

London

Lawrence Abu Hamdan

Chisenhale Gallery

“A kind of superior journalism” is how art historian Kenneth Clark once described Francisco Goya's *The Third of May 1808*, 1814, a brutally graphic painting of then-recent political executions. Some two centuries later, employing the latest in digital technologies, a recent strain of investigative artists—among them Trevor Paglen, Forensic Architecture, and Lawrence Abu Hamdan—seem the heirs to Goya's revolutionary repurposing of art.

Abu Hamdan gained attention last year with the audio work *Saydnaya (the missing 19db)*, 2017, commissioned by the 13th Sharjah Biennial and now reinstalled in a free-standing structure near the entrance to his darkened solo exhibition “Earwitness Theatre.” Inside, as if occupying the beating heart of Hamdan's gallery/theater, we listen in pitch darkness to mysterious pounding sounds and 'ear-witness' accounts by former detainees of the brutal Syrian prison of Saydnaya. Inmates were kept in darkness and even blindfolded; denied the faculty of sight, they developed an acute sensitivity to sound. (Conversely, Goya was completely deaf when he experienced the atrocities of 3 May, leading Clark to speculate that the Spanish artist compensated with high-impact visual imagery.) Abu Hamdan has gathered the prisoners' spoken testimonies alongside their re-enactments of recollected sounds, resulting in a body of sonic evidence documenting the otherwise unrecorded, unspeakable violence that fills this architecturally designed hell on earth.

Surrounding the small enclosure housing *Saydnaya* is *Earwitness Inventory*, 2018, the artist's collection of ninety-five objects mentioned in trials from across history or in Abu Hamdan's own inquiries into recent events involving acoustic memory, narrated in a scrolling text projected on the far gallery wall. For instance—as we read in the illuminated text—the sound of “wagon wheels on a dirt road” is how survivors described the ominous roar that preceded the 1964 opening of a giant sinkhole in a South African gold-mining village, swallowing houses whole and burying its residents alive; wagon wheel and dirt pile duly occupy a section of the gallery floor. In the text, remembered sounds are sometimes compared to film-industry

sound effects; one ear-witness explains that the thud of a punch does not so much resemble the Foley artist's phonebook dropped to the floor but a cinderblock falling onto concrete, or a watermelon being smashed. Abu Hamdan seems to equate official news channels with the fictions constructed in movies and TV.

Expressed in a dry just-the-facts style, the text never remains static but appears to be typed 'live' before us, in some ways mimicking the unresolved, open-ended nature of the narrators' memories. Each “page” of white-on-black text slowly fills downwards with harrowing events; once filled, the 'page' is wiped clear and new typing emerges, in the darkness, from the top. No printed transcript is provided; if your eyes stray from the moving cursor you risk losing the narrative thread. Earlier text vanishes; testimonies blur together. With my eyes fixed on the shifting words, repeatedly re-adjusting focus from light to dark, I nearly tripped over the cinderblock and watermelon scattered on the floor. After crashing into a near-invisible standing helium balloon positioned at head-level and encountered like a bodiless ghost, I stumbled weakly on, a little shaken.

With their unadorned documentary work, Forensic Architecture (with whom Hamdan has collaborated), comprised of architects, artists, lawyers, scientists, and others, have questioned their identity as artists. In contrast, Abu Hamdan manipulates an arsenal of contemporary art strategies—readymades, installation, moving image, text-based art, as well as performance (the associated piece *After SFX*, 2018, performed at Tate Modern), but the overlapping media never detract from the work's primary truth-telling function. The illusion is of artlessness, yet Abu Hamdan has skillfully orchestrated a theatrical experience that is both edifying and unnerving, transforming the windowless gallery into a disquieting, suffocating cell.

—Gilda Williams