

**45th Parallel** is developed in collaboration with the Toronto Biennial of Art, March 26 – June 5, 2022.

## TORONTO BIENNIAL OF ART

*45th Parallel* is commissioned by Mercer Union, Toronto; Spike Island, Bristol; the Toronto Biennial of Art; and Western Front, Vancouver. The film is produced by LONO Studio and made possible with the generous support of Arts Council England, Canada Council for the Arts, and the Ford Foundation.

Mercer Union thanks Leading Supporters Donna & Robert Poile.

The exhibition is presented in partnership with Scotiabank CONTACT Photography Festival. In-kind sponsorship is provided by Panasonic through its partnership program for cultural institutes.

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*45th Parallel* is presented as part of *Artist First*, a Mercer Union commissioning platform. *Artist First* Commissions are made possible with the generous support of Jane Corkin, Nuyten Dime Foundation, Jeanne Parkin & Jennifer Parkin, and Donna & Robert Poile. Learn more [mercerunion.org/artistfirst](https://mercerunion.org/artistfirst)



### Mercer Union, a centre for contemporary art

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Mercer Union acknowledges the support of its staff, volunteers and members, the Canada Council for the Arts, the Government of Ontario through the Ontario Arts Council, and the City of Toronto through the Toronto Arts Council.



ISBN: 978-1-926627-58-8



## BIOGRAPHIES

**Lawrence Abu Hamdan** (born in 1985, Amman, Jordan) is a “Private Ear.” His interest in sound and politics originates from his background as a touring musician and facilitator of DIY music. The artist’s audio investigations have been used as evidence at the UK Asylum and Immigration Tribunal and as advocacy for organizations such as Amnesty International. Lawrence has exhibited at the 58th Venice Biennale (2019); the 13th and 14th Sharjah Biennial (2017 and 2019); the 11th Gwangju Biennale (2016); and Tate Modern, London, UK. As part of a temporary collective with nominated artists Helen Cammock, Oscar Murillo and Tai Shani, he was awarded the 2019 Turner Prize.

**Tina Sherwell** is Visiting Professor of Art and Art History at NYU Abu Dhabi. From 2017-2021, she was Head of Contemporary Visual Art at Birzeit University, prior to which she was Director of the International Academy of Art, Palestine (2007-2012, & 2013-2017). She has authored various texts on contemporary Palestinian art and in 2019 curated the major exhibition, *Intimate Terrains: Representations of a Disappearing Landscape* at The Palestinian Museum, Birzeit.

## PUBLIC PROGRAMMING



**5 May 2022 at 11AM EST | Presented in partnership with the Toronto Biennial of Art**

Lawrence Abu Hamdan joins art historian Tina Sherwell for a conversation engaging the film and exhibition *45th Parallel* (2022) to discuss the challenge and opportunity of creating work across borders. Register to attend at [mercerunion.org](https://mercerunion.org)

**FORUM** is Mercer Union’s ongoing series of talks, lectures, interviews, screenings and performances. Admission to our public programming is free and all are welcome.

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Cultivating artists and challenging audiences since 1979.



**SPACE: Shellie Zhang | *A day passes like a year: Ode to Spring***  
21 March – 20 June 2022

Mercer Union’s SPACE billboard commission has invited artist Shellie Zhang for its 2021-22 season for a yearlong series titled, *A day passes like a year*. Known for her highly composed still life works that assemble objects of pop iconography, cultural construction, and diasporic memory, Zhang’s photographs offer vibrant gestures of reclamation, humor, and dissidence. In a quadriptych portrait of the year ahead and a reflection on the year that has passed, *A day passes like a year* looks to the Chinese four seasons painting traditions and the immediate locale of Mercer Union to glean a format for telling time in its place through change, personal connection, and collective association.

Read the artist’s note on the third edition: *Ode to Spring*, and an accompanying text written by Stephanie Wong Ken at [mercerunion.org](https://mercerunion.org)

**Shellie Zhang** is a multidisciplinary artist based in Tkaronto/Toronto. She creates images, objects and projects that explore how ideas of integration, diversity and assimilation are implemented, negotiated, and manifested in relation to lived experiences. Zhang is interested in how culture is learned and sustained, and how cultural objects and iconographies are remembered and preserved. She is a recipient of the 2021 Toronto Friends of the Visual Arts Artist Award, and in 2017, was an Artist-in-Residence at the Art Gallery of Ontario. Recent and upcoming projects include exhibitions at AKA, Saskatoon (2021); the plumb, Toronto (2021); and the Anchorage Museum (2020).

**SPACE** invites one artist to produce a yearlong series of images for a public-facing billboard located on the east façade of Mercer Union.



Lawrence Abu Hamdan:  
**45th Parallel**

26 March – 4 June 2022

## A Pair of Boots

The Haskell Free Library and Opera House is a rare anomaly, a public space situated between Canada and the US—the only one of its kind to exist on the 9000 km border. Established in 1904 by the Haskell family in a gesture of goodwill towards unity, the location is the setting for the film *45th Parallel* by Lawrence Abu Hamdan, a monologue in four parts vocalized by the filmmaker Mahdi Fleifel. It unfolds around the case of Hernández v. Mesa in which unarmed 15-year-old Sergio Adrián Hernández Güereca was fatally shot, cross-border, by a US Border Patrol officer in 2010. Abu Hamdan uses the site of the library and opera house to explore how seemingly disparate spaces are implicated within each other; how the presumably sterile and mundane non-spaces of borders are in fact deeply layered sites in which complexities around visibility, invisibility, and fields of vision can lead to fatal consequences. Through this work, we understand borders to be sites of porousness, exception, and temporal shrewd inventiveness by those caught in and in-between the rubrics of the ever-increasing fortress culture of nation states. The artist emphasizes that it is in these zones that state-sponsored acts of discrimination, violence, and exclusion cloaked in national security and the arbitrary enactment of the law come to the foreground.

Public libraries are some of the few remaining spaces which have not been co-opted into capitalism. They enable access to knowledge irrespective of individual economic resources and function as spaces for reflection, meeting, browsing, and daydreaming. The Haskell Free Library straddles the border which runs through its space and yet is not discernable; as Fleifel explains in Act 1, “The border cannot be crossed here, and yet inside it’s like the border doesn’t exist. Technically, Agatha Christie sits on a shelf on US soil, and Iggy Pop’s biography is in Canada, but visitors to the library can freely drift between fiction and non-fiction.” In the opera house, the audience sits in the US and watches a show in Canada. However, as Fleifel explains, those entering from Canada must exit back into Canada and vice versa, activity which is monitored by a patrol car outside the building.

In Act 1, the artist unfolds a story about how the library’s washrooms were once used for firearms smuggling, nodding to genre crime films with suspenseful narration. What finally gave away the suspected smuggler, we learn, was his style—too overdressed for the library. The voiceover stands in contrast to the vacant interiors over which it is delivered; the site emulates Victorian and Georgian architectural traditions and combines rare native woods and stained glass mosaics. The narrator goes on to describe the building as a smuggler’s “giant illusionist cabinet,” a reference doubled by the trompe l’oeil painted backdrops seen

on the opera house stage that punctuate each act. The first backdrop is of Venice’s Grand Canal, the second a concrete culvert in El Paso–Juárez (the site of the Hernández shooting), and the third is an aerial view of Damascus. Each image projects us into other spaces, offering framed views into parallel worlds, which set the scene for each act. As the narration reveals, these spaces are deeply implicated within one another, all pointing to questions around viewpoints and vantage points, visibility and invisibility; after all, it was precisely being in the line of sight which lost Hernández his life.



The scenograph of the Venetian canal recalls the way the invention of perspective created illusions of traversing the pictorial field. In *De Pictura*, Leon Battista Alberti describes the act of painting through a metaphor of opening up a window on the canvas, the same way in which a scenograph sets the scene and opens up a parallel space; however, it is important to consider “perspectival representation was dependent on two important divergences from human vision. The mobility and binocularity of vision, was reduced to static monocular point of view.”<sup>1</sup> Hernández’s vantage point was part of what led to tragedy; as Fleifel reads in *45th Parallel*: “Each time he would steal a look, he would lean out a little more. But each time he peered out he would enter the cross hairs of agent Mesa, who never put his pistol away. Drawn in by this ducking and darting, the person taking the video pans her camera towards Hernández, and as she does the sun catches the camera lens, forcing it to recalibrate the exposure. The video goes dark and three loud gunshots ring through the air.” The moment of death is not caught on camera.

Such ducking and darting is played out in border zones across the globe as figures hoping to attain an advantage for a split second lose their lives. As Paul Virilio writes: “From the original watch-tower through the anchored balloon to the reconnaissance aircraft and remote-sensing satellites, one and the same function has been indefinitely repeated, the eye’s function being the function of a weapon.”<sup>2</sup> As Fleifel describes in Act 3: “In his official statement, Mesa claimed that he was ‘surrounded by illegal aliens’ who ‘threw rocks at him.’ Witnesses deny this, and there are no rocks visible in the video. Invisible rocks versus real bullets was a hard argument to win, and so the US Department of Justice developed a strategy in defence of their agent. They sought to make something so brutally simple, legally complex.”

The empty, deep brown wooden seats of the opera house place us, the audience, as the only witnesses to Fleifel’s monologue. He uses the whole space, walking between the rows of seats as he underlines the minute legal dynamics that spiraled out from the shooting of Hernández, drawing in a conglomeration of physical spaces from across the globe. Our eyes focus in on the painted aerial view of Damascus. Aerial images enable a God’s-eye view, a commanding gaze, and a seemingly more objective perspective that has become embedded in the modern military state. “[T]he aerial image can generate dynamic interest as the viewer attempts to ‘see’ clearly what appears at first glance to be ‘unseeable.’ The history of aerial imagery itself reveals the emergence of ‘ways of seeing’ that underscore the uneven and varied nature of embodied observation in modernity.”<sup>3</sup> Abu Hamdan starkly highlights the apparatus’ slippages and ambiguities through Fleifel’s recounting of a different event: “On the 29th of August 2021, an American drone operator with his feet firmly planted on US soil, zoomed his camera on a group of people loading up a car with water in Kabul. Assuming the barrels of liquid were explosives, he pulled the trigger, killing three adults and seven children.” As the horrific list of other such incidents is narrated, we come to realize as Eyal Wiseman has, that in the “moment ‘before’ and the other, perhaps more purposely, produced ‘after’—the event itself is always already missing from representation. The record of the event, then, remains incomplete, indeterminate, ambiguous.”<sup>4</sup> As the monologue unfolds, we realize that the ruling on Hernández’s shooting has implications for 91,340 drone strikes conducted from American soil, paving the way for a torrent of cases. Not unlike the boots that, as we learn in Act 1, gave away the firearms smuggler, the positioning of the US Border Patrol officer’s boots become the deciding factor in holding back an eminent tide of legal suits.

If the Rio Grande River had never dried up from extreme heat, then Hernández and his

friends wouldn’t have gone to the concrete culvert to play. Like many teenagers around the world who don’t have delineated recreational spaces, makeshift ones are where moments of an already stolen youthhood are spent. Fleifel sits in the children’s section of the Haskell Free Library; unable to fit into the chair, he seems larger than life, almost confined. The sense of innocence and sanctuary inherent in the space frames his narration of the final act. He explains that since the US travel ban put into effect through Executive Order 13769 and 13780, families have used the Haskell Free Library as a place of temporary reunion. The library becomes a place where grandchildren meet their grandparents, aunts and uncles who are unable to travel to the US. A space of contemplation becomes a space of family gatherings. *45th Parallel* reveals how states of exception are increasingly becoming the rule, and how border zones outside our fields of vision are not empty expanses of patrolled wired and walled landscapes but instead deeply interwoven into our everyday lives.

—Tina Sherwell



<sup>1</sup> Friedberg, Anna, *The Virtual Window: From Alberti to Microsoft* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2006), 28.

<sup>2</sup> Virilio, Paul, *War and Cinema: The Logistics of Perception* (London: Verso Books, 1989), 4.

<sup>3</sup> Kaplan, Caren, *Aerial Aftermaths: Wartime from Above* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2018), 19.

<sup>4</sup> Wiseman, Eyal in Kaplan, Caren, *Aerial Aftermaths: Wartime from Above* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2018), 204.