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ARTREPORT

Artist Elham Rokni Explores Memory And Identity Politics

By Lia Soorinian - Aug 16, 2015



Kahlili Sisters, installation view, Elham Rokni

Elham Rokni is an Iranian-Israeli artist who immigrated to Tel-Aviv at the age of nine. Like many immigrants struggling with identity, Rokni strives to navigate the two realms through her mixed-media artwork, exhibitions, and teachings.

Rokni's work primarily centers around her divided dialogue between her "Western educated" self and her rather repressed Iranian identity. Though her MFA from Bezalel is the core foundation of her artistic training, she strives to reconnect with her past by incorporating Iranian traditions and culture into her art.

In her video project *“Yousef-Abad,”* Rokni attempts to deconstruct her earlier childhood memories of Tehran by indirectly creating a video of her neighborhood. Because she cannot return to Iran as an Israeli citizen, she does not have physical access to the places that formed her identity almost thirty years ago. Consequently, she had a childhood friend walk through her neighborhood and record the entire stroll through Rokni’s past. Though building numbers had changed and street signs had moved, the entirety of the tour was a very emotional ride for Rokni.

She validates her memories through these clips as she says, *“It doesn’t matter if the walls are different colors, as long as the cinema is the same.”*

Although Rokni does not consider the idea of abstract “border jumping” to be a form of activism, the small act within itself could be a form of resistance since “refugees not only resist brutality but also the new laws.”

This video served as a justification that her memories were not lying to her. She further unpacks the meaning of consciousness and asks the audience: How does memory work? Does nostalgia keep the artist distant from the subject?



Yousef-Abad, installation view, Elham Rokni

Upon the completion of her project, the political aspects of her work rose to the surface and made way for her most recent project, *“Dear _____ Salam.”* Here she illustrates the process by which her identity is censored through a series of email exchanges.

Elham Rokni’s artwork on identity politics has been showcased internationally and her projects are relatable among a wide audience. Although she has not been able to return to Iran, she continues to explore the politics of identity and memory through her art.



Mirror Room (2011), Elham Rokni



Green Lights, installation view



Options for Arched Ceiling (2011), Elham Rokni

Rokni exhibited her work at the NADA festival during Frieze in New York and has an upcoming residency at 18th Street Arts Center in Santa Monica, CA.