

# Uriel Orlow

## The Short and the Long of It

*By Omar Kholeif*



**GBLA Stamps**, bitterlake series 2010, pigment print, 50.8x40.6cm - Courtesy of the artist

Uriel Orlow's work is characterised by a personal desire to uncover hidden histories. Much like a news reporter, Orlow embeds himself in the thick of it, seeking to unbuckle the narratives that lay behind the façade of the dominant socio-political regime. Yet unlike the conventional archaeologist, Orlow doesn't leave the end-receiver with a strictly coherent narrative. Rather, his observations are presented in piece meal – fragments of individual experiences, public and private, collected here from the perspective of an intimately connected outsider. The focus of Orlow's installation, *The Short and the Long of It*, is derived from a little-known

incident that seems to have disappeared from public history. It relates to the failed passage of fourteen international cargo ships through the Suez Canal on the 5th of June 1967. Caught in the midst of the Six Day War between Israel and Egypt, Syria and Jordan, the ships were only able to leave the canal in 1975, when it reopened. Stranded for eight years in the Bitter Lake, the Cold War adherences of the multi-national crews were disbanded, giving way to a new kind of communal survival between the crewmembers. The various crewmen formed a self-contained social system, where they created an in-between State, with their own



**Limbo**, video projection, 13' and **Anatopism**, 81 slides, 2010, Courtesy of the artist

stamps and trading structure, and which even included the organisation of their very own Olympic games, in 1968. Developed during a three-month residency in Egypt, Orlow articulates his fascination with the subject matter by referring to the personally touching detail of Roland Barthes' punctum. After discovering a set of stamps created during this period on the internet, Orlow felt an unerring compulsion to find out more about this intractable history. He ventured to Egypt with the little knowledge that he had managed to gather and set about a methodical process of research, which led him from Cairo to a small fishing village near to the canal.

The resulting installation, with its different modular elements is a little more opaque than the narrative that Orlow relays in conversation. Yet rather, than alienate the viewer, this focuses the visitor's attention on connecting the narrative dots.

At its centrepiece is a moving image work entitled, *Limbo* (2010). This thirteen-minute dual projection (also available as a single channel entitled, *Yellow Limbo*), weaves archive footage from the days on the cargos with photographs, 8 MM footage, and some of

the artist's own video, as he attempted to document the uninviting territory with his handheld camera. The panoply of techniques that the artist uses, disembodies the experience from its original narrative, and leaves the viewer positively disoriented – trying to merge together different pieces of the story. Muscle-bound blonde and blue-eyed men hop about in potato sacks; others are playing sports in the middle of the encompassing Bitter Lake, where they are sequestered. There is something confounding about the experience of watching these men reduced to a state of unbridled abandon, bopping and hopping like infants. Convivial, they look like the kind of men you'd find on the back of a vintage American postcard or pin-up magazine. An elliptical slide carousel intercepts this myth and reminds us of the contested political backdrop that encompasses these ships, and indeed, lives. The adjunct series of statements, *Anatopism* (2010) possesses a range of credits such as, 'Six-Day War/June War/Third-Arab Israeli War', before it descends into a playful mixture of facts and titles. 'The Pulsar Star is Observed for the first time' it recites, before alluding to The Doors' song 'Strange Days'



**The Short and the long of it**, Installation, 2010, Courtesy of the artist.

-- an ironic parallel to the odd experience of being a marooned cargo man. The slides veer from playful to informative. We are reminded that the pound sterling was devalued because of the strain caused by the closure of the Suez Canal, as well as the Tet Offensive and the death of Martin Luther King Jr.

There is an irony of course that some of these horrific acts are taking place outside of the insular bubble of the Bitter Lake, where these crew men are relegated to a seemingly perpetual state of leisure. But didactic sermonising is not Orlow's intent, or indeed his style. Rather, the ambiguous commentary that runs with these pictures is as much about the experiential process of absorbing Orlow's intersecting histories. Indeed, watching the slides is akin to observing the mind of an intellectual narrator as it unravels – jumping from a lucid observation, to a quiet snigger. This form of modular deconstruction is what Orlow refers to as 'an exploding film'. With the moving image providing the emotional punch or heartbeat, the disparate works that

surround it, add texture, as well as multiple entry points for interpretation.

The unique multi-strand narrative also encompasses a framed series of photographs entitled, *Waterlocked* (2010), which sees the crewmen playing sports in tiny blue and coloured shorts. Elsewhere, the artist collects artefacts, such as documentation from the *National Geographic Magazine*, which includes a gripping image by Jonathon Blair from 1975 of a diver underwater, with a rifle in hand. The photo prints, untitled: from the series of *What Cannot be Seen* (2010) present us with a modern view of the canal. The spectre of three large ships loom menacingly in the background of the unperturbed waters. Orlow went through gruelling measures to capture these frames, as documentation of the canal is now prohibited. These captures are juxtaposed against humorous pieces, which include a found photograph of an Egyptian man dressed in over embellished attire, as he cradles what seems to be a man dressed in drag. This is interspersed with newspaper



**The Short and the long of it**, Installation, 2010 - Courtesy of the artist.

clippings and some of the stamps, which drew Orlow to the subject matter early on. Each and every piece can be constructed and deconstructed to produce multiple 'readings' when presented in parallel with one another. In the single-channel video, *Water and Smoke* (2010) we see a bomb exploding along the side of the canal. Except instead of an instantaneous eruption, the artist suspends viewer expectations by slowing down this immediate act by dragging it out over a period that exceeds six minutes. Utilising old TV footage, Orlow's intervention is a re-appropriation of history. Presented on a black TV cube, this piece of 'hacked' footage could just as easily exist on the web, alongside the work of the artist Oliver Laric, whose *Versions* (2010), included tampered internet memes that contradicted conventional media representations of conflict.

After the billowing smoke dissipates, what lingers is the sight of the crewmen on board the ships of the *Bitter Lake*. Everyone is obsessed with the notion of the sailor. His persona has been fetishized in popular TV shows from *Sex and the City* to heroic biopic pictures and retro advertising. His persona is one of hope – blonde hair, white teeth, infantile, innocent, but equally, he is strapping and free. This image is potent here -- a somewhat sardonic contradiction of Egypt's former Western colonisation, and its discontents. Uriel Orlow is an artist who is obsessed with peeling back these artifices, and with *The Short and the Long of It*, he shares his fascination with the world.



**Water & Smoke video on Monitor**, 2010 - Courtesy of the artist.

#### *About the writer*

*Omar Kholeif is an Egyptian-born, UK-based writer, curator and editor. His writing appears in Art Monthly, The Guardian, Frieze, Film International, and Scope, to name but a few. Omar holds an MA in Film and Politics from The University of Glasgow, as well as a professional degree from Screen Academy Scotland, and is an Inspire fellow at the Royal College of Art, London and FACT (Foundation For Art and Creative Technology), Liverpool. He is also a contributor to Document, the only UK documentary film festival, with a human rights focus, based in Glasgow, Scotland.*

*His cross-disciplinary curatorial practice is largely focused on the presentation of film and video for both the cinema and the gallery. His main research interest relates to the intersection of art and culture with identity politics, and re-appropriating post-colonial theories for a web 2.0 era. Omar is currently working on two touring exhibitions and projects that explore collaborative tools and interfaces of authorship and production. He most recently co-edited the publication, Vision, Memory and Media (Liverpool University Press 2010).*