

“The Tenant” — Joshua Schwebel and “Hiding in Plain Sight: Archives of Oil” — Sanaz Sohrabi by Saelan Twerdy

REVIEW 15 Apr 2022

Last fall, Centre CLARK presented separate solo exhibitions by artists Joshua Schwebel and Sanaz Sohrabi. Employing the strategies of institutional critique and research-based installation, respectively, the two shows complemented each other in their polemical approach. Schwebel’s “The Tenant” was a hyperlocal investigation of the fraught politics of gentrification and artwashing while Sohrabi’s “Hiding in Plain Sight: Archives of Oil” offered a more free-associative curation of archival imagery relating to the geopolitics of oil in Iran and the Middle East.

Schwebel’s “The Tenant” was presented as a single entity consisting of a dossier of evidence regarding the effects of real-estate speculation on artists in Montreal’s Mile End neighbourhood. Specifically, the exhibition focused on the holdings and activities of Allied Properties Real Estate Investment Trust, a Toronto-based firm that owns the buildings at 5445 and 5455 Avenue de Gaspé, which contain Centre CLARK, along with other artist-run centres and studios. A series of seven en- graved aluminum plaques bearing informative texts—meticulously fabricated to match the specifications of the building’s Allied-branded corridors—lined the walls of the exhibition, narrating the recent history of gentrification in the Mile End, for which the de Gaspé buildings serve as a microcosm.

Once a hub for the Montreal garment industry, the building attracted artists’ studios and galleries, including CLARK, which moved into the property in 2002. Textile manufacturers and wholesalers have largely either shut down or migrated to cheaper warehouse spaces along Chabanel, northeast of Mile End, in what is now known as the Garment District. When Allied purchased the building in 2011, artists based in the building organized to form the Pied Carré collective. Their fight to preserve studio space and artistic community led to a 30-year reduced-rent agreement with Allied for studios and cultural spaces. Initially celebrated as a successful collaboration between artists, the city, and real estate developers—and marked by Allied’s establishment of its Make Room for the Arts program and launch of an in-house art magazine, *Block*, with the tagline “Creativity has its place”—Allied’s costly renovations nevertheless resulted in exponential, unexpected increases in rental taxes, forcing up overall rents and leading to the departure of artists, many of whom decamped to the same Chabanel area to which garment workers had already moved.

The first phase of Schwebel’s exhibition was a procession of displaced artists who travelled from their current studios on Chabanel back to de Gaspé—an event that occurred before the exhibition opened to

the public. They came bearing found equipment and junk—signage, tools, sewing machines, clothing racks— from abandoned or evicted textile shops, which was installed at CLARK, along with other items found and produced by Schwebel. The artist’s research is meticulous, but his signature ruthlessness comes out in deliciously subtle gestures of revenge and exposure. One table displayed a custom Monopoly game branded with Allied properties on the board and the company CEO on its currency, a “celebratory” gift given to tenants (including Centre CLARK) upon Allied’s purchase of the building. If Schwebel had made it himself, it would be a fairly trite critical gesture. The fact that it was produced by Allied, and apparently offered without irony, is far more damning. Displaying precisely this sort of object is the essence of Schwebel’s practice; as in previous exhibitions where he donated his fees to paying gallery interns or impersonated a more well-known artist in order to reveal bias in curatorial selection, Schwebel delights in airing dirty laundry, exposing the “normal” operations of organizations to uncomfortable scrutiny.

Another item on view was obtained by more invasive measures: a copy of Jane Jacobs’s *The Death and Life of Great American Cities* (1961) sits atop a stack of coffee table books that replicates those found in Allied’s Toronto offices, which Schwebel visited, seeking information about their Make Room for the Arts program. While there, he stole the dust jacket of Jacobs’s text, lending the tableau a mild transgressive thrill. On another table, he assembled a small library of past *Block* issues, whose roster of respected contributing artists, writers, and curators disguises the publication’s function as a publicity venture meant to polish Allied’s reputation as a benevolent, creative enterprise. One of the artists featured in the magazine’s commissioned centrefold was Celia Perrin Sidarous. Along with two other artists, Perrin Sidarous gave audio testimony about her experience with Allied in a custom listening post. As Perrin Sidarous relates, she felt she simply wasn’t in a position to turn down Allied’s fee. Schwebel’s inclusion of her testimony highlights the ethical contortions that cultural workers are forced into by the imperatives of a fundamentally predatory economy.

Like “The Tenant,” Sohrabi’s “Hiding in Plain Sight: Archives of Oil” also engaged the cultural investments of powerful financial interests. But whereas Schwebel’s exhibition was embedded in the context of Montreal, Sohrabi’s focused on her birth country of Iran. She curated materials from the archives of British Petroleum (BP), formerly the Anglo-Persian Oil Company (APOC), to emphasize how cultural production funded by oil extraction played a role in constructing the imaginary of Middle Eastern nationhood and national liberation. The exhibition comprises two “timelines” of imagery: *Spectres of the Subterranean (part 1): Rhymes and Songs for the Oil Minister*, which focuses on the Organization of the Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC), and *Archives of Oil: Future Relics* (both 2021–ongoing), which focuses on the BP archives. Presented without didactic context, these fragments convey the complex struggle of colonized nations attempting to liberate themselves from the yoke of imperialism by nationalizing their oil resources.

Sohrabi’s exhibition was dominated by an enormous print of the cover art for *Rhymes and Songs for OPEC*, a 1980 Venezuelan double LP (sponsored by Petroleos de Venezuela, S.A.) that celebrates South- to-South solidarity among member countries of OPEC in Asia, Africa, and South America. The cover art matches highlighted nations on a world map to the cheerful jewel tones of the robes and Nehru jackets of singers striding across a green lawn. The walls of the gallery clamoured with a salon-style profusion of other archival images and ephemera, from magazine covers to stamps, and official and non-official APOC and BP documentation. Underlying the glamorous images of Iran’s swimming pools and cinemas is the persistently imperial logic of a political order based on fossil fuels.

The commissioned images of leisure in “Archives of Oil” obscure the labour (and the transnational labourers, including migrants from Iraq and India) that made such abundance possible, while also

disguising that the majority of this wealth flowed not into Iran but back to BP’s headquarters in London. Sohrabi’s assemblages illuminate the “structures of feeling” (to use Raymond Williams’s term) that inflected cultural life in the post-war period in Iran, prior to the revolution of 1978–79 and the outbreak of the Iran-Iraq war in 1980: decolonial aspirations ultimately limited by neocolonial power relations.

Sohrabi and Schwebel both used investigative, documentary methods to dig into conflicted political situations, and both emphasized the degree to which culture is a staging ground pitched overtop of a more fundamental struggle over resources. In this regard, each enriched the view of the other, demonstrating how the dynamics of imperialist capitalism operate across various times and places.

“The Tenant” and “Hiding in Plain Sight: Archives of Oil” ran from 28 October to 27 November 2021 at Centre CLARK, Montreal.

About contributors

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