having said that, I feel there is a perception that masculinity and violence does pervade areas in the Middle East. This is prevalent to the point where many associate the whole region with war and conflict is even seen as an inevitability in the region – often overlooking the role of foreign intervention. The film presents an image of masculinity and care in a region that is predominantly represented as the stark opposite. I wanted to make a different kind of image than is often presented in the media.

There is something simple about observing someone who has such in depth understanding of an object, such as a car or a pot. There is a connection forged in 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: You have made this work from the position of someone who is not from the region. Can you talk about this position?*

**MB:** I am constantly navigating my position towards the spaces, materials and subjects that I look at in my work. I shot my previous film, *Jerusalem Pink*, in Palestine. I was researching my great-

grandfather who worked as an architect and as head of the Palestine Archaeological Museum (now the Rockefeller Museum) from 1917-1937, during the British Mandate. Subsequent generations of my family were also based in the region and this familial connection was in part what led me to Palestine and Lebanon.

I am 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* but, of course, I am always experiencing life there with a degree of distance because I'm not *from* there. 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.

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 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 address this distance.

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

The space is set up for a cinematic viewing experience that subtly references a car interior. The bespoke upholstered seating and the carpet are made from fabrics used for cars. I wanted to create a sense of entering an enclosure and being taken somewhere, as happens in the film when the different characters guide me through the landscape.

**EG:** *Lastly, why have you chosen to title the film, The Drift?*

**MB:** *The Drift* is a 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 the temples and the way that the narratives of the characters connect tangentially. The film creates an effect 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 man, and 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 refers to the ground and the earth, as well as movement and trajectory. There is a parallel between the geographical sense of the term, for instance a snowdrift, and the kinetic sense of movement in a given direction, an impulse. The film approaches the landscape vertically and horizontally through the roles of the archaeologist and the joyrider. *The Drift* tries to grapple with the complexity of the layers of history that are present in Lebanon and how they impact day-to-day life.

*Interviewed by Ellen Greig, Exhibitions & Events Curator, Chisenhale Gallery on Thursday 23 March 2017. Chisenhale Gallery, London. Chisenhale Interviews, series editor, Polly Staple, Director, Chisenhale Gallery.*