

MAKING A SCENE

Torreya Cummings
Strange Familiars
(or Non-Daguerreian Anti-Portrait
Studio for Local Types)

Bessma Khalaf
Invisible Thief

The Center for Tactical Magic
Bank Heist Contest



Introduction

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Bank Heist Contest

Friday, October 5 –
Saturday, October 27, 2012

Artists' Receptions
Wednesdays
October 10, 17, & 24, 2012
6:00 – 9:00 pm

Public Hours
Wednesday
3:00 – 9:00 pm
Thursday – Saturday
12:00 – 6:00 pm

For *Making a Scene*, Torrea Cummings, Bessma Khalaf, and the Center for Tactical Magic develop new projects on site. Each of these artists plays with the mundane and the magical in transformative or risky experiments that provoke their viewers to performative, unexpected and humorous acts. During their projects, the artists invited participants to be a part of their processes as they developed new bodies of work and built on installations in process. Writers Michele Carlson, Sarah Hotchkiss, and Genevieve Quick respond to the artists' unfolding work.

Torrea Cummings created a portrait studio inspired by daguerreotype portraiture of the 19th century for her project, *Strange Familiars (or Non-Daguerreian Anti-Portrait Studio for Local Types)*. Cummings worked closely with participants to develop a new and fantastic hybrid identity. In the resulting photographs, the subject is transformed, borrowing traits from character tropes found in Western movies as well as contemporary San Francisco culture and subcultures.

For *Invisible Thief*, Bessma Khalaf created a charged, mysterious environment in which to shoot a new series of photographs with the participation of viewers. Visitors who passed through the dark curtains into the tiny white box were greeted with a sudden blast of light and an unexpected photographer capturing their soul.

For *Bank Heist Contest*, Aaron Gach of The Center for Tactical Magic invites the public to imagine the possibility of a successful bank heist. \$1000 will be given as a reward to the best proposal. Bank Heist proposals are due by high noon on January 31, 2013. This project will conclude on March 1, 2013 with an award ceremony for the winner of the Bank Heist Contest.

Strange Familiars (or Non-Daguerreian Anti-Portrait Studio for Local Types)

By Michele Carlson



The rhizome pertains to a map that must be produced, constructed, a map that is always detachable, connectable, reversible, modifiable, and has multiple entranceways and exits and its own lines of flight. It is tracings that must be put on a map, not the opposite.

Deleuze & Guattari¹

Oakland-based artist Torrey Cummings' exhibition *Strange Familiars (or Non-Daguerreian Anti-Portrait Studio for Local Types)* is at once an installation, performative exchange, and photographic series. Cummings sets up a dynamic site where she photographs portraits of constructed social character types that the artist and subject create together. Taking cues from 19th century daguerreotypes, Cummings highlights visual tropes from an imagined American "Wild West," augmenting them with several closets' worth of costumes that reference any combination of Halloween, clubbing, drag, and period performance wear.

On one hand, *Strange Familiars*, like much of Cummings' practice, is steeped in the aesthetics of a mediated West and "the Western." This is an imagined landscape where lone cowboys wander the open range and sassy women kick up their skirts and lean over the railings of brothel balconies. Here prospectors slither hungrily through shantytowns and man's destiny hinges on expansion, exploration, and staking claim. *Strange Familiars* is referentially rooted in the aesthetics of American history and historiography, but the project operates more generatively than simply looking at the past to reframe the present. The mythologies and spectacle of the so-called Wild West are deployed to examine how our representation and cultural imaginary continue to privilege and maintain white male patriarchy and exclusion. Cummings' insertion of other bodies and histories into this site not only offers an opportunity to question the representation of this historical landscape, it also suggests new ones.

Participants fill out an online questionnaire that asks them to describe themselves in "types" and fictions. Rather than check the usual boxes designating race or gender, they select fictional character types that appeal to them and answer questions such as "what person from the past would you be if you could choose?" The extensive list of "types" Cummings offers is a mix of historic groupings (saloon keeper, prospector), professions (writer, artist, art handler) and social categorizations specific to the San Francisco Bay Area (Berkeley Bowl hippie, SF giants fan, Marina boy or BART busker). The artist and subject then engage in a collaborative bricolage—assembling together a visual representation of a character to be photographed.

Central to the installation is a canvas wall tent, which is roped from the rafters and concrete beams of Southern Exposure's industrial space, providing a backstage to contain the plethora of costumes and props Cummings has scavenged from her personal archive. Fur pelts, antlers, parasols, and other costuming lines the interior of the tent, occasionally draping over the eave ropes or littering the outside. But this is no Western revival. Disrupting the fiction created by the 19th century periodware are stilts, swaths of gold lamé, sailor's costumes, various wigs,

hats, feathers, a fake fir tree and even a yoga ball. Hanging on a nearby wall is a sheath of shimmering foil streamers reminiscent of those that flutter off the handlebars of little girls' bikes or that provide the perfect amount of celebratory tackiness to a New Year's Eve party. In front of this backdrop sits a worn and faded salmon-colored Victorian-style chair. When all is lit correctly, the installation is roused into a sensational disco spectacle, as if a photography studio and the backstage at a drag show met at Frontierland. It is a lively event.

Cummings' work is not merely rooted in this affect. Though it relies heavily on the cultural meaning of particular visual accoutrements, *Strange Familiars* is ultimately an exchange. Cummings' shimmering backdrop immediately disrupts any linear narrative that could be ascribed to the photographs, inserting hints of a contemporary moment and emphasizing the theatricality of the subjects. This is a stage. And we are all performers. Cummings asks her participants to perform this assemblage of cultural drag by combining a local social vernacular with pieces of the past, based on current mythologies of historic lives. Yet, the project goes beyond mixing the present with the past. Cummings does not look backward through history and forward to the future.

Rather, she suggests that, similar to the movement of tumbleweeds, our very identities bustle illogically across social and historical landscapes, picking up and letting go of discrete pieces as we move in a multiplicity of unexpected directions. Like Deleuze and Guattari's rhizome, Cummings' work is a map—a strategy for reconfiguring our experiences that is not rooted in any distinguishable time, place, or lineage but always looks for new journeys and ways to reorganize.

In *Captain of the Cutty Sark*, the seated subject looks territorially at the camera, holding an excessively large prop bottle of Cutty Sark Whiskey between her spread legs. She is reminiscent of an old fisherman, donned in a yellow rain coat, rain boots, heavy wool fingerless gloves, and maroon tights. Cummings relies on popular visual tropes of fishermen and sailors imbedded in our cultural imaginary. She appropriates various accoutrements such as double-breasted pea coats, fishing nets, and wool caps and gloves to trigger these associations. *Runaway Cyborgs Poorly Disguised as Sailors* shows a male and female standing stiffly in black blazers and white sailor's caps. Each wears one of the de-fingered wool gloves seen before. Props and costumes repeated from photo to photo change their meaning depending on the context and characters of each photograph. Cummings uses repetition to suggest that many histories occur at one time under a single linear narrative.

Cummings' work reveals the many "entranceways and exits" to history and our place within those histories. Her practice is not just a historical revisionist process, it is a wandering exercise employing past influences to create something new. It is not necessarily a direct reaction to the legacies of exclusionary histories, nor is it beholden to them. Instead, her project brings about something unexpected from the world in which we already take part. In selecting new identities for the project, Cummings' sitters are guided by the contents of Cummings' tent and the themes the artist suggests. But by limiting the sitter's choices, Cummings challenges her subjects, as well her viewers, to question how they regard assumptions of bodies and cultural categories.

Torrey Cummings is a project-based artist living in the Bay Area, working at the crossroads of history, memory, and fiction. The work deals with the leftovers of the "wild west" and Manifest Destiny, and the conflict between cultural ideologies of liberty and practices of enclosure, viewed through the lens of queer urban culture and cinema. Projects usually take the form of sculpture, installations, photographs and/or performances. She grew up practically feral in California's Great Central Valley.

¹ Deleuze, Gilles and Guattari, Felix. *A thousand plateaus: capitalism and schizophrenia*. The University of Minnesota, 1987. 23







In her recent work, Bessma Khalaf has depicted herself as a cross between a Jedi knight and an ancient oracle, fusing pop cultural references with historic Chaldean themes. Rather than emphasizing the specificity of the individual as in self-portraits, Khalaf stands in as an abstract marker, representing a collision of historic and cultural symbols. In *Invisible Thief*, she directs her lens towards others, rather than herself, creating oblique, tongue-in-cheek portraits of her subjects' souls. Alluding to a photograph's ability to "capture" an image or moment, Khalaf plays with this almost predatory connotation and the notion of photography as an apparatus for stealing souls. In response to our current age of empiricism, which privileges knowledge obtained through vision, *Invisible Thief* exploits the deficiencies of the camera and the human eye to engage in the whimsy of mysticism.

Like a video screening room, the exterior of Khalaf's structure blends in with its white gallery surroundings. However, upon entering the pitch-black chamber, participants become the photographic subject, rather than the viewer. Lurking in the room, Khalaf readies her Polaroid camera and shines an extremely bright flashlight at her visitors. After photographing her subjects, she leaves them again in darkness to exit the enclosure. Outside the installation, the artist displays the final Polaroids on simple white shelves on the surrounding gallery walls. The intimate and abstract ghostly images range from almost entirely over-exposed to extremely dark. Subjects develop auras, twins, additional arms or legs, elfin ears, and other anomalies. In contrast to the verisimilitude of high-resolution photography, where skin and hair are visceral surfaces, Khalaf's subjects lack the solidity of the physical world.

Like late nineteenth-century spirit photography, Khalaf's work employs photography's seeming objectivity on the fugitive and mysterious otherworldly. While William H. Mumler began making spirit photographs by accidentally exposing a negative twice, other Spiritualists mined photography's long exposure time, insisting sitters remain still for long periods while ghostly actors secretly lurked in the background. During Mumler's time, photographic processes were rapidly changing and almost alchemical; with wet plate collodion, daguerreotypes, and albumen silver prints emerging, photographers mixed chemicals, coated glass or metal plates, and processed their prints by hand. These elaborate and precise steps created many opportunities for errors or intentional fiddling. As the burgeoning industrial age privileged empiricism, older forms of mysticism lingered, and still do. In 1869, Mumler was charged and acquitted of fraud, indicating the difficulty in legally establishing intentional deceit versus authentic spiritual belief. While few in mainstream culture today see spirit photography, or its various modern forms, as being authentic spiritual experiences, Khalaf's *Invisible Thief* invites her visitors to engage in it as whimsical play.

In contrast to the early photographic processes of Mumler's period, the Polaroid has few options for intervention; Khalaf's camera only has exposure settings for "darker" and "lighter." The Polaroid's prepackaged film cartridges and automated developing prohibits the artist from editing or doctoring her images. Additionally, the instamatic format itself speaks to the candid snapshot, where the photographic subject is unprepared and un-posed, possibly revealing a greater truth. As a format that prioritizes speed over image quality, Polaroids are riddled with irregularities. Although she is unable to intentionally alter her images, Khalaf harnesses the Polaroids' distortions to play with the objectivity of the photograph.

In addition to the incongruities of film, Khalaf's project exploits the deficiencies of the human eye. Moving from the well-lit gallery space into Khalaf's dark enclosure, visitors leave a space where vision is prioritized. Entering blindly into darkness, Khalaf's subjects are quickly blinded by the light of her flash. Momentarily, the viewers' eyes may begin to adjust, allowing them to briefly make out generalities of their environment. Even so, most subjects avert their gaze from the light, and thus the camera. After the picture is taken and the light dies, the participant's vision is quickly disabled, leaving them again in a dark void. Oscillating between extreme levels of light and dark, viewers repeatedly grapple with their own vision, at the same time becoming the subject of visual record. Moreover, as opposed to the long lenses of surveillance or tabloid photography, Khalaf's dark room enables her to be the voyeur who stands right in front of her subjects.

By disabling her visitors' sight, *Invisible Thief* has an almost predatory sense, but without intending any real malice. Having spent long periods of time in her pitch-black enclosure, Khalaf's eyes have adjusted to the nocturnal darkness, while the participants enter with a visual disadvantage. Inside her room, Khalaf is armed with two Polaroid cameras, a stockpile of film, and two flash lights—one designed for hunters and the other for the police. With one hand holding her light and the other her camera, Khalaf stuns her subjects, freezing them in photographic time. Hearing her participants enter, she is prepared for them, while her subjects are not entirely prepared for her. Additionally, the railing that defines the subject's area almost pens them in, while Khalaf has the remainder of the room to move about. The power dynamics that Khalaf has designed place the subject in a position of vulnerability so that as an "invisible thief," she can easily extract her subject's souls.

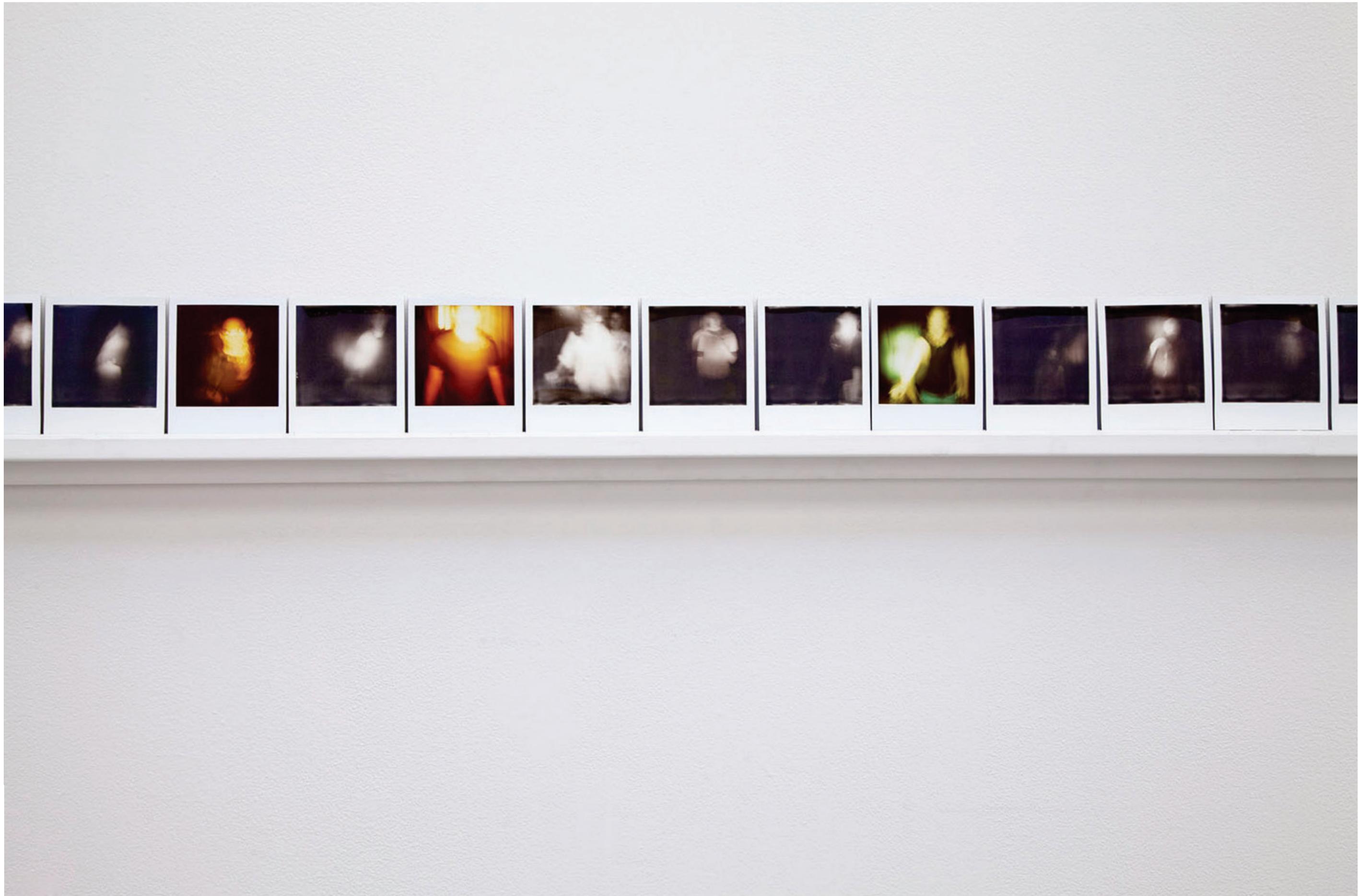
Teetering between predatory waiting and monastic seclusion, Khalaf sat silently in a pitch-black room for nearly six hours a day for three weeks, pursuing an almost ritualistic exercise in endurance and self-discipline. Demonstrating none of the dramatics of typical mediums, who heave and thrash about when crossing over to the other side, she shined her light and snapped her photographs silently and with self-restraint. The artist's sincere demeanor lent the project a sense of belief, a conviction in either the artwork itself or its spiritual claims. Khalaf has explored endurance in her previous works by sitting on an ice carved horse for six hours awaiting its collapse, or repetitively melting candles for twelve hours to produce wall of oozing wax. Through simple, but prolonged gestures, she pushes her subject matter to its extreme, eliciting photographic documents or videos that are often both absurd and earnest.

At a literal level, Khalaf's project explores darkness and light, but it also investigates mysticism and empiricism. Since the early nineteenth-century, belief in empirical rationale and the otherworldly have clashed, as they did when charges were brought against Mumler. Today, although belief in ghosts is rarely a matter of authentic spiritual conviction, many seek out horror films, haunted houses, or the occult to suspend critical judgment in favor of light-hearted play. Even as expanded scientific knowledge expands, it continues to provoke new questions about the past and the unknown. While theoretical physics discusses multiverses that parallel our own world, empiricism has shifted from what is visually knowable into the abstractions of math and subatomic space, and vision's purview has waned. Khalaf's project allows viewers to engage with the fantastical speculation of the otherworld by revealing the errors of both photography and the human eye.

ARTIST BIO

Bessma Khalaf is a multi-disciplinary artist based in the San Francisco Bay Area. She had two well-received solo exhibitions at Steven Wolf Fine Arts, San Francisco in 2012 and 2008, and has appeared in group shows at Southern Exposure, San Francisco, and The Lab, San Francisco. Her work has been reviewed twice on Artforum.com and the San Francisco Tribune. She received a MFA from California College of Art in 2007, and was the recipient of the Visions From The New California Award 2012, through the James Irvine foundation, a two month residency at Kala, and the Murphy Cadogan Fellowship. Khalaf was born in Baghdad, Iraq and emigrated to San Diego California in 1990, just before the first Gulf War. She currently resides in Oakland, CA where she curates Keys That Fit, a display-window exhibition space.





By Sarah Hotchkiss



A group show is not a contest, but in some cases, contests are art.

“REWARD \$1,000.00 BANK ROBBERY,” reads the enormous text on the wall. Behind black velvet ropes stands a pedestal supporting a polycarbonate-sealed safety deposit box filled with fat stacks of one-dollar bills and coins. Unmanned in the gallery, *Bank Heist Contest* speaks for itself, saying simply: this could be yours.

The Center for Tactical Magic, the artist think-tank responsible for this display, positions its piece as an open call for creative problem solving. *Bank Heist Contest* invites applicants to imagine a successful robbery, plot their methods, and construct a visually compelling argument supporting their proposal. According to the contest guidelines, submissions will be judged on concept, presentation, feasibility, and creativity. Frequently asked questions include “Are you encouraging people to rob banks?” and “Can I use my winnings to buy body armor or a get-away car?”

Respectively: no and maybe. *Bank Heist Contest* functions like a ‘true’ contest. There are rules (the proposal must be entirely original, not borrowed from real or imagined events), there is a due date (January 31, 2013, high noon), and a panel of jurors. During *Making a Scene*, the Center for Tactical Magic even hosted a Bank Heist Contest Proposal Workshop, a staple in all democratic application processes.

In my own short history of writing grant proposals, never has the potential reward been so tangible, so concrete. Monetary prizes usually exist abstractly, remaining so even as they are promised in letters, issued as checks, and deposited into accounts. *Bank Heist Contest* brings the physical reality of \$1,000 back into the equation, conjuring some of the lust actual bank robbers must feel toward their quarry. The winner of *Bank Heist Contest* will, in effect, ‘steal’ the prize money without actually committing a crime.

The potency of the piece draws from two very deliberate sources: a rich history of fictional bank robberies, themselves inextricably bound up with actual bank robberies, and the current economic climate, itself an echo of the Great Depression. Between these two seemingly disparate collapses of time and reality comes the inspiration for a cleverly staged participatory art piece.

There are many versions of the bank heist. There is the Bonnie and Clyde version, the Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid version, the hundreds of other romantic real life and film versions; the sleepover bandits, the violent takeover, the note passed across a counter. There is the possible redefinition of ‘bank’ and ‘heist’ to include embezzlement, fraud, identity theft, and counterfeiting. There is the film based on a real crime and the real crime based on a film. Bank heists exist within a strange loop of popular culture and economic necessity. History folds in on itself as past heroes are depicted by contemporary celebrities, the true nature of their crimes forgotten and replaced instead by a Robin-Hood-like gloss.

A seasoned bank robber will tell you the entire process is a performance, executed by all participants in the encounter with alarming regularity. Joe Loya, author, former bank robber, and *Contest* juror, spoke during *Making a Scene* at the invitation of the Center for Tactical Magic. Wanted for twenty-five bank robberies, he served seven years on three convictions and today delivers thoughtful and eloquent commentary on his own path to crime. In a 2009 interview with *The Rumpus*, he empha-

sized the dramatization involved in a successful heist: “Bank robbing is a sexy crime. People learn how to be criminals by watching movies. They mimic the posturing of these guys. There is this romanticization even among the criminal class.”

This sense of disassociation is echoed in a recent work of fiction, Tom McCarthy’s 2005 novel *Remainder*, centered on an unnamed narrator and his attempts to make himself “feel less unreal.” By learning a series of actions and repeating them precisely, the characters in the book re-enact an imaginary bank robbery orchestrated by a thief-turned-criminal-psychology-student. In doing so, they create a suspension, an elongation of time in which the crime occurs.

Loya speaks to this as well: “...if you’re committing a crime it slows down. When I robbed banks, it was almost an eye-of-the-storm type of moment. You’re absolutely present. Your body is feeling more vital than it ever will. You are confronting your mortality, your life is now completely altered and you will always experience the vibrations of that moment.”

The empowerment at the root of Loya’s statement is one captured by the structure of *Bank Heist Contest*. By contemplating robbing a bank, we are given the opportunity to symbolically strike back at the very powers that brought us to our current economic state. To gather energy from outrage, one need only remember the subprime mortgage crisis, bailouts, unemployment rates, health care costs, vast inequalities, and the recession in general. *Bank Heist Contest* provides an outlet for these frustrations.

In much the same way, bank robbers of the past captured public imagination and quelled collective anxiety for the future, while providing entertainment and vicarious thrills through their exploits. The ‘Golden Age of Bank Robberies’ was concurrent with the fledgling Federal Bureau of Investigation’s ‘War on Crime.’ This was the time of John Dillinger, “Baby Face” Nelson, Kate “Ma” Barker, Alvin “Creepy” Karpis, and George “Machine Gun” Kelly.

The lawlessness of these men and women is nothing to romanticize, and yet we cannot help ourselves. A level of impracticality is necessary when dreaming up wild schemes. In crafting our bank heists, the Center for Tactical Magic encourages us to deviate from the norm and make off like a bandit, entertaining bold, risky, and illogical ideas in a valuable thought exercise.

Bank Heist Contest references a period of American history, but simultaneously functions as a lesson for the future. Subverting the grant application process familiar to all non-profit, educational, research, and arts organizations threatened by budget cuts and dwindling funds, the Center for Tactical Magic conflates theft with reward and levels the two. In doing so, the project encourages radical thought about the ways in which we identify and address our current social, economic, and political divides. To effect change, the contest proposes, change must be demanded, in full.

ARTIST BIO

Inspired by studies with a private investigator, a magician, and a ninja, the Center for Tactical Magic formed in 2000 as a think-tank dedicated to the coalescence of art, technology, magic, and positive social change. Working across barriers of art, design, architecture, and community service, the CTM’s collaborations have also involved hypnotists, locksmiths, aquatic biologists, members of the Black Panther Party, radical ecologists, and the American Red Cross to name a few. Frequently infiltrating multiple spheres of influence, the Center for Tactical Magic continues to mix elements of subculture, social politics, and revelry into a powerful potion. For more: tacticalmagic.org

REWARD
\$1,000.00
BANK ROBBERY



EVENTS

Artists' Receptions
Wednesdays, October 10, 17, & 24, 2012,
6:00 – 9:00 pm

Every Wednesday from 6 to 9 pm,
Southern Exposure hosts receptions in
celebration of the artists.

Settling the Score, A discussion with
Joe Loya for *Bank Heist Contest*
October 17, 2012 7:00 PM-9:00 PM

Former bank robber turned essayist, playwright,
and author of "The Man Who Outgrew His
Prison Cell," Joe Loya discusses our fascination
with bank heists, how to train a bank robber,
bank heist bad planning, and how to choose the
appropriate getaway song.

Bank Heist Contest Proposal Workshop
October 27, 2012 2:00 PM – 4:00 PM

The Center for Tactical Magic presents the
taxonomy of bank robberies, facts and myths
about them, and inspires participants to develop
the best *Bank Heist Contest* proposal possible.
Proposals are due January 31, 2013 at high
noon. Attendance at the workshop is not required
to submit proposals.

THANKS

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