

Artist:
Joyce Joumaa

Curator:
Heather Canlas-Rigg

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prologue

أنا أحب البحر, *I Love The Sea*, Egyptian singer Nagat El Saghirah's famous ballad, fills the audible space of UQO with its romantic melodies and lyrics of infinite love and longing for the sea. The poetic and metaphoric possibilities afforded by the inescapable feelings of love, and the vastness of earth's oceans, surface like a buoyant note transmitted throughout Joyce Joumaa's exhibition *Prologue*.

Anchoring the exhibition is a July 1958 issue of *Life* magazine that reports on the Lebanon Crisis, the United States' first military intervention in the "Middle East." The Mediterranean sea is an important undercurrent in *Prologue*, as the ocean bore witness to the hundreds of ships and thousands of US Marines who used the water and shore as a way to enter Beirut and begin their occupation. Joumaa specifically examines how the so-called crisis was reported to Americans by honing in on how the story was narrated in the magazine, as well as through footage aired on television, two modes of transmission that reached everyday American citizens in their living rooms.

Joumaa hints at that domestic space through the inclusion of multiple welcome mats on the gallery floor. Here, the mundane, everyday objects carry militaristic language pulled from *Life: Pacific Fleet, UAR Mediation, Eastern Mediterranean, Internal Crisis*. The publication's narrative, steeped in Western imperialism and carefully crafted for an American audience, speaks to the marines' presence in Beirut as "...helping the Lebanese people to be free."¹ The political posturing of the Cold War, in addition to the United States' desire to have uninhibited access to oil reserves, and fears of pan-Arab nationalism espoused by the influential Egyptian president Gamal Abdel Nasser, was foregrounded throughout the issue. The 15 page story opened with the heading: "THE MARINES HAVE LANDED AND...COLD WAR MOVES TO A SHOWDOWN,"² followed by "This time the threat was the turbulent Middle East."³ Such saviouristic, Western-centric language was accompanied by numerous images of the marines as they "swarmed ashore" as if mystically and monstrously rising from the depths of the sea, "just as they had done at trouble spots around the world for over 150 years..."⁴

1. "The Marines have landed and...the Cold War moves to a showdown," *Life*, July 28, 1958, 13.
2. "The Marines have landed and," *Life*, 13.
3. "The Marines have landed and," *Life*, 13.
4. "The Marines have landed and," *Life*, 15.

Joumaa transposes the welcome mats, used universally to greet guests as they enter ones' home, into a tongue-in-cheek gesture that nods to Lebanon's then president, Camille Chamoun. A Western-backed American ally, he invited—partly under the auspices of the Eisenhower Doctrine⁵—the United States to intervene in his country's politics that summer as he unconstitutionally sought to occupy a third term amidst facing immense opposition nationally and throughout the region. Joumaa's mats underlie the absurdity of such a gesture, where the Lebanese people had no choice in the arrival and "welcoming" of such a force and their own implication in what was the beginning, or as Joumaa poetically points to through her title, a prologue, for a fraught and ongoing international relationship.

On the walls surrounding the mats are miniature bronze soldier figurines—wearing fatigues while holding and aiming guns—toy avatars used for board games where players, often family and friends gathered around a table, vie to win a round of international domination. Ostensibly predicated on wholesome American family togetherness, such games normalize militaristic domination, reinforcing the routine violence and destruction of imperial pursuits. Joumaa pushes further at the conflation of everyday American culture and imperial power through the incorporation of pieces of Bazooka bubble gum. Acting as shelves for the tiny fighters, the playful, iconic American candy was first made available shortly after World War II. Named after the rocket launcher weapon that was heavily used in that war, its bright design carries the colours of the American flag, turning the innocuous and pleasurable act of chewing sweetly flavoured pink bubble gum into a ritual communion with the darkness of violent weaponry and America's military industrial complex.

Edward Said wrote extensively about the power of media and the West's long standing ability to narrate their imperial pursuits in a manner that homogenizes and destructively stereotypes Southwest Asia and Arab and Islamic cultures.⁶ *Life* magazine's extensive reach across the United States throughout the 20th century contributed immensely to the

5. The Eisenhower Doctrine began in 1957, and pledged that America would provide economic and / or military aid to countries in the "Middle East" threatened by armed aggression or Communism. It was mostly seen as a way to further extend American presence and control over the region.
6. See Edward Said's books *Covering Islam: How the Media and the Experts Determine How We See the Rest of the World*, 1981, and / or *Imperialism and Culture*, 1993, among others.

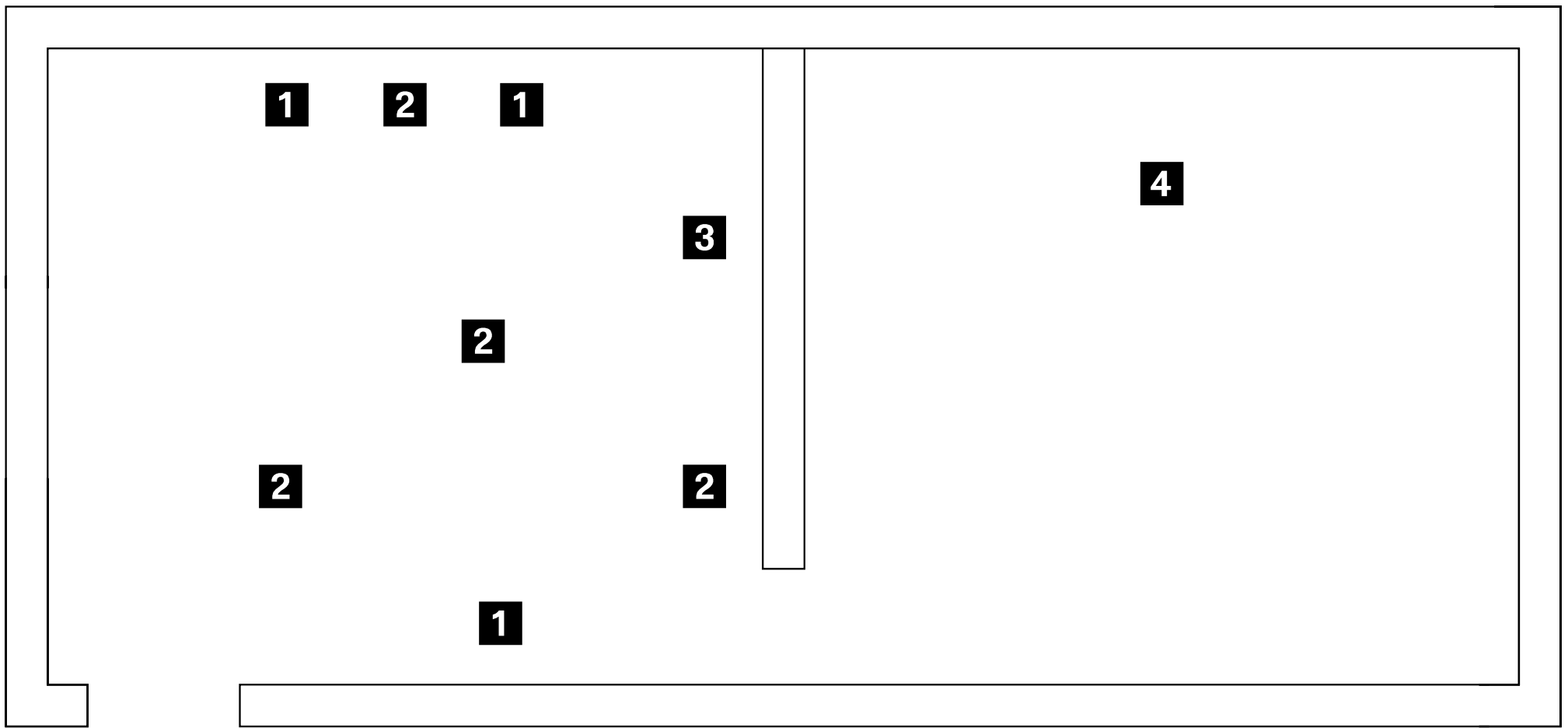
manufacturing of American superiority and Eastern inferiority that continues to manifest within the hearts and minds of Americans. This aided in the fueling of a dark global divide that was made more potent with the Cold War, with 9/11, with the ongoing genocide of Palestinians, and that continues into 2026. This narrative did not only materialize in “news” form, but in advertisements, objects, and in the way the United States (and the West) constructed values, morals and desires. The sustainability of the American way of life is predicated on the continued propaganda and rhetoric of such superiority, where those in “exotic lands far away” are in need of civilizing and conquering. The inseparability of imperialism and culture is evident in the pages of *Life* where Marine conquest in the “Middle East” is entangled with the ability to drink bourbon, take aspirin, use floor wax, purchase new car tires, or buy a new Chrysler. In many ways, the publication acts as a technological harbinger for the way war is now livestreamed through our phones, which we watch and consume while we simultaneously shop online and text with our loved ones.

The exhibition’s titular work, *Prologue*, is a video featuring distorted footage of US ships sailing to shore, and the Marines’ subsequent landing that was used for television broadcast. It is here that El Saghirah’s song and voice emanates from, wafting over the invasion footage like a strange, nightmarish music video of sorts. Yet Joumaa overlays the footage with large bright blue Arabic text—the lyrics of أنا أحب البحر, *I Love The Sea*, which scroll upwards, blocking the imagery. Evoking a news anchor’s teleprompter, the song’s audio and visual lyricism disrupts the imperial narrative. Are we to sing along to the invasion? Or is the love song here a remedy and respite for the sea, an unconsenting accomplice in the 1958 intervention?

As the song’s refrain floats out over the film footage again and again, *Prologue* reminds us that this is an ongoing story, a repeating story of incursion, extraction, withdrawal. As soon as it ends it begins again. And yet the song cannot be contained, the affective lyrics and the primordial sea become an incantation, overlaying and eventually overriding the narratives of nationalism and imperialism like the radio waves that carry it across space, across borders, across time. The story is still being written, and although it may seem at times doomed to infinitely repeat itself, a story has a beginning, middle and end. If there is a prologue, there can also be an epilogue.

Joyce Joumaa is a visual artist and writer who is based between Beirut, Montréal, and Amsterdam. After growing up in Lebanon, she completed studies in cinema at Concordia University in Montreal. In her work, she examines the microhistories of Lebanon as a way to understand how the structures of the past influence the present moment. At the heart of her practice is an interest in politically charged space and the social psychology that stems from this tension. She has exhibited her work at the Montreal Museum of Fine Arts, the E-flux Screening Room, the Stewart Hall Art Gallery, the Sharjah Architecture Triennale, the 60th Venice Biennale, and the 35th edition of the 35th Ljubljana Biennale of Graphic Arts. Solo exhibitions of her work were recently presented at the Canadian Centre for Architecture; at Plein Sud, centre d’exposition en art actuel; and at Galerie Eli Kerr. She was awarded the production grant from Periculum Foundation and the 2023 Prix Plein sud.

Heather Canlas Rigg is an independent curator and writer based in Toronto. Her practice is rooted in investigating how artists employ the materiality of camera technologies to interrogate imperialist structures, and in thinking critically about institutions.



1

Blue Bat #1, #2, #3, Bazooka bubble gum, bronze miniature figurines, aluminium shelf, 2025.

2

Untitled, doormats, 2025.

3

Life Magazine 1958 issue, *Life Magazine 1958 issue* original copy, 2025.

4

Prologue, vidéo, couleur, son, 5 min 29 s, 2025.

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