

Emily Jacir's Europa: restrained and harrowing artwork indebted to detail

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Tuesday, 29 September 2015

Whitechapel Gallery, London

Jacir's ongoing multimedia work *Material for a Film* explores the life of a man killed by Mossad in the 70s – elsewhere she peels back layers of identity and belonging



The more you look, the more there is to this exhibition ... Emily Jacir. Photograph: Emily Jacir/Whitechapel Gallery

The cocktail party is in full swing. David Niven is out on the balcony and Peter Sellers is at the bar. A waiter crosses and recrosses the room. Who notices a waiter? Henry Mancini's soundtrack repeats in this short clip from Blake Edwards' 1963 comedy *The Pink Panther*. Everyone is pretending to be someone else: Sellers, the hapless inspector Clouseau; Niven, a suave international jewel thief. The waiter is just an extra. Living in Rome and down on his luck, but immaculate in his suit and tray in hand, you wouldn't notice Wael Zuaiter unless you were told that nine years later, the impecunious Palestinian translator would be gunned down one evening by Mossad agents – one of a number of Palestinians assassinated in retribution for the Munich massacre at the 1972 summer Olympics. Mossad thought Zuaiter was a PLO mastermind of the attack.

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Although a vocal activist, Zuaiter was an unlikely target, and an even more unlikely terrorist. They killed him anyway. One of the bullets lodged in the copy of the Arabian Nights he carried in his pocket, and which he was translating into Italian from the original Arabic.

Zuaiter's life and death are the subject of Emily Jacir's best-known work, her ongoing 2006 *Material for a Film*. Photographs of places and people, portraits, letters and telegrams, notes, audio recordings of phone conversations (Zuaiter's voice somehow both hollow and intimate), and a recording of Gustav Mahler's Ninth Symphony, fill the installation that opens *Europa*, her exhibition at London's Whitechapel Gallery. *Material for a Film* is a harrowing yet restrained journey through a succession of cumulative details.



A journey through Wael Zuaiter's life, in Emily Jacir's ongoing *Material for a Film* project. Photo: David Heald

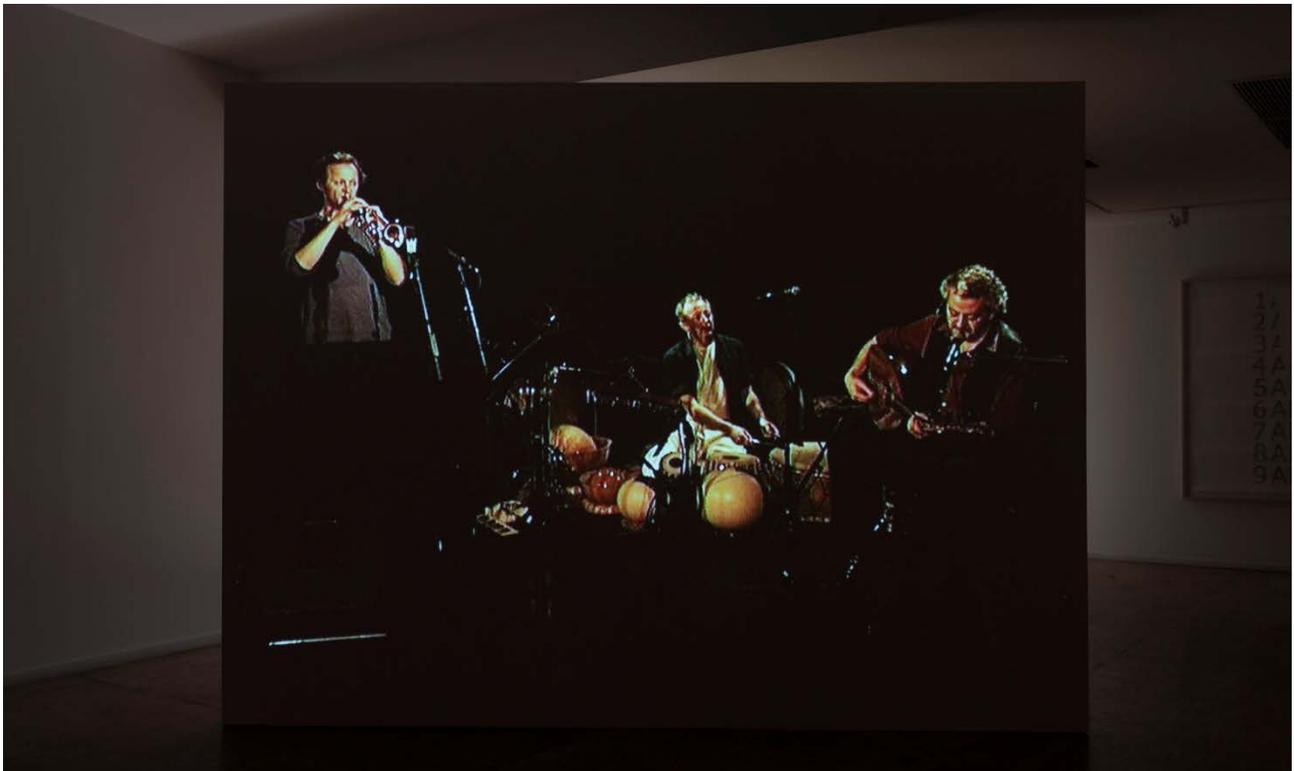
A whole life is here if you could unravel it, but it's impossible to do so. Would all this be better as a book about Zuaiter, or a documentary? It seems important that all this is a physical journey from event to event, moment to moment, disparate fragment to fragment. This self-contained exhibition within an exhibition is a journey that has no end, except for the black and white photograph of a body on the street at the entrance.

In another work, *Linz Diary*, Jacir records herself in the Austrian town every evening, on one of the CCTV cameras watching the square. We see her distantly, down by the fountain. Some evenings she's under a white umbrella. Or curled up like a ball. A little printed remark accompanies a succession of grainy stills. One evening, there's a little gathering in memory of Edward Said, who had died the week before. On 14 October 2008, she's "standing perfectly still. disenchanted. on the left. a boring day in Linz. 1800 hours." And so it goes. Made before we filled the world with selfies (was it really so recently?), she marks her place in the world with a daily routine as night falls. It is absurd.

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Jacir leaves things hanging. You feel their weight. “The artist lives and works around the Mediterranean,” reads the biographical note at the back of the catalogue. Born in Palestine, Jacir often returns there. She is currently based in Rome. For a while, she lived in Linz. A circular baggage carousel sits on the floor and lurches into movement as you approach. No one waits and no luggage comes. It just turns, blankly.

The more you look, the more there is to this exhibition. Jacir films a concert, destined for East Jerusalem and Bethlehem that never took place. The oud player Marwan Abado – an Austrian national of Palestinian origin, according to Whitechapel Gallery’s press release, based in Vienna for 20 years, with his visa and papers all in order – was detained in an Israeli airport overnight, then summarily deported. Later, he and his two fellow musicians, a trumpeter and a percussionist, performed the concert anyway at Jacir’s behest, in an empty theatre back in Austria. Abado introduces songs to an audience that isn’t there. Halfway through, they take a break and the camera watches their instruments on the silent, empty stage.



ENTRY DENIED (a concert in Jerusalem), 2003. Photograph: Joerg Lohse

The exhibition’s studious feel is really a kind of deadpan. Stories and lives, including Jacir’s own, erupt within it. At times it is even funny. In Paris in 1998, she changes \$100 at a bureau de change into francs. At the next change shop, she changes it back. From exchange to exchange, from “no commission” bureau to bureau she repeats the procedure. The money dwindles to a handful of coins. Where did it all go?

At the same time every Saturday in Linz a siren goes off. Shoppers and passersby ignore the urgent clamouring wail. Jacir’s camera watches them. The traffic passes, people go about their business. The bomb could be about to drop or an invasion might be taking place, who knows? I guess Jacir could have found the reason for the siren. She leaves it as a sign of recurring emergency.