

Reviews: New York

Walid Raad/ The Atlas Group

The Kitchen

Born in Lebanon in 1967 and now a professor at New York's Cooper Union, Walid Raad is founder and chief librarian



Walid Raad/The Atlas Group, still from *I Only Wish That I Could Weep (Operator #17)*, 2000, single-channel video installation, dimensions variable. The Kitchen.

of The Atlas Group, an organization devoted to researching and documenting recent events in his home country. Complicating this endeavor is the fact that The Atlas Group is a fiction and its archives have been wholly or partially fabricated by the artist himself.

None of this would be apparent, however, from a first glance at Raad's presentation at The Kitchen, where information was as scrupulously indexed and categorized as a scholarly research project. The materials and their alleged sources were carefully described on extensive wall labels. For example, individually framed pages from *Notebook Volume 38: Already Been in a Lake of Fire, 1975-91* (1999) were attributed to one Dr. Fadl Fakhouri, "the foremost historian of the Lebanese civil wars." Pictures of cars allegedly "of the exact make and model as those used in suicide bombings" were pasted on each page with handwritten notes in Arabic (translated into English on the margins) listing the date of the event, condition of the car and type of explosive used in the terrorist act. It seemed authentic, except the series was almost too beautifully constructed to be the work of an archivist.

The show also included fake documentary footage attributed to fictional characters. In *Hostage: The Bachar Tapes (#17 and #31)* one "Souheil Bachar" describes his experience as the sole Arab captive among Terry Anderson and four other

American hostages taken by Shiite Muslims in 1985. Bachar's story is entirely fictional, but the narrator convincingly dwells on the inaccuracies and contradictions in the actual hostages' accounts of their persecution, leading to the conclusion that all descriptions of traumatic events may be distorted or fictionalized

in some way. *I Only Wish That I Could Weep (Operator #17)*, 2000, presents images—ostensibly created by a security agent operating a surveillance camera—of the sun setting over the sea in West Beirut. According to the wall label, the agent was temporarily distracted by the beauty of the seascape, swung his camera toward it, and was then fired on the spot for this momentary lapse from his responsibilities.

Even when we know (or suspect) that the narratives have been completely concocted by the artist, the pathos of this video and other works in this fascinating exhibition is genuine. More than anything else, Raad's project demonstrates what happens when facts are bent to underscore an emotional truth. In some instances, this technique may have therapeutic value; in others, it adds up to propaganda. In this case, it is safe to call it art.



Nobuyoshi Araki, *Untitled (Painting Flower)*, 2005, Cibachrome, 19" x 24".
Anton Kern.

—Barbara Pollack

Nobuyoshi Araki

Anton Kern

Arguably Japan's most famous living photographer, Nobuyoshi Araki began his career in advertising. His background as a commercial photographer is evident in his careful display of subjects as desirable products—high-end amalgams of

erotica, design, and fashion. In this exhibition, Araki presented "Painting Flower," a 2005 series of color photographs, as well as a selection of black-and-white gelatin prints from the '70s to the present.

A grid of photographs excerpted from Araki's "Diaries" of 1992-93, *101 Images Dedicated to Robert Frank* (1992-93/2005) interspersed ordinary black-and-white scenes from Tokyo—building facades and architectural details, sky, streets, stores, a half-eaten dessert—with images of bound and naked women to make a black-and-white checkerboard of sexualized metropolitan life. In the main gallery, opulent close-ups of flowers dripping with blood-red and vivid green paint were installed as diptychs and triptychs, usually juxtaposed with a beautifully modulated black-and-white photo of a slender, naked or seminaked young woman, tied up with legs splayed and breasts unbecomingly squeezed. Trussed and suspended in positions that look extremely uncomfortable, the women remain impassive. On the other hand, the flowers—brightly painted or-

chids, lilies, and chrysanthemums—though obvious in their references to labia and phalluses were gorgeously corrupt and seductive.

Araki is a gifted photographer whose eye can be fetishistic, voyeuristic, and subtly cruel, reflecting the dark side of Japanese formality and its culture of restraint. While he is known for his provocative, prurient images, here they seemed more detached and stylized than in the past, as if this master were teasing his audience with pornographic propositions that deliberately failed to deliver.

—Lilly Wei