



In The Shadows

Contemporary Artists and Obsessive Memory





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Levent Tuncer

Armita Raafat

Leonardo Drew,

Artur Zmijewski

John L. Moore

Dan Crews

Zarina Hashmi

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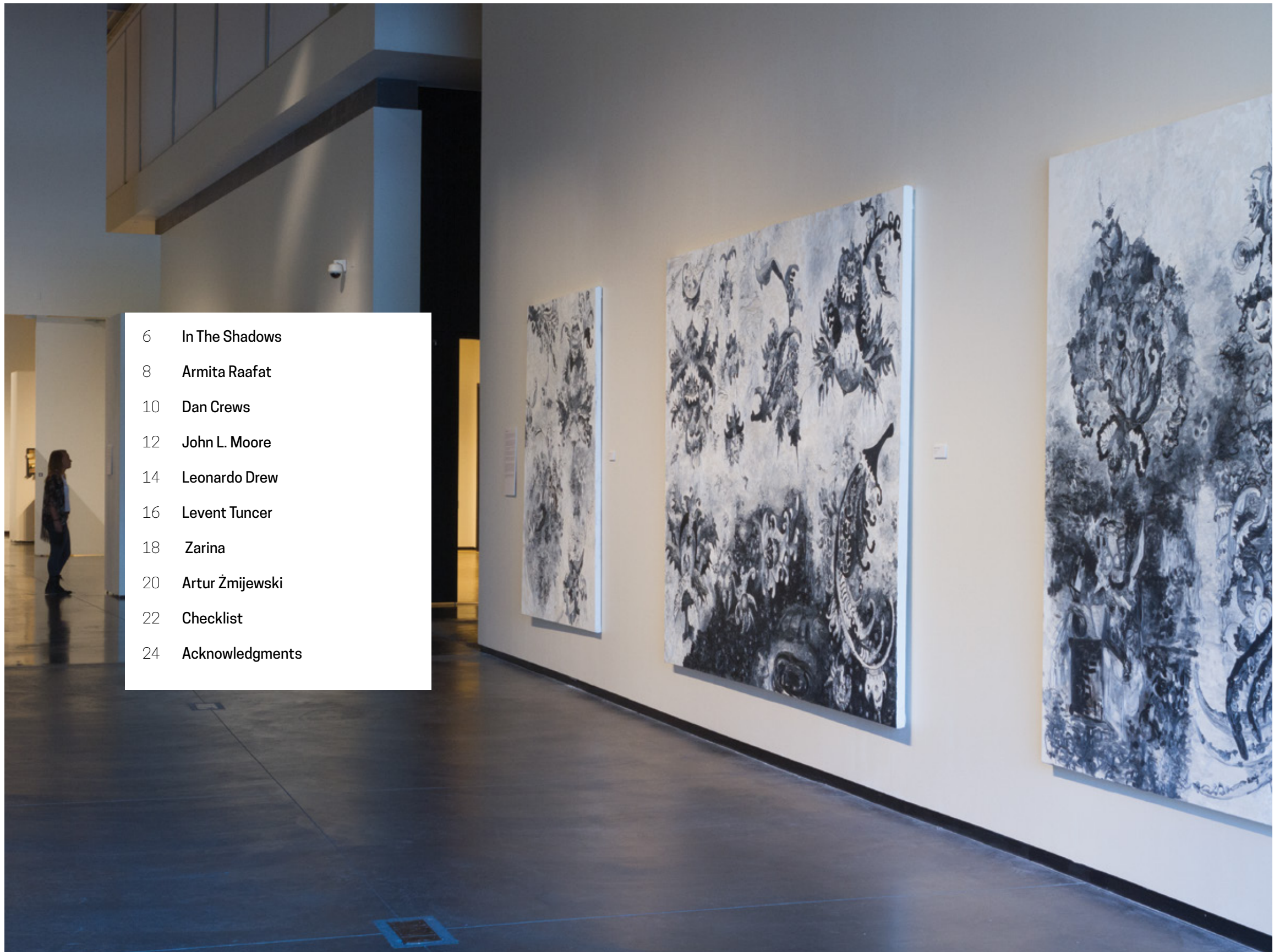
Don Desmett, Curator

Essay, *In The Shadows*

October 16 – November 14, 2014

James W. and Lois I. Richmond Center for Visual Arts

Albertine Monroe-Brown Gallery



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In the Shadows: Contemporary Artists and Obsessive Memory

Don Desmett

Dr. Oliver Sacks, in an essay for the New York Review, stated about memory and memory systems; “Indifference to (memory) source allows us to assimilate what we read, what we are told, what others say and think and write and paint, as intensely and richly as if they were primary experiences. It allows us to see and hear with other eyes and ears, to enter into other minds, to assimilate the art and science and religion of the whole culture, to enter into and contribute to the common mind, the general commonwealth of knowledge. Memory is dialogic and arises not only from direct experience but, from the intercourse of many minds.” In *In the Shadows: Contemporary Artists and Obsessive Memory* explores ways in which artists’ view or distort and use the concepts of individual and shared memories in their art.

Many of us think that our memories fade, and finally leave us altogether. But in fact our memory “banks” have an immeasurable ability to store past information. The hard part for our brains to manage is the retrieval of that vast amount of material. But forgetting some memories can actually benefit the recollection of important and useful information. Lost memories actually make way for current facts that you bring up and use daily, like going to a gallery to see contemporary works of art. If you did not lose some memories of where you have visited art galleries, you would be lost in the information of all the art galleries you have ever visited. Instead, the important memories of the Richmond Center for Visual Arts come up as the information you need for the artists in this exhibition. Less relevant spaces for exhibitions are forgotten, which helps you remember the importance of visiting this exhibit.

But recalling memories are almost always prone to change. Levent Tuncer proves that in his method of making compositions from a single source, and then trying to clear his mind and paint what is left of a particular image he has studied before beginning his paintings. Some memories of the image he has looked at become more important, and thus stand out. They also become manipulated in the process of “re-creating” the visual image of origin. Artur Zmijewski’s videos of the elderly, remembering the major events of war are then forced to focus on memories of songs from that time. Some go to happy tunes of their childhood, some to patriotic State anthems, some to military band recollections. In that way, major events can be reconstructed and compartmentalized for an individuals most needed response, from romanticizing horrible memories, to the power of shared responses to those same major events.

The artists of *In the Shadows* work from different approaches to memory response. Dan Crews confuses the compositions by slightly altering and overlapping similar lines and colors. John L. Moore goes from the visual vocabulary of past experiences to painterly abstract language. Zarina documents her varied homes in detailed mappings. Leonardo Drew composes from found objects that become a collection of his own personal memories. Armita Raafat deconstructs the language of architecture.

Recalling memories in diverse ways help us re-interpret those past experiences and, introduce us to different pathways to our future.



Armita Raafat is a New York City based artist. She was born in Chicago, moved with her family to Iran in 1980 when she was four, and returned to the U.S. in 2003. The Iran-Iraq War, which she witnessed while growing up, serves as an important backdrop to the artist's multilayered works in which personal and collective memory intertwine.

Raafat performs an archeology of memory in evocative mixed-media installations that draw on architectural motifs from Iran and, inspired specifically by a 17th-century architectural masterpiece of the Safavid Empire, the Sheikh Lotfollah Mosque in Isfahan, Iran. Raafat's site-specific installations incorporate fragments of muqarnas, an architectural motif comprised of three-dimensional ornamentalations arranged in tiers. Raafat says of her new series of work that they are "reminiscent of stalactites, muqarnas developed in the middle of the 10th century. It is comprised of three-dimensional modules arranged in tiers and is mostly used in the entrances of mosques, Mihrabs, domed-ceilings and vaults." The work contrasts the mosque's sense of harmony and perfection by approximating a state of disrepair or ruin. Invoking the pervasive destruction that resulted from the Iran-Iraq War (1980-88), Raafat alludes to the fragility of life in Iran today — from continued conflict in the region to ongoing tensions between Iran and the United States — and reflects on the unshakable desire for survival.

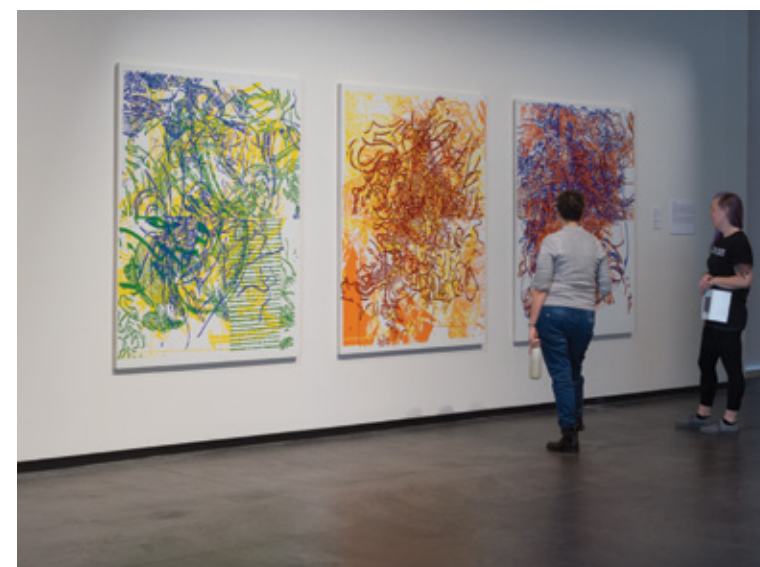
"I use the modules of Muqarnas as my building blocks for creating three-dimensional compositions grounded in modern abstraction. Some of my pieces hang chest-high like niches or cling as if webs to corners and ceilings, while others rapture the wall with motifs and disparate elements like mirrors and fabric." While inspired by architectural elements, these pieces look fragile and fragmented. A tension is formed with the juxtaposition of traditional and modern elements, the past and the present, as the structures appear frozen in moments of crumbling and falling apart.





Dan Crews is interested in the accumulation and repetition of imagery. He 'finds' his images through a process of densely overlapping his drawings and other found imagery by the use of a Xerox machine. The Xerox is enlarged and transferred to a masked prepared canvas. The image is cut out and sprayed with acrylic color by airbrush. This process distances the hand of the artist, making the viewer look twice at the line drawing to figure how it was made. Is it mechanically reproduced or handmade? The color and imagery are reused several times in these paintings. This asks the viewer to recall an image or color in a different spatial situation from other layers of other paintings. Dan's work challenges the expectations of what a painting is.

Crews painting, *Breather* (2012) for example is the perfect orientation for the audience, of the artist "using" the memory of mark making to entice the viewer to explore the layers of information within the composition. Layers of drawn lines, perhaps architectural details or even transit city maps are cut out, copied, reversed, and color coded, a process that is never quite narrative, but somehow recognizable as something in each individual memory bank. On further viewing, the information starts to break down, confusing us as to what, and even why we brought a visual history of information to the painted image and, from our own stockpiled resources of historical data.





John L. Moore states that; “All of my work is informed by memories. Memories of things that I have experienced, or were told to me; things that I have read or dreamed. Since many dreams are recurring they often shape my thoughts and visual images.” Moore’s paintings have a set of visual vocabularies, used time and time again that help familiarize the viewer to cues in John’s abstract narratives. Moore changes a memory to a series of abstract sprawling clues, including mirror shapes that reflect atmospheres, not recognizable objects. Black oval shapes that appear almost as cutouts on the surface that let the viewer “inside” the work. Landscapes that have been washed away by a curtain of apparent rain and fog. The atmospheric landscapes have a depth, but at the same time a spacious quality of air – or space informed by violent actions like wind, flying objects, and shards. In dreams we remember what might have been informed by reality, and what might be the unexplained premise of a disjointed narrative. John’s dreamscapes become the viewers to explain, to examine, and to find their own answers within.

The Red Paintings were at first primarily about fire. “In May 2001, I had a dream that my work was destroyed in a fire. I wondered how would I paint fire. Then I received a call from my gallery that a work in a private collection had been destroyed in a fire. I began some drawings to put down as quickly as I could my ideas, but quickly abandoned them and went straight to the canvas.” This began the series of red paintings, carrying images of traps, mazes and mirrors, like *Mirror on Red Background*, 2007.

“My recent paintings carry a combination of memories. They are a reflection on real events and dreams, about fading memories, where I can’t quite fix on them, not getting a clear image or thought and then like magic things become clear again, the memory returns intact and is possibly enhanced.”

Titles of paintings, like *Black Night* (2011) and *Grey Empty Mind* (2014) can be descriptive and, at the same time, carry a personal commentary. In the painting titled *Black Grey* (2013), cropped forms from previous paintings are present - one suggestive of a trap is at the bottom, and in another of a small mirror is located at the top. A large mirror is absent from its frame and the frame appears to be carried by the wind.





Leonardo Drew (born 1961) creates large-scale sculptural installations and collaged mixed media sculptures, incorporating both manipulated and found materials such as paper, wood, tree branches and roots, rust and mud. These materials are often stacked on top of one another, arranged in gradations of length or shape, endowing the sculpture itself with contrasting qualities of rigorous organization and organic chaos or proliferation. Drew has been making variations on this visual vocabulary of humble materials since the 1970s, having had his first solo exhibition at the age of 13.

Because Drew has been producing art from an early age, (and being documented in dozens and dozens of important exhibitions and critical writing) from the dramatic sculptures and installations of the 1980s and, the enormous wall tableaux of the 1990s, to the more fragile paper casts of the past decade, Drew has in a way documented his life experiences, saving memories in his constant production and consistent career with the ability of revisiting his personal and well documented accounts.





Levent Tuncer is a Turkish/American artist whose paintings distribute ideas of repetition, with order and disorder, history and fiction, change, and a primordial awareness of the duality that is inherent in all cultures. The work establishes a dialogue about these dualities using designs derived from architecture, textiles and tiling's as cross-cultural emblems of Tuncer's themes.

Tuncer says "...we live with our memories, constantly, everyday and most of the time relate to them intuitively. If you turn this way or other, there are red and green lights advising us what to do, based on remembered experiences and learning. But these memories of the same event, we re-call are different each time we re-call them, because our brain has embellished the memory each time it is re-called. So our lives are constantly re-shaped by how our memories evolve, so everything changes all the time as far as our memories and what they mean to us."

Tuncer paints out of a "Proustian Space" where one is between sleep and awake-ness, as well as referring to certain art histories, and re-interpreting, stylizations and formal ways of making art, mostly from "Islamic Art" looking beyond rules, to the inner psyche of the artist and thus conjures his paintings.

Of course Proustian space is an ambiguous place, where not being completely asleep or awake but both at the same time creates a fertile spring, where past and present is accessed intuitively and not only presented in a cross cultural DNA of imagery but made in to an epic, visual state of history/memory/ real and fiction.

In the History/Fiction series, for example, the artist has for some years been working with a single sixteenth century Iznik tile pattern. By repeating the design, allowing it to echo itself and mutate, and by superimposing various geometric systems on it, he creates a complex visual equivalent of the dynamics of cultural disjuncture. Just as memory alters the perception of time, by overlaying these patterns, Tuncer subverts their repetitive rigidity. In painterly language, using tactile qualities, he suggests "order, like authority, is vital only when it evolves, and that it evolves only when challenged and made to diverge from its historical context."

The end result is a painter of immense technical ability using a system of composition that is free but confident. These paintings are expressive in ways that only a master of surface, structure, and manipulative control can accomplish.



Zarina was born in Aligarh, India, in 1937 and has lived and worked in New York for the past 3 decades. Her main medium is paper, which she employs in woodcuts, etchings, drawings, rubbings, and casts made from paper pulp. Although she is primarily a printmaker, she considers herself to be a sculptor as well, in part because the activity of carving blocks of wood is central to her practice.

Zarina's vocabulary is minimal yet rich in associations. Her near abstract compositions are inextricably linked to her life and to the themes of dispossession and exile that have marked it. Her family is Muslim but chose to stay in India following the partition of 1947, which resulted in the uprooting and deaths of millions of people. Conditions in India eventually made it impossible for them to remain any longer, but by the time her parents chose to immigrate to Pakistan in 1959, Zarina was married and living in Thailand. She was unable to return to her childhood home and was also not "at home" in Pakistan. She later lived in Germany, France, and Japan before settling in the United States. The concept of home—whether personal, geographical, national, spiritual, or familial—resonates throughout Zarina's work. The lines that define her spaces are never anonymous; on the contrary, they are handcrafted and calligraphic. Although it appears in different guises throughout her works, her distinctive sense of line is the unifying element of her compositions, like an umbilical cord that ties her to this world regardless of where she is.

Therefore, memory plays a pivotal role in Zarina's image making. In *Cities I Called Home* (2010) we witness five distinct detailed (city) maps of streets, rivers and directional connections that represent places abstracted but still holding specific longitudinal directives. In describing "place", Zarina opens up our own memories to places left behind, moved away from, but holdings for the personal, political, and social landmarks for ourselves.



Artur Żmijewski was born in Warsaw in 1966 and grew up under Soviet-imposed communism and at one point, martial law. As the communist regime fell apart and was swapped for capitalist ideals, Żmijewski came of age bombarded by opposing ideologies. At art school, he and his peers were encouraged to finish each other's work, a sure-fire method to get students thinking about how meaning takes shape. Żmijewski has said it's not enough for art to ask questions. Rather, "artists need to get real and provide some arguments." If the arguments he puts forward can seem bleak, it's up to his audience to come back with something more convincing.

Żmijewski's work is nothing if not provocative – to both his subjects and audience. With scant concern for complacent liberal ethics, the Polish artist often devises button-pushing behavioral experiments. In his reality TV-style documentaries, opposing political groups have been set at each other's throats, people play tag nude in a gas chamber, an old man has his faded concentration camp number re-tattooed, volunteers role-play prisoners and their guards until the situation becomes horribly authentic. People and power structures are stripped (sometimes literally) back to their essence, exposing the nasty, fundamental problems that haunt us as humans.

Our Songbook (original title: *Nasz śpiewnik*) is a film about problems with individual memory and the gradual degeneration of collective memory. During his stay in Tel Aviv in 2003, Żmijewski contacted a number of Polish Jews who had left Poland – the land of their ancestors – shortly before or during WWII. He asked them to recall and sing the songs of their youth. The protagonists recall all kinds of melodies: cavalry songs, pre-war pop hits, the Polish national anthem. Żmijewski shows a world that is irrevocably becoming past. Our Songbook is one of the most moving and meaningful projects of the Polish artist in recent years, and one that has found a reflection in the debates on national identity and Polish-Jewish history. Żmijewski broadens the field of art with his films, treating art as a tool for remembering, generating knowledge, and calling it into question.

The film "80064" shows an encounter between Artur Żmijewski and Josef Tarnawa, a 92-year-old former prisoner of the concentration camp at Auschwitz. Like most films by the artist, "80064" is a unique experiment. Filmed in a tattoo parlor, the artist speaks with Tarnawa



about his history and encourages the old man to "renew" his prisoner number, which is tattooed on the man's forearm and has faded throughout the years. The film investigates the act of subordination by repeating the tattooing process, which was initially meant to stigmatize the Auschwitz prisoners. The confrontation seems both unsettling and reconciliatory. Żmijewski has a very high regard for the persons he encounters. He aims to portray each person as he or she appears. As Żmijewski stated in an interview: "I conceive a germ for the actions, and the further progress of the events creates life." As such, "80064" is an intimate and uncensored encounter with history.



Armita Raafat

Untitled 1

resin, plastic, mirrors, paint, sumi ink
26 × 7 × 42"
2012

Untitled 2

resin, plastic, mirrors, paint, sumi ink
22 × 7 × 48"
2012

Untitled 3

resin, plastic, mirrors, paint, sumi ink
21 × 7 × 45"
2013

Untitled 4

resin, plastic, mirrors, paint, sumi ink
24 × 14"
2014

Dan Crews

Was it London or Paris

acrylic on canvas
72 × 55"
2013

breather

acrylic on canvas
72 × 55"
2012

untitled (wings)

acrylic on canvas
72 × 55"
2012

John L. Moore

Black Grey

oil on canvas
80 × 68"
2013

Black Night

oil on canvas
60 × 50"
2011

Mirror on Red Background

oil on canvas
2 panels: 13.75 × 23.75" each

Grey Empty Mind

oil on canvas
80 × 68"
2014

Jimi

oil on canvas
80 × 68"
2012

Leonardo Drew

Number 99X

fabric, rust, string, wood
6 parts: 13 × 25 × 4" each
2005

Levent Tuncer

#1

oil on canvas
84 × 60 "
2012

#5

oil on canvas
84 × 60"
2013

#9

oil on canvas
120 × 89"
2013

Zarina Hashmi

Cities I Called Home, edition 5 of 25

portfolio of five wood cuts and text printed
in black on handmade Nepalese paper and
mounted on Arches buff cover paper
5 panels: 26 × 20" each
2010
Courtesy of Lühring Augustine Gallery, NYC

Artur Żmijewski

Our Songbook

Single channel video, projection or monitor,
11 minutes, color, sound
Polish OV /English subtitles
2003

80064

Single channel video, projection or monitor,
11 minutes, color, sound
Polish OV /English subtitles
2004
Courtesy of Galerie Peter Kilchmann, Zurich

Acknowledgments

I have always counted on the direct connections between artists, curators, and activists to drive my research over the thirty years plus of producing exhibitions, public art projects, and special events related to the visual arts. It was, in this case that the artist John L. Moore and curator Jane Farver spent time with me on the idea of this thematic exhibition. These initial meetings steered the final list of artists best suited to frame the focus on the subject of obsessive memory and visual language. I thank John for literally moving me around to artist studios in Manhattan and Brooklyn, and introducing me to some of the artists in this exhibition that I had not discovered on my own.

It was also Jane Farver who insisted that I pursue the work of Artur Zmijewski, whose work embodied the idea of pushing the limits of memory – and the obsessiveness in breaking boundaries between the artist and his subject. To that end, I thank Jane, and in her memory I dedicate this publication.

Much has been written about memory and the unconscious mind. Dr. Oliver Sacks amazing books on the topic, including *The Man Who Mistook his Wife for a Hat*, and his numerous essays on the development and understanding of the mind have been key in keeping this exhibition alive for years and years in my research. I'm very excited about the final gathering of the artists in the exhibition. To Levent Tuncer, Armita Raafat, Leonardo Drew, Artur Zmijewski, John L. Moore, Dan Crews, and Zarina Hashmi, thank you!

Thanks to the artists, collectors and the galleries, including Luhring Augustine Gallery, NYC and, Galerie Peter Kilchmann, Zurich for supporting this project and their artists interest in participating. To my staff: Mindi K. Bagnall for organizing the exhibition installation and making it a reality. To Sam Ephland, Mandy Hess, Maddie Helwig, Nick Anderson, and Sarah Spohn for going the extra mile for the exhibition installation. To the Frostic School of Arts' Design Center; faculty member Nick Kuder and graphic designer April Sova for their fantastic design of this catalog. And, to the Gwen Frostic School of Art at Western Michigan University, their support of the exhibitions at the Richmond Center for Visual Arts has made *In the Shadows* a pleasure to exhibit.

Don Desmett
Founding Director of Exhibitions
James W. and Lois I. Richmond Center for Visual Arts

