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Video-Sampling Syria: Global Politics From a Ground's-Eye View

By NEIL MacFARQUHAR

LOS ANGELES — Julia Meltzer and David Thorne decamped for Damascus in March 2005 with a vague notion of assessing the toll exacted on ordinary Syrians by the Bush administration's treatment of their country as an "axis of evil" understudy.

While the president had singled out Iraq, Iran and North Korea by name, the toppling of [Saddam Hussein](#) in April 2003 was accompanied by unsubtle hints of "You're next" to Syria's Baathist regime next door.

"I think the question that we went there with was, 'How does this threat, this policy, live in people's psyche?'" said Ms. Meltzer, a media artist, in an interview at the couple's light-filled home and studio in a former factory along the cement-lined banks of the Los Angeles River. "How do people experience it, how does it register in their day-to-day lives?"

The fruits of their project will be on view in three video works at the [Whitney Museum of American Art](#)'s biennial, which opens on Thursday. Two somewhat abstract video pieces — "Not a matter of if but when" and "Epic," also called by its Arabic translation, "Melhame" — will be installed at the museum proper.

A third video, "We will live to see these things," which is slightly more grounded in daily life among Damascus residents, will be screened on Friday night at the Park Avenue Armory, an adjunct site of the biennial. Afterward the couple and Rami Farah, the young Syrian artist with whom they worked, will take questions from the audience.

Ms. Meltzer traveled to Damascus, the Syrian capital, to teach at the University of Damascus for eight months on a \$50,000 Fulbright fellowship. Because the school didn't really offer media art, it assigned her to teach a class in the journalism department. The couple had also jointly received a \$35,000 grant from the Rockefeller Foundation to explore how elements of President Bush's foreign policy were playing abroad.

Within weeks of their arrival, [Rafik Hariri](#), the former prime minister of neighboring Lebanon, was assassinated. The killing was widely attributed to Syria, which prompted a burst of open political discussion in Damascus. The two American artists interviewed all kinds of people, gradually narrowing their focus to eight local residents whom they met with repeatedly for discussions on how they envisioned the future.

Then they began sifting through the interviews, seeking themes that could be boiled down into a series of word prompts or texts. Various aspects of life in Syria went into the mix, including the oblique way that people discuss its oppressive government and the frustration of living under a system that has been promising revolutionary glory for more than 40 years but has remained resistant to change. Regional events also played a part, like the revelations that Iraqi prisoners were tortured by American soldiers at Abu Ghraib.

The two videos to be screened at the Whitney consist of a series of close-ups of Mr. Farah as he delivers vivid, often improvised monologues in Arabic (with English subtitles) that were inspired by the prompts.

The longer one, “Not a matter of if but when,” plunges the viewer instantly into a stream of vulgar invective of the type that accompanies the discussion of topics like political change in any Levantine cafe. “Peace. I don’t want it,” Mr. Farah tells the camera. “Justice. Why? Victory? Makes me sick! Love? Shameful. Freedom? Ugly!” There’s more, but it can’t be printed here.

Some prompts were as simple as the word “poison,” reflecting the growing strains in relations between the United States and the Arab world, Ms. Meltzer said. That word sent Mr. Farah on a long riff about a daily diet of slightly poisoned bread or jam.

The concept of an implied threat from the United States is suggested in a similarly abstract way. There are no proper nouns: phrases like “the Baath Party” or “Abu Ghraib” never enter the narrative. There is talk of torture, but it could be any place. God enters the monologue periodically, but it could be anybody’s god.

“Not a matter of if but when” was shot in 2005 and on periodic visits in 2006, and “Epic” last year on a \$10,000 grant from the Art Matters foundation.

The couple said they felt that the mood had darkened considerably when they arrived to shoot “Epic” in August, not least because of the presence of two million [Iraqi refugees](#) in Syria.

“There was a sense of resignation,” Mr. Thorne said, adding, “All of the small excitements of 2005 — when there was this talk about, Is the regime going to fall? Is the Iraq war actually going to produce some kind of viable and positive outcome in the region — all that talk that had been in the air was gone.”

The government of President [Bashar al-Assad](#), like the 30-year tenure of his father, Hafez, often suggests that without the ruling Baath Party, the country would descend into chaos.

So the artists asked Mr. Farah to describe what might happen in a civil war. That went nowhere, they said, as did most prompts based on a specific situation rather than a general concept. Mindful of the way Baghdad bombings left heads and limbs scattered in the streets, Mr. Thorne then suggested that Mr. Farah imagine civil war as if his own body had been similarly shattered.

The camera never leaves Mr. Farah’s face as he describes his head, torso, arms and legs fighting for supremacy. Mr. Farah trained as a dancer, Ms. Meltzer said, which seemed to allow him to pull the force of his entire body into expressing his emotions.

The five-segment piece to be shown at the armory, “We will live to see these things,” is more concrete. An architect describes the frustrations of starting a major project in the 1960s that remains unfinished. A segment focused on a summer Koran camp suggests how Islam has become a ubiquitous force.

A third segment tries to capture the strange position that Syria accords Basil al-Assad, the oldest Assad son, an equestrian champion who had been groomed to succeed his father as president but died in a car accident in 1994. Posters of Hafez, of Bashar, of Basil hang throughout Syria, often referred to wryly as “the father, the son and the holy ghost.” In this sequence, pictures of a riding competition are juxtaposed with a text that Mr. Thorne wrote

about a leader who never seems to arrive.

In the last segment, three themes that inform all the pieces are woven together: American foreign policy, life under a totalitarian government and the notion that the Middle East has continuously inspired prophets.

Reading about the Bush policy of pre-emptive war and about prophetic speech in early Christianity, Mr. Thorpe said, the artists concluded that administration officials held an almost prophetic conviction that they could reshape the Middle East.

Prophecy and policy seemed to merge, with the modern echoing the ancient. "They involve a kind of projection into a future: this is what is going to happen," Mr. Thorne said.

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