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Rosalind Nashashibi, *Eyeballing*, 2005, film still,
Courtesy of the artist, LUX, London and Murray Guy,
New York.

ON THIS ISLAND

Allyson Unzicker

Although cultures invent and then invoke truths, myths or folklore as natural truths to explain the function of the gaze, a much simpler concept will do: that of the stain.¹

—Bruce Fink, *Reading Seminar XI*

*This royale throne of kings, this sceptered isle,
This earth of majesty, this Seat Of Mars,
This Other Eden, demi-paradise...
This precious stone set in the silver sea,
Which serves it in the office of a wall*

—William Shakespeare, *Richard II* (II.i.40-42, 46-47)

*On This Island*² considers an island not only as a geological site, but as a political border and psychological screen. Along this line of thought, three historical scenes come to mind: Brexit, Great Britain's recent withdrawal from the European Union, largely in order to establish an autonomous economy and to tighten immigration policies; 9/11 New York, the moment when terrorism and "the enemy" became a part of everyday language, forever altering national security and the way we travel; and lastly, the Gaza Strip, which exists as an island unto itself, defined by extremely tight border controls and restrictions from being under siege between warring territories. *On This Island* positions two films by Rosalind Nashashibi alongside one another: *Eyeballing*, a 16mm film shot in New York City in 2005, and her most recent, *Electrical Gaza*, filmed in Gaza in 2014. Nashashibi's films are

studies of closed communities as seen through a series of everyday moments, cast glances, nuances and subtleties. An unconscious anxiety lies beneath the surface of both films, elicited by an omnipresent and shifting gaze, as these *islands* are formed through control and authority, between that which is visible and invisible.

The Gaza Strip is arguably one of the most contentious areas in the world and due to military operations between Egypt, Hamas and Israel, entering or leaving Gaza is no simple task. When the artist was first commissioned to make a film about Gaza in 2010, the political situation was changing, but life for Gazans was very much the same. Positioned between Egypt and Israel, it exists as a densely populated, self-governing strip of land with one of the highest homeless and unemployment rates in the world. Almost 80% of the population are reliant on humanitarian aid and nearly half of its population are minors. Occupation has also restricted import and export, as well as access to arable land and fishing. As a result, the U.N. declared that it would become economically unlivable by 2020. The Rafah border crossing, the single entry point between Gaza and Egypt, and the Erez border crossing, the barrier between Gaza and Israel, are often closed, disallowing entry or departure unless under extreme emergencies, making Gaza into an open-air prison. Yet, *Electrical Gaza*, an eighteen-minute video shot on film and montaged with digital animation, portrays an unexpected view that is often unseen by Western audiences as it resists any direct narrative of war and poverty.

Set in situ, shortly before Israel's last military operation against Hamas in 2014, the film begins with a light synthetic beat pulsing over a view of a lively crowd. Banal moments of riding backseat in a car or interior shots of a household are disrupted by more actively charged scenes like that of Hamas marching through the streets or busy crowds at the front gate of the Rafah border crossing. It is at this crossing that the video first transitions into animation displaying a desolate and surreal image of the foreboding gate. These sudden, uncanny animated scenes construct a fictitious rendering of Gaza, one that depicts the contradictions of daily life as mediated through a screen of

constant surveillance. Restricted access to the outside world is controlled by powers unseen, encapsulating Gazans like an invisible spell, hovering above and around its borders. This nearly global isolation is its *enchantment* - a land filled with people who are bewitched by a perpetual war. Gaza is an *electrical* environment, charged and exciting, yet stagnant and artificial when filtered through its stifling occupation.

Nashashibi's films allude to what is inside the frame as much as to what is outside. Due to Israel's occupation, hundreds of thousands of Palestinians have been displaced. Israel's response to the Second Intifada, Palestine's uprising against Israel in 2000, was to build a wall along the West Bank to prevent terrorist attacks, furthering Gaza's *island* existence. By nature, a wall hides or deflects an issue but does not make it disappear. Donald Trump's declaration to build a wall between the United States and Mexico, and the United Kingdom's tightened immigration policies, are a *wall* to tens of thousands seeking entry into a colonizing country. Beyond this line of sight, *Electrical Gaza* provides an alternative view, as if through a child's eyes, using animation to make ordinary moments surreal – a collision of sentimentality within a state of emergency. Translated from live action footage, it has an uncanny effect, pricking the viewer's attention. The captivating pleasure of the uncanny lies in its ability to appear as something recognizable that mimics, yet disrupts, reality. Images of narrow alleyways permeate a suspended state of tension throughout the film, a space that is either empty or filled with children playing. The most surreal moment of the film lies at the end, depicting an animated view of an alleyway with a large black dot looming over it, slowing growing larger. This spot, or stain, blocks any direct view; it is a screen that hides the gaze.³ This scotoma (Greek for "darkness") is an obscuration that occurs in one's visual field, wherein light is undetected; the limitation of eyesight is that we can only see 'visible' light. This visual disturbance in the landscape is a moment of cognition. It is here that the enchantment shifts beyond merely portraying a fantasy, but rather a visualization of the limited viewpoint we have of such a landscape. A blind spot relates to the flaw of our conscious state

– much like a curtain that stops in the middle of its ascent, it presents a stage that is both seen and unseen. The growing black spot appears in the alley as an absence of presence – that which is there, but we do not want to see. The anxiety of impending violence is not shown, but implied, through the looming spot that pushes outside the frame and, in so doing, measures the finitude of what proceeds and exceeds us as both hiding and revealing the urgency of Gaza's conditions. Ironically, its borders and its sea work against it to serve Egypt and Israel as a *precious stone set in the silver sea*. This perceptual shift in the film is recognition of its inherent trauma.

Void of any dialogue, Nashashibi's films are nonlinear in structure, where past, present and future hold no measure, operating much like a dream in following the logic of memory. Unlike her previous films, *Electrical Gaza* has an eclectic score mixing ambient sounds with synthetic beats and a clip of Benjamin Britten's *Fanfare* (1939), an operatic adaptation of Arthur Rimbaud's set of poems, *Les Illuminations*. The interruption of the score at the end of the film creates an anxious tension and ominous air leading into the scotoma. A line from Rimbaud, whose poetry focuses largely around discovery, innocence and revolt, is used as *Fanfare's* operatic motto throughout – *I alone hold the key to this savage parade*. The enchantment within the film lies in the fact that it recognizes the limitations of portraying an experience from a single vantage point. It cannot be mastered, as Rimbaud's statement suggests, but rather *illuminates* that it is through the impossible that we can imagine the possible – in the space of aesthetic production, meaning is created, yet unresolved. The stain at the end of the film recognizes the narrowness between that which is fiction and reality in the restricted lives of Gazans.

With tensions constantly rising in the Middle East, and with recent issues of police brutality and violence in the United States, authority and control lie at the heart of these two *islands* – Gaza and Manhattan. *Eyeballing* is a ten-minute, 16mm film that cuts between imagery of inanimate objects that subliminally suggest

a face, and the front entrance of the 1st precinct police station in Tribeca, New York City. A fixed camera position focuses on the front entryway where police weave in and out of the station like bees from a hive. Some officers are oblivious to the camera, while others react with typical authoritarian machismo. The simple structure of the film repeats itself, becoming a meditation on the ways in which individuals perform their roles and the performative act of the viewer projecting their image onto others. The binary between the two images provides a gap for the viewer to interpret their relationships to one another, as the images alone deny any narrative meaning. The gaze itself is invisible and unstable, always moving outside the plane of perception, sliding between signifiers – the artist, the officers and the “eyes” of the city. The cops both see and are seen as they move between public and private space, the doors serving as a portal between them. The banal humor in finding faces in inanimate objects cuts the anxiety of the police watching the city. The role of surveillance is reversed, however, as the viewer becomes the watcher, creating a paranoia that bounces between the subject and its object. In a post 9/11 world, surveillance has decreased individual privacy, yet increasingly we are willing to share our private lives via social media. This release of privacy, however, allows us to see the unseen, including the prevalence of continued violence towards black Americans by police and authorities, often captured on cellular devices – a violence which has always existed but is often unseen. This paranoia also shifts to the artist, who, as a woman, penetrates male-dominated communities in order to make her work, creating an exterior tension that is not visibly present in the films themselves. As a result, women are almost nonexistent in either of the two films. As it is illegal to film police stations, especially after 9/11, the artist’s safety is also at stake in the filming process, a risk Nashashibi takes again later in entering Gaza. The artist often uses a guise, or other tactics of subterfuge, to enter these difficult spaces, further adding to the inherent paranoia within both films.

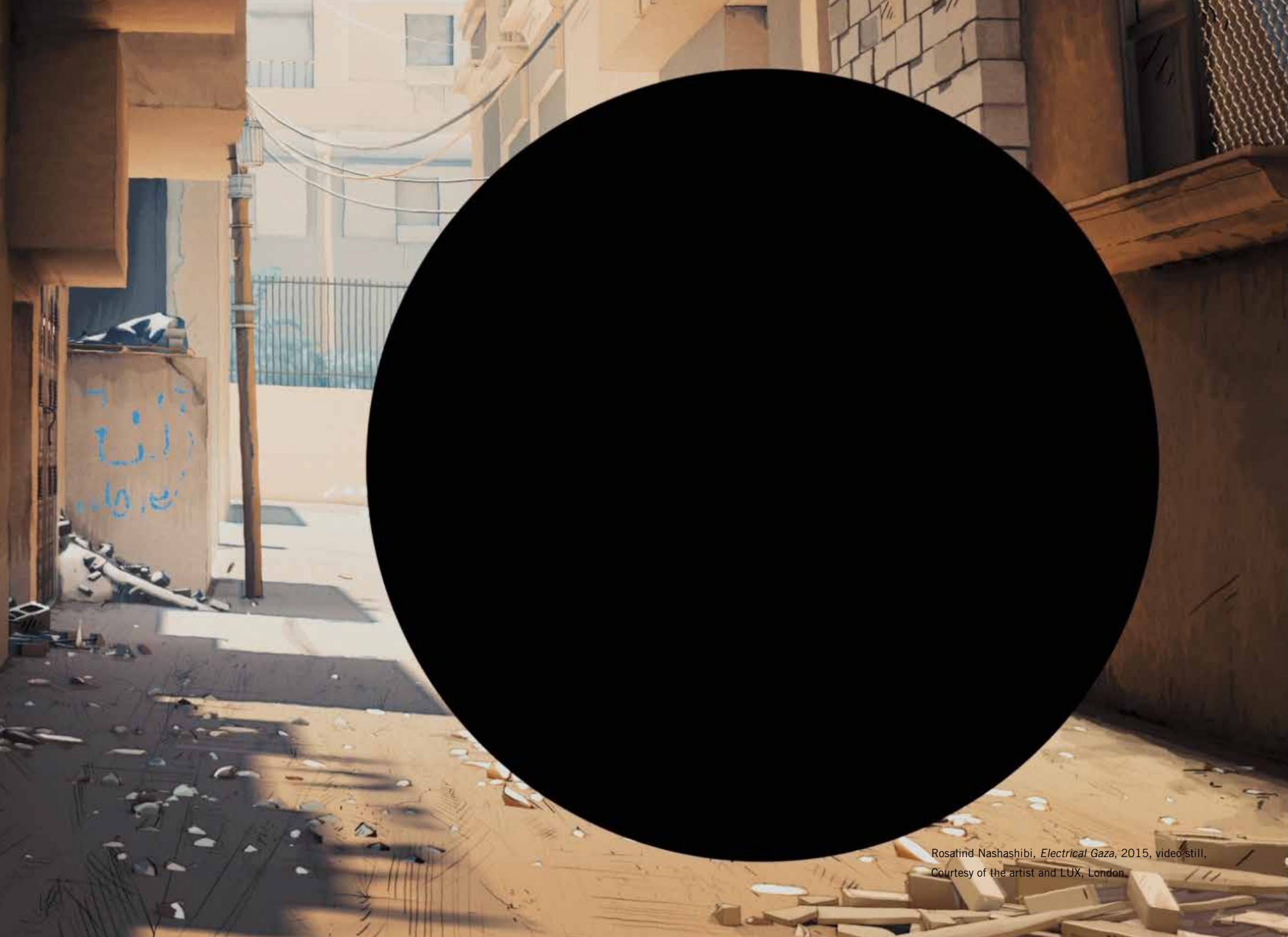
Eyeballing operates as a meditation on observation, that in becoming aware of being seen we exist. Carl Jung used the concept of archetype to illustrate that there is a collective unconscious that exists through universal myths and motifs across humanity that evolves over time. The artist describes these archetypes as *authority figures, dumb players, gods, monsters, fools, and totems* in order to explore *the essence of the totemic characters portrayed*. Either the officers are to be feared or honored as a symbol of protection or god-like authority in our everyday lives. These archetypes, whether it is the officers or the militancy of Hamas, are both recognizable archetypes for authority and control prevalent throughout each film. Roland Barthes’ notion of myth was largely formulated around language, as a type of speech or semiological system, suggesting that these signs must always be reinterpreted in relation to current events. Returning to *Eyeballing* today contextualizes it within recent accounts of police brutality and violence, and in relation to the recent uprising of the Black Lives Matter movement. Issues of race relations, xenophobia and authority become re-contextualized when viewing the film in America almost ten years after its making.

Shown together, these films create a binary between indexical representation and imagined space, a disruption that disallows passive viewing. The use of imagination – smiling faces on buildings and animated scenes of Gaza – juxtaposes the real and the imaginary, assisting the viewer in seeing that which is not directly visible. This returns us to the scotoma, reminding us that our line of sight is only partial in its perspective.

1 *On This Island* is the title of a series of poems published in the U.K. in 1936 by W.H. Auden who largely influenced the work of fellow poet Benjamin Britten.

2 Bruce Fink, *Reading Seminar XI: Lacan’s Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis* (New York: State University of New York Press, 1995), 192.

3 Fink, *Reading Seminar XI*, 192.



Rosalind Nashashibi, *Electrical Gaza*, 2015, video/still,
Courtesy of the artist and LUX, London.



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Bio.

Rosalind Nashashibi was born in 1973 in Croydon, England. Nashashibi received a MFA at the Glasgow School of Art in 2000. Recent solo exhibitions include *Two Tribes* at Murray Guy Gallery, New York, *Electrical Gaza* at the Imperial War Museum, London, and *The Painter and the Deliveryman*, Objectif Exhibitions in Antwerp. In 2014, she received the Paul Hamlyn Foundation Award for Artists. Nashashibi has had numerous solo shows including those at Tate Britain; Chisenhale Gallery, London; Presentation House Gallery, Vancouver; ICA London; Bergen Kunsthall; Berkeley Art Museum. She represented Scotland at the 52nd Venice Biennale, and has participated in Manifesta 7, Sharjah 10 and the 5th Berlin Biennial with Lucy Skaer in their collaboration as Nashashibi/Skaer. In 2017, Nashashibi/Skaer will have a solo exhibition at Galleries Lafayette, Paris. Nashashibi lives and works in London.

Curated by **Allyson Unzicker**

Director, University Art Galleries: **Juli Carson**

Associate Director, University Art Galleries: **Allyson Unzicker**

Copy Editor: **Samira Yamin**

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CAC Gallery
Contemporary Arts Center Bldg 721
University of California, Irvine
Irvine, CA 92697-2775
T 949.824.9854 | www.uag.arts.uci.edu
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