

“Whose afraid of Yasmine Chatila?”

By James Fuentes

New York City, September 2008

“Who's afraid of Virginia Wolf means who's afraid of the big *bad* wolf . . . who's afraid of living life without false illusions.”¹ — Edward Albee

Stolen Moments is Yasmine Chatila's love poem to New York. To capture these moments her artistic process was as follows; while working exclusively at night, Chatila would find a well-situated New York City apartment with views of apartment interiors across the way. She would then set up her telescopic and photographic equipment, position the camera pointing through a stranger's window and patiently wait. As it was “true” surveillance the artist did not seek permission. However, through a labor intensive post-production process the artist obscures these intimate portraits, taking these documentary events into the realm of fiction and fantasy. Over an eight-month period Chatila meditated on thousands of *Stolen Moments* thus creating her latest body of work, comprehensively presented at Edelman Arts, New York.

As the concept of an omnipresent witness is at the cornerstone of many religions, “the witness” in this case was Chatila, who

¹ Flanagan, William. (1966, Fall). "The Art of Theater No. 4: Edward Albee", *The Paris Review*, Issue 39

participated in an ever-expanding practice of surveillance. Typically employed as a strategic method for control, in this instance surveillance was used to humanize the nameless and faceless people that city dwellers encounter every day. In the events captured through these windows, what is intended to be hidden is revealed, mundane actions become heroic, and the armor we all wear outside the sanctity of home comes off revealing rarely seen aspects of human nature.

The aesthetic of *Stolen Moments* has its roots in German Expressionistic cinema and Film Noir. The grainy, night-vision landscapes not only create a strong mood but also function to preserve the anonymity of her subjects. Further placing these images in the realm of fantasy is the placement of these “portraits through the window” within revealing the interior architecture that is disassociated from the original context of the window. Architecture that implies “Gotham” gives the work its cinematic quality. For instance, a building in City Hall might have a window extracted from Chinatown, thus creating a dynamic landscape reminiscent of our complex city structures and communities.

Yamsine Chatila is a painter. Only very recently did she decide to replace the brush, oil paint and canvas for more contemporary tools. Ultimately, through these portraits she is able to convey something about human nature with immediacy best suited to photography. The armor we all wear outside the sanctity of home comes off revealing rarely seen aspects of human nature. More real than the “realist”

reality show, the methodology behind these portraits does not allow the subjects to have that self-awareness that occurs when one is confronted with the camera. What is also highlighted by this series is how the invasion of our privacy has become increasingly commonplace. With the proliferation of consumer spy shops, online social networks and aggressive government legislation that has almost all but erased our right to privacy, we are shifting from a society that fears being watched to one that accepts it as the norm.

Little did she know that through this exploration of how others live that she would gain so much insight into her own-self. Now when Chatila walks by a stranger in the street she now has a heightened sense of how they might behave behind closed doors. For instance, one of the most profound observations she made in the course of this project, is having noticed that even the most brazen person deflates when they come home. A slouch and hence a certain vulnerability emerges. “Spending time with strangers has brought me closer to humanity. When I walk in the street I no longer feel surrounded by anonymous drones. I see people with their insecurities and their vulnerabilities. It has inspired a feeling of being connected to others.”, Yasmine Chatila recently stated in an interview. This series is remarkable in its ability to translate such humanity through the most astonishing means.