

Hakim Bishara and Hagar Ophir give a brief outline of their Kunsthall 3,14 exhibition, *It Is Only Through Your Thoughts That I Can Remember Who I Am*, in response to question from Johnny Herbert.

Johnny Herbert: I'm very interested in your work with an exhibition and specific figures—for example, Madame M.S, a Lebanese painter that you say “remains a total mystery”—we might think of as forces that history couldn't hold and their environments couldn't record. The title of your exhibition at Kunsthall 3,14, *It Is Only Through Your Thoughts That I Can Remember Who I Am*, is a case in point. I want to meditate on this title a little: Who might we think of as “I” and who might we think of as “your” here?

Hakim Bishara: Madame M.S appears in the original catalogue as a Lebanese painter who introduced only two paintings (Cactus [gouache] and Flowers [watercolors]), as opposed to all other artists who introduced a large volume of works. Furthermore, while the other eight participating artists became founding figures of Lebanese and French Modern Art, Madame M.S remains absent from the records of art history. More than two years of an extensive research through archives in Jerusalem, Beirut and Paris yielded no results as to her real identity. And to further enhance this enigma, George Cyr—a French painter and the curator of the exhibition — introduced a portrait of Madame M.S in the original show, but we weren't able to trace that painting or M.S's own works. Faced with this biographical void, we decided to give Madame M.S a voice instead of ignoring her, and to re-imagine her life and work as a leading protagonist in our story.

The title *It Is Only Through Your Thoughts That I Can Remember Who I Am* is borrowed from the 18th century Yiddish play *Dybbuk*. In one of his letters, Mordechai Narkiss, the director of the Bezalel National Jewish Museum, mentions seeing *Dybbuk* on the bookshelves of Genevieve and Leon Moron's house in Beirut. Genevieve Moron was a surrealist painter and an art collector who contributed works to the 1943 exhibition, and her husband was the commander of France Libre's navy forces in the Levant. That little piece of information made us think of the story of the *Dybbuk* (a phantom, a dislocated soul of a dead person possessing the body of a living one) as an allegory to our story. In *Dybbuk*, Channan, a Hassidic scholar who falls in love with Leah, the daughter of a merchant who was promised to him as a future wife, dies when hears that she was engaged to another man. His soul possesses Leah's body after his death and he speaks to her in codes. In a climatic moment, Leah confronts Channan's voice by asking him: who are you? To which he replies: “I have forgotten myself. It is only through your thoughts that I can remember who I am”. Madame M.S, who was a real painter who lived in Beirut in the 1940s, is asking us to re-imagine the story of this forsaken exhibition, as well as her own story, so that she can remember who she is, and so that we in turn can remember who we were before nationalism and war. We do hope that this exhibition will encourage people who lived or researched that period to shed more light on un-archived and unwritten details of this story.

Hagar Ophir: When you enter the exhibition space, and pronounce its title, you perform yourself as the one who needs the thoughts of others to be able to remember who you are. We often forget how our thoughts operate like sounds—a sound reverberates only when it hits a wall. Personally, I was seeking to create my position through the work of the imagination and through Hakim and

our other theatre collaborators. Those collaborators are first of all Madame M.S and the other historical characters. They are actors in our theatre of operations. They either perform themselves or hide from us in the archive set, making us imagine them back in time. The “I” in the title is interchangeable: it is Madame M.S asking to remember herself through the thoughts of the Archive Chorus, which represents us, and vice versa. That also applies to our work process within our group (Set designer Martha Schwindling; Sound artist Miriam Schickler; Light designer Rachid Moro; researchers Ellie Armon Azoulay and Stephanie d’Arc Taylor), where we relied on each others’ thoughts to remember who we are. The mysteries of theatre can be staged only through the thoughts running between us. And lastly, this title refers to the people of Jerusalem and Beirut, who have forgotten themselves and the shared life they used to live through the course of wars and the sealing of borders.

J.H: The staging of *It Is Only Through Your Thoughts...* is an intriguing and refreshing approach to research presentation (as formal as that sounds). We’re writing before the exhibition is installed in Bergen, but it seems like an emphasis will be placed on ambience and atmospheric attunement, much like stage design. How do you think of this approach of (non)correspondence to the procession of vitrines so often encountered with such work?

H.O: Theatre is a place that calls for action. At the theatre set, there is a space for imaginary facts and facades. In theatre, we have the freedom to bypass the inaccessibility of original paintings, documents and artefacts hidden in institutions’ vaults or kept away for political reasons. In theatre, we can move across time and shift from Beirut to Jerusalem in just a few steps.

H.B: Each work has its singularity. In this project we were faced with the problem of irretrievable and overlooked histories. We had to re-imagine the past and fill in the information gaps, as historians inevitably do. History is always re-imagined. As the work progressed, we found ourselves correcting the archives and creating our own counter-archive. The choice to give the subject a theatrical treatment came naturally. The Middle East was the “Theatre of Operations” of the great powers during WWII, hence our name. We couldn’t be satisfied with a dry presentation of archival findings. That wouldn’t have been enough to tell the story. We treat the archive a site for séance, to trigger the memories imbedded in our collective psyche, which is now slumbering in a collective amnesia. We wanted to relive a moment that cannot be lived anymore in the current political reality—a past that appears as a utopian future from today’s perspective. This exhibition is daydream that moves between 1943 and now, between fantasy and reality.

J.H: This reminds me of something someone recently saying to me that the “first rule of historical work” was to “not project the present onto the past”. Disagreements with the statement aside, it does seem to demand some kind of immersion in, and transportation into, a past—that a fixation on a blurry, echoic point can lead to some kind of hallucinatory temporal transportation that you’re inviting here. I look forward to seeing how the exhibition works with these ideas!