

BEIRUT

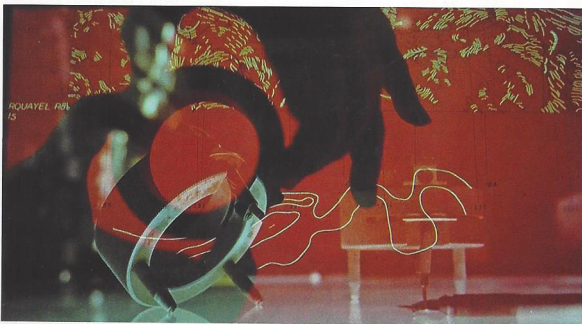
Ahmad Ghossein

MARFA'

For several years now, the artist and filmmaker Ahmad Ghossein has been splashing around in the psyche of Southern Lebanon, that swath of politically volatile, frequently war-ravaged, and always incongruously verdant countryside squished between Syria, Israel, and the Mediterranean Sea. Think rolling hills, parasol pines, premodern poverty, Hezbollah, and the mini castle mansions of the nouveaux riches. In videos such as *The Fourth Stage* and the performance *When the Ventriloquist Came and Spoke to Me*, both 2015, Ghossein has delved into the ways the territory can be known, imagined, and mythologized. His work, always playful on one level to mask the seriousness of his purpose on another, tacks from the magical and wondrous to the arcana of politicized public art and militant architecture.

For "There Is No Right or Wrong Here," his first solo exhibition at a gallery in Lebanon, Ghossein turned to issues of land ownership, mapping, and language. He also found, interviewed, and filmed the last living cartographer employed by the Lebanese state. Mohammed Adeb Khaled is the inscrutable star of Ghossein's fifteen-minute video *The Last Cartographer in the Republic*, 2017. From 1963 until 2006, Khaled was employed in the Directorate of Geographic Affairs, where he excelled in a specific kind of topographical mapmaking, using a three-legged compass to create exquisitely detailed contour line drawings on red acetate that look like abstractions. With Khaled's retirement, this method of mapmaking has effectively become obsolete in Lebanon, predictably surpassed by satellite imaging. Ghossein and the artist Rafik Mourad tracked down all the tools necessary to revive it

Ahmad Ghossein,
*The Last Cartographer
in the Republic*, 2017,
HD video, color,
sound, 15 minutes.



(including the acetate sheets, which Ghossein found in the army's archives) and made attempts at mapping the territory anew. These efforts, mounted on light boxes, are each titled *Draft Zero*, 2017. Were it not for the presence of Ghossein's elliptical and mesmerizing video, playing as it does with light and shadow, sight and blindness, observation and data, the *Draft Zero* pieces would have stolen the show.

Initially, Ghossein, who is known principally as a filmmaker, had planned to forgo film work altogether in this exhibition. He had intended to treat the show as an opportunity to make objects and experiment with their relationship in space. His tactile thinking about ownership of land (which under Ottoman law, for example, had to be worked) and how a figure locates him- or herself in the terrain yielded some compelling groupings: a corner filled with metal rods, the kinds used by French mandate authorities to measure the sea level in Lebanon, lodged in concrete for the installation *The Point or One of the Government's Secrets: Elevation*, 2017, and the documents and other materials related to the artist's attempt to assign ownership of an otherwise unclaimed plot of land in Southern Lebanon to the gallery's owner, Joumana Asseily, in the six-part installation *Obsession*, 2017.

As conceptual artists of a certain generation sometimes do, Ghossein throws a few too many things at one good idea, and his considerable humor is buried in the fine print of a couple of small booklets. One features a rueful essay on land ownership and liberation by the writer and curator Rasha Salti; another ostensibly lists the works on view. But the artist has peppered his descriptions with comical asides, sly observations of geopolitical affairs, and stories about his father's infatuation with Lenin. All this may add up to little more than armature for the film, but it shows an agile mind at work with new materials. That, as much as the last cartographer, may have given the show its energy of strange anticipation and promise.

—Kaelen Wilson-Goldie