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Mariam Ghani

NEW YORK,
at Ryan Lee

by David Markus



Mariam Ghani: *The City & The City*, 2015, video, 28 minutes, 50 seconds; at Ryan Lee.

When Brooklyn-based artist Mariam Ghani arrived in St. Louis in 2014 to begin a yearlong fellowship at Washington University, the city was deep in mourning over the loss of Michael Brown, the African-American man whose controversial killing by a white police officer in the northern suburb of Ferguson galvanized the Black Lives Matter movement. Attuned, as previous works attest, to the ways in which urban and architectural space both influence and index social experience, Ghani began researching the history of St. Louis and the key sites in the city's social and geographic development. The resultant project, "The City & The City" (2015), consists of works in various mediums. The centerpiece is a twenty-nine-minute video made in collaboration with St. Louis-born choreographer Erin Ellen Kelly and narrated by Missourian Derek Laney, who plays a slain man drifting about a fictional metropolis, trying to piece together the circumstances of his death. The work summons Brown, the October 2014 Ferguson protests, and a number of dark chapters from St. Louis's more distant past.

In a further act of invocation, Ghani has taken the title of her project and the conceptual framework of her video from a 2009 book by China Miéville, the British-American sci-fi novelist and social activist. As in Miéville's book, the story in the video is set in a city that has split into two distinct peoples and nations, segregated from each other less by physical barriers than by their conformity to laws commanding them to willfully "unsee" each other. By mapping this fictional bifurcation onto the geography of an American city whose recent racial turmoil stems from generations of inequality, Ghani opens viewers' eyes to an all-too-real contemporary dystopia.

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Laney, as narrator, lays out a story of an aborted revolution waged by a small group of citizens capable of clandestinely slipping from one city to the other. Laney was among several artist-activists who marched a mirrored casket through the streets of Ferguson at the height of the 2014 protests. Ghani pays homage to this event by representing the dead character's body in her video as a shattered mirror lying in an abandoned construction site.

A series of photographs from Ghani's project helped connect the images in the fictional world of the video to the real-life history of the metropolis. One image shows a desolate street in Kinloch, a traditionally black suburb bordering Ferguson whose population plummeted in the 1980s after the City of St. Louis began buying out private homes there as part of a noise-abatement plan for the nearby airport. Another depicts the urban forest that has grown over the former site of Pruitt-Igoe, the notorious housing project whose demolition in the 1970s, after years of neglect, became emblematic of the supposed failures of subsidized housing programs. Like the street in Ferguson where Michael Brown's corpse was left to fester for hours in the afternoon sun, these are spaces haunted by the victims of systemic racial violence and disregard.

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