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Brooklyn Rail
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To Cover, To Read
Kameelah Janan Rasheed *Unsewn Time*

Kameelah Janan Rasheed's solo exhibition *Unsewn Time* at the Art Institute of Chicago (111 South Michigan Avenue) is a mesmerizing tableau of images, sounds and objects. Situated ceremoniously apart from the museum's main corridor in the modern wing, the show is a finely collaged landscape of gossamer photographs, short films, and kindred resinous objects. Curated by Grace Deveney, the David C. and Sarajean Ruttenberg Associate Curator of Photography and Media, the ongoing exhibition (through January 8, 2024) offers viewers a kaleidoscopic encounter with the artist's singular cosmos.

A text-based artist, Rasheed's transmedial artworks stitch together a cohesive—albeit oft-illegible and fractured—stage, an imaginary worldscape. As we enter the standalone exhibition space, the ambient hum of 'Keeping Count' (2021-2023)—a single-channel black-and-white video (9 min and 37 seconds)—compels our attention. This atmospheric allure and drone soundscape augurs some enigmatic, even spellbound mood. On the screen of 'Keeping Count,' rhythmic utterances and autographic marks dissolve into an open-ended cascade of graphic threads. Accompanied by an original score from the sonic artist Th&o, the film is an immersive cinematic experience of anti-narrative montage. Glitchy textures, found footage, and invented symbols reconfigure to form a new alphabet: syntax, signs and symbols each dis-remembering their own genealogical histories. Text is freedom and paragraphs perform their own voices.

"Like braiding sand," one of the many evocative phrases to roll across the screen, seems also synecdoche for the exhibition at large. In fact, the title of Rasheed's show itself is also a poetic substitute: *Unsewn Time* is a fragment of text from the Lebanese artist Eten Adnan and a book-length poem called *Arab Apocalypse* (1980).⁷ Like *Unsewn Time*, 'Keeping Count' is a hypnotic playscape; a self-contained system that disassembles and discovers, memory autogenerating to evoke meaning anew.

To read carefully within a field of erasure is a principal theoretical concern for the artist. In this way, thinking of Roland Barthes's 'zero degree of writing' makes sense. For Barthes, scribble and mark making are irreducible traces of the artist's body and hand, the residue of poetic gesture. The akin terrain in *Unsewn Time* is an accruing palimpsest of touch and virtual engagement: a thicket of forgotten language and unknowable pictograms unfolding

Similar to her film work, the large-scale photographs and small prints in the show are likewise defamiliarized objects. Again, as text-based art, consider only in brief the materials and labels for two artworks. First, *Study VII crumble/crumble/crumble/crumble/fold/mark/fold/lean/drip/drip/drip (the ___are creeping in)* (2022-23). Rasheed unveils the sentience of sentences as a nest of calligraphic cathedrals in space. The lengthy title is not mere gratuitous pun; the words and signifiers themselves enact a kind of scrolling inscription, the maker and the made in action. The gestural description is then threaded into the list of materials: light sensitive gelatin silver paper, photographic fiber, photographic developed, kosher rock salt, and oil stick. The series of seven small photographs is cartography: a set of cracked surfaces, sinuous engravings and faded textures—Alberto Burri miniaturized into bedazzling softened frames.

Next, *Surrender II, 2022-23* is a large-scale grid of nine metallic panels. Ephemeral white scratches, golden squares, and black hieroglyphs inscribe the surface. Below, a non-exhaustive litany of materials is noted: India ink, oil stick, gelatin silver paper, shellack, Vaseline, charcoal, skin oil, rock salt, black iron oxide powder. Once again, words perform an uncanny doubling of artistic praxis and bodily movement. The *thing* made—a photograph, an object—is a curious rehearsal, *cataloguing* made manifest. The artworks enact a disclosure, even an appropriation, of the capital and circulation involved in their own creative.

Reading With the Grain (2023) is a 24-gauge steel plate hand coated with varnishes and pigment. With twofold analog—William Carlos Williams and Alan Sekula (*Photography Against the Grain*)—the obsidian-like ocular wall collapses the surface. And like Sekula, images speak their own substance. Beholden, the porous nature of sight bursts, and overdetermined act of reading drifts wayward. Rasheed's process-based work asks viewers to surrender agency, letting go into an impervious lacuna of *un-visibility*.

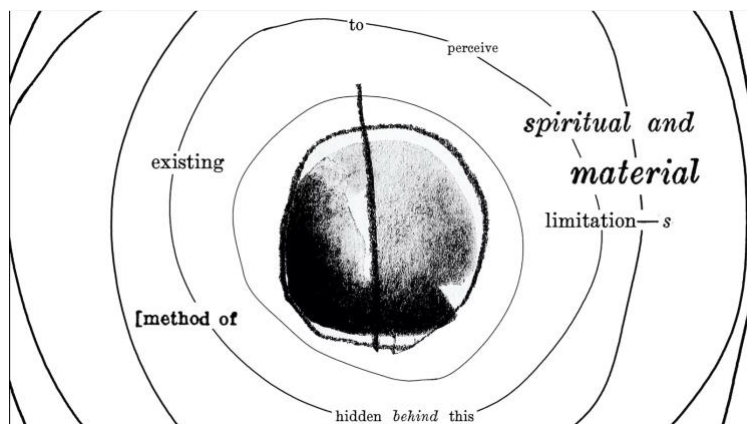
Rasheed's phenomenologically all-encompassing show is thus Proposal: a set of tangential relations, silently harmonious and organically afloat. A proposition of prepositions. Because of this, let us imagine Rasheed's work in wordless dialogue (presence in absence maybe?) with her other momentous works. Intertextuality is key. For example, a few titles (2020) from these largescale projects: *Are We Reading Closely* (2020); *Everyone will be saved through algebra (A Casual Mathematics, II)* (2020); *Each Sentence is a Sponge* (2020). Columns of words and the breadth of commas live in between surfaces: a transtextual tableau of deviations, derivations and divinations. So, last then.

Throughout early fall in Chicago, I have had the pleasure to immerse myself weekly in the sensorium of Rasheed's show. I note this regularity only to highlight a premonition from my first viewing: quite immediately, *Unsewn Time* summoned to mind for me Natalie Diaz's poetry collection *Postcolonial Love Poem*, most especially her tour-de-force poem 'Snake-Light.' There felt to be an analog here between the two contemporary artists—some shared forcefield of sensibilities and pathos. Diaz writes, 'Let's say it's all text—the animal, the dune, the wind in the cottonwood, and the body./Everything *book*: a form bound together.'

Similar to *Unsewn Time*, text and book are primal sites of encounter for Diaz. Words and ciphers, memory and loss, hieroglyphs and maps reveal their silent kinship. The relational contingency of semantic value and somatic boundaries are at stake. How do we see? How do we read? How do we live?

Now, more than ever my first intuition seems salient. The world is text. And world-making in pictures and words alike is at once a process of concealment and disclosure. Lexicon and language suspended. Rasheed and Diaz each illumine the evocative nature of reading as disjointed praxis. Vision, sense and inured connotation align only in traces and indices, vanishing glyphs and emblems. We learn in the blank spaces between lines of text—Reading a space alone in and with ourselves. In this reflexive process, one becomes private witness to the shadows that hold memory in script.

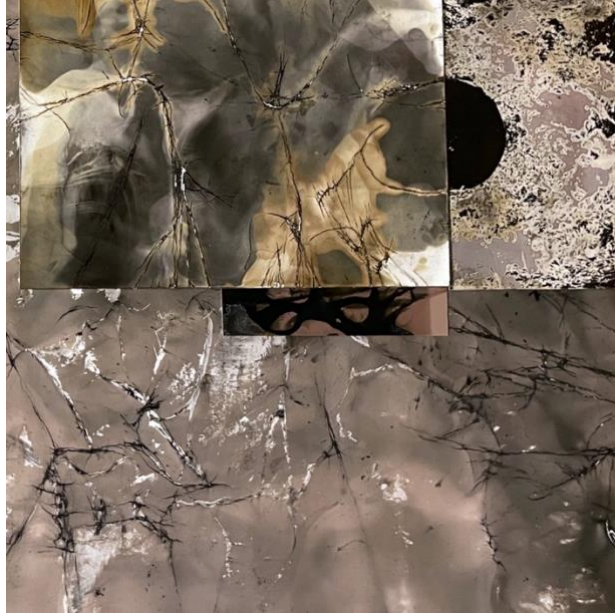
Rasheed's work benevolently ventriloquizes our disappearing world. *Unsewn Time* offers both time and space to drift. With our own generous spirit at hand, internal perceptions tilt and attunements alter. Any compulsion for answers and *knowing* glide away like Rasheed's helix pearls of sand, presence transformed instead into a more authentic void of impermanence and fuzz, screens and dreams, fog and imagination. And if we are quiet enough in Chicago at the Art Institute some unscrubbed and grainy version of our lost selves may surface.



Kameelah Janan Rasheed, Still from *Keeping Count*, 2021-23.
Original score by Th&o, Johannesburg, South Africa. Courtesy the artist and NOME, Berlin.
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Installation View *Unsewn Time*



Are We Reading Closely?, 2020, Blackout Vinyl Fabric; 4 banners, each: 8 x 35 feet
Brooklyn Museum (Outdoor Courtyard)