



**Akram Zaatari**  
**Bodybuilders. Printed from a damaged negative showing Munir el Dada in Saida, 1948.**  
2007, inkjet print, 180 x 145 cm,  
edition 5 + 2 AP. Courtesy the artist  
and Galerie Sfeir-Semler, Hamburg  
& Beirut



**Kyriaki Costa**  
(see **Drawing Room**)  
**Rhizome.** 2011, fabric, thread,  
marker, 86 x 114 cm. © the artist.  
Courtesy Omikron Gallery, Nicosia

# AKRAM ZAATARI

**Akram Zaatari: *Composition for Two Wings***  
Kunsternes Hus, Oslo  
4 November – 22 January

**Akram Zaatari's** video *Tomorrow Everything Will Be Alright* (2010) recounts a timeless scenario in an aptly out-of-time manner. An Instant Messenger-style conversation, its alternating red and black sentences appear, one by one, in Courier font within an old-fashioned log report, as if typed by a wartime code-breaker. Someone is contacting an old flame (opening line: 'Hello sexy!'). They'd parted acrimoniously; now this someone wants his or her ex back, and the other is, to say the least, not sure. There's recrimination, flirtation, recollected heartbreak, rebuttal, pleading and, for us, a feeling of raw intrusion. Much of what's alluded to, significantly, is outside our understanding (even prior to the video's ambiguous coda, old camcorder footage of a sunset), though we're led to wish we knew more. Intimate communication, this retrospective demonstrates, is Zaatari's wheelhouse; yet he's equally concerned with the means we use – how they're circumscribed, how they're problematic – to convey feelings or truths. And as a result, his practice is of the rare kind that can collapse the interpersonal and the political.

Much of Zaatari's practice, like that of Walid Raad and other artists connected to the Arab Image Foundation, has concerned the civil war in his native Lebanon during the 1970s and 80s; as above, withholding or slowly delivering information is frequently his method. In the video *Letter to Samir* (2008), a man matter-of-factly writes a letter, but he's a Lebanese resistance fighter who's spent a decade in an Israeli prison, from 1998 onwards. In such jails, a wall text informs us, information travelled via letters in microscopic handwriting, folded down to pill size, wrapped in plastic and swallowed to be transported or passed via a kiss. A 2008 c-print, also entitled *Letter to Samir*, features one of these, blown up to the same scale as – and ironically resembling – the mortar shell in the photograph beside it.

Zaatari also shares with Raad a structural anxiety about how historical information is conveyed, and numerous works here both lean on and question personal archives in a play of revealing and concealing. Sumptuous large-scale photographs make still lifes of BASF cassettes, or of photographic albums with jolly covers

containing images of rubble-strewn streets and wrecked buildings. Photographs of explosions that the artist took as a teenager are turned into videos that uneasily address the indexical, as when Zaatari's camcorder pans and zooms on his own photographs of explosions, briefly reanimating them. There's a palpable sense, here, of trying to resurrect and understand a painful past – another link to *Tomorrow...* – and yet this work pales beside the show's highpoint, *Her + Him Van Leo* (2001).

In this slowly unspooling video travelogue, Zaatari tells us (via stammering captions: first, second, third drafts of his narrative) that he'd found a photograph of his grandmother as a young woman and gone to meet the Armenian-Egyptian commercial photographer – famous in his own right – who'd taken it. Without telling the photographer of his blood bond, Zaatari reveals to us in captions that the photograph was 'a scene of seduction'. While intercutting between the photographer's strange, arty self-portraits and the artist's naked, then twenty-five-year-old grandmother, thereby constructing an implicit, near-paranoid relationship between them, Zaatari records the ageing artisan's assertions about photography's changing shape. How it was always untruthful – subject to retouching; how it is now dead, replaced by video. What comes over here, though, is not some cultural-studies bromide about photography's limitedness, but the authentic humanist note of Zaatari's practice: an evocation of people, driven by varieties of need, using the fragile expressive tools to hand, and of other people, later, trying keenly to understand them.

**MARTIN HERBERT**

# DRAWING ROOM

***Drawing Room***  
Omikron Gallery, Nicosia  
10 December – 14 January

**Nicosia, Cyprus:** a city of much contradiction, where ancient walls coexist with Louis Vuitton outlets. The discovery of natural gas in local waters has only added to the still-palpable tension between the Turkish-occupied north and the

Greek Cypriot south. Whether offshore reserves will turn this picturesque island into Dubai in ten years' time remains to be seen, but that hasn't stopped people from making hopeful predictions. How any of this affects the local art scene is unclear; but despite its somewhat isolated location, a bevy of emerging artists calls this isle home. And in terms of drawing, it turns out that they're preoccupied with the same issues as their counterparts the world over.

Without any particular theme or trend, *Drawing Room* is simply a showcase for a wide range of works in many styles, and despite the absence of any coherent theory, many of the more successful pieces do seem attentive to matters of craft. A prime example is Anastasis Stratakis's *Turn Me On Dead Man* (2009), a graphite-on-paper rendering of a dead soldier: the unfortunate victim's eyeballs are somewhat cartoony, as if drawn by master animator Tex Avery, but overall the shading and rendering on the soldier's jacket and helmet verges on photorealism, carefully indicating volume and texture. Ino Varvariti's pencil drawing *Mountains Come First* (2009) is in a similar vein, the Greek text that spells out the title appearing, via *trompe l'oeil* precision, as if it were engraved on a piece of marble; while Efi Savvides's ghostly monochrome silkscreens on handkerchiefs, *Maqtub (Destiny – 'It Is Written') I-VIII* (2011), are based on detailed drawings of abandoned houses engulfed by foliage from the Turkish-occupied city of Famagusta that are then repeated three times and mirrored in a Rorschach-like pattern.

Kyriaki Costa's *Rhizome* (2011), in fabric, thread and marker, has an outsiderish, folk-art quality that is tempered by its monochrome palette. Several animals hover on the horizon line, while the roots of trees penetrate the soil where human forms congregate underground, including a sickly-looking baby breastfeeding. Although not working from actual legends, Costa manages to allude to her country's rich heritage without succumbing to trite sentimentality. Dimitris Neocleous's long vertical ink on paper *Palimpolis – Gazing at the City II* (2011) is an agreeable mix of fantasy drawing and graffiti mural. Owing a bit to the Arts and Crafts movement, it leaves one unclear as to whether Neocleous is representing flora and fauna overtaking a claustrophobic view of a compact city, or perhaps something more alien: cybernetic conduits, say, supplying the hamlet with essential nutrients. It's beautifully laid out, with a somewhat ornamental pipeline form becoming larger and dominating the bottom of the composition until it engulfs the inhabited parts of the city. While it might be a stretch to forge a connection to Cyprus's newfound reserve of fossil fuel, the stylish drawing nevertheless points to a future state where an interconnected landscape is the key to survival, and provides both aesthetic and intellectual nourishment.

**CHRIS BORS**