

# Walid Raad's Playful and Dead-Serious Experiments with History

Raad's latest exhibition in Beirut explores history, archives, and reality with his signature inscrutability and dry humor.

by [Mary Pelletier](#) December 29, 2017



Installation view, *Walid Raad: Better Be Watching the Clouds* (2017)

BEIRUT — As the Louvre Abu Dhabi opened to a sold-out crowd on 11 November, some of the objects from its Islamic collection *must* have been missing. Five of them, which were loaned to the Gulf's newest art institution in 2013 from its big sister in Paris, were off-site, taking up space in the middle of an expansive, white-walled warehouse in Beirut's

industrial Karantina neighbourhood.

At least, that's what Walid Raad tells us.

The five objects, each displayed on a personalized, standalone, brightly coloured backdrop, currently make up the most alluring sections of Raad's latest solo exhibition, *Better Be Watching the Clouds*, at [Sfeir-Semler Gallery's](#) Beirut space. A familiarity with Raad's decades-long, perplexing practice certainly isn't a prerequisite for visiting this exhibition, but those trekking to the fourth floor are likely to be acquainted with the Lebanese artist's continually modified ongoing projects, including The Atlas Group, where imagined archival constructs elucidate the convoluted memory narratives (or lack thereof) relating to the Lebanese Civil War(s).

Raad has continued to restyle and reorganize the material "within" his established frameworks, and much of *Better Be Watching the Clouds* highlights his ongoing critique of the Middle East's rapidly expanding art infrastructure. This is entertainingly articulated in the three works from *Scratching on things I could disavow*, a project Raad began in 2007, along with a series of photographs from *Sweet Talk: Commissions*, a "new" trove of documents from The Atlas Group, and a look at his collaboration with Bernard Khoury *Preface (2016-2036)*.



## Walid Raad, "Sweet Talks: Commissions"

"Of the 18,000 objects held in the Louvre's newly established *département des arts de l'Islam*, 300 were sent to the Louvre Abu Dhabi in 2013 for the museum's 2017 inaugural exhibition," begins the backstory to the five mysterious objects that make up *Les Louvres* portion of *Scratching ...* "When the crates were opened in Abu Dhabi in 2013, the French conservators, expressly flown in from Paris for the delicate operation, were taken aback by what was inside. The objects that had arrived were not the ones that had been sent."

What had been affected by the stifling Emirati heat — the objects themselves, or the Western curators dropped into the desert? Raad, who was an [artist-in-residence](#) at the Louvre in Paris at the time, purports to have answered this question after gaining access to the objects himself — the "new" objects were composites, the result of a face-trade between objects that rendered a shadow-less result.

In the gallery, these objects are deconstructions of things that appear to be of "museum quality" (half of a sculptured face, mosaic tiles arranged to mimic something akin to an ancient vessel). They float upon their backgrounds, casting a deep shadow — a problem fixed by Raad's adept handiwork. It's almost more theatrical to view this installation from the back, where the propped set displays, with their jagged, laser-cut edges cast deep shadows, and give the impression of a forest of dark, stretched shapes.

Shadows continue to play a role in *Letters to the reader*, where Raad, fearing that the artworks in a fictional Museum of Modern Arab Art had been stripped of their shadows, has laser cut them into two museum-like walls. Facing this display, a wallpapered installation of paintings make up *Postface to the Ninth Edition on Marwan Kassab-Bachi (1934-2016)*, where Kassab-Bachi's drawings, found on the backs of 23 canvases in storage at the Beirut National Museum, are hung salon-style.

Raad's fictional comments on institutional art structures, which have been gaining traction in the Middle East, play on the absurdity of exultation within them – what does it mean for Islamic artifacts to return to the region of their origin, bestowed with status from those in the West? Who is in charge of the museum walls? Will we believe anything the wall tells us? As with Raad's earlier works, there is a sly wink to his audience in every segment of every archive, every source.

These references to “culture construction” build on Raad's earlier commitment to exploring the reconstructed landscape of Beirut. He returns to this in a series of photographs from *Sweet Talk: Commissions*, the most engaging of which colourfully cut-out and collage layers of monumental imagery. In the only work from The Atlas Group, (dated here as a project beginning in 1989), *Better be watching the clouds* takes the logbook of Fadwa Hassoun, a retired officer in the Lebanese Army, who was a trained botanist, and was tasked with assigning code naming world leaders the names of local flora. Twenty-nine plates from botanical books are collaged with black and white heads over pistils: Ariel Sharon over Commelinaceae, Margaret Thatcher over *Anacyclus clavatus*. When a version of this work was displayed at MoMA in 2015, the name Fadwa Hassoun was nowhere to be found — instead, The Atlas Group received the box of plates anonymously, with a note reading: *Comrade leader, Comrade leader, you'd better be watching the clouds*.

At the back of the gallery, Raad and Khoury's *Proposal for a Beirut Site Museum (2016-2036)*, submitted to (and rejected by) the Association for the Promotion and Exhibition of the Arts in Lebanon, is laid out in blueprints and a scale model. “How can we deserve Lebanon's modern and contemporary art?” they ask.



## Walid Raad, "A Proposal for a Beirute Site Museum"

Their answer lies in patience — there's no need to rush and mistakenly house a counterfeit canon. Instead, they offer to construct an underground network that will connect these institutions when they are finally established. Taking a step back from this scale model of Raad's rebuilt, culturally-connected city, it seems that perhaps the biggest wink of all is directed at us, taking it all in under the auspices of Beirut's finest commercial gallery.

[Walid Raad: Better be Watching the Clouds](#) continues through December 30 at Sfeir-Semler Gallery, Tannous Building, Quarantine, Lb-2077 7209 Beirut.

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