

For Immediate Release

## Mercer Union and Toronto Biennial of Art present Lawrence Abu Hamdan's first major Canadian commission

*45th Parallel* sheds light on the complexities of borders and their many implications

March 1, 2022 (TORONTO, O.N.) — Mercer Union presents *45th Parallel*, a solo show by Lawrence Abu Hamdan, in collaboration with the Toronto Biennial of Art from March 26 to June 4, 2022. The exhibition features the Turner Prize-winning artist's first major commission in Canada, a video set at the Canada-U.S. border, which inspired the title of the show. *45th Parallel* reflects on how the permeability of borders and the impermeability of laws implicate people and cultures — at times with fatal consequences.

"The threshold of national borders represents so much," says Julia Paoli, director of Mercer Union and the exhibition's co-curator alongside the biennial's Tairone Bastien. "These are jurisdictions politically defined as essential components to the formation of sovereign states — but in their regulation of movement, they're also richly layered, complex sites of negotiation. Lawrence Abu Hamdan's work sheds light on these complexities, creating conditions that allow us to see and hear stories that are distinct from how we might typically perceive them. This is an ongoing inquiry for the programs at Mercer Union; we have been working with artists whose projects share a critical understanding that narratives have the power to draw lines in the sands of history, the imagination, and our collective ability to figure the future."

*45th Parallel* was filmed on-site at the Haskell Free Library and Opera House, a unique structure situated on the border between Quebec and Vermont. Built in 1904 under the patronage of the local Haskell family, the building was designed as a symbol of unity between Canada and the U.S. In 2017, following the Trump Administration's executive order banning travel to the U.S. by nationals from several countries, including seven Muslim majority nations, the library became the temporary and unlikely site of family reunions. Since the pandemic, it has been closed to out-of-town visitors entirely. Set in this geographical and political gray zone, the video tells the story of *Hernández v. Mesa*, a case centred on the fatal cross-border shooting of an unarmed 15-year-old Mexican citizen by a U.S. Border Patrol agent in 2010. When the case reached the Supreme Court in 2019, the Department of Justice intervened to claim that although the border guard's firearm was discharged on U.S. soil, Mesa could not be prosecuted in the States because Hernández was killed in Mexico. Citing concerns that the case could open the U.S. to vulnerabilities by setting a precedent for families of drone strike victims in Syria to seek justice, the court ruled in favour of the border agent.

Abu Hamdan's video unfolds as a monologue in four parts performed by acclaimed Danish-Palestinian filmmaker Mahdi Fleifel (*A Drowning Man*) inside the Opera House. Each act begins with a change in the Haskell stage's hand-painted scenography. It starts with the original backdrop of a picturesque Venice canal; the second backdrop features the El Paso-Juárez crossing where Sergio Adrián Hernández Güereca was shot; and the third depicts an aerial view of Damascus, a reference to a 1920 painting by British artist Richard Carline. The changing backdrops highlight the video's underlying question about shifting perspectives and vantage points, and will also be on view at Mercer Union.

Lawrence Abu Hamdan was born in 1985 in Amman, Jordan. His audio investigations have been used as evidence at the Asylum and Immigration Tribunal in the U.K. and as advocacy for organizations such as Amnesty International. He 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. As part of a temporary collective with nominated artists Helen Cammock, Oscar Murillo, and Tai Shani, he was awarded the 2019 Turner Prize.

*45th Parallel* is a collaboration between Mercer Union Toronto and the Toronto Biennial of Art.

## TORONTO BIENNIAL OF ART

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

Mercer Union thanks Leading Supporters Donna & Robert Poile. *45th Parallel* is presented as part of *Artist First*, a Mercer Union commissioning platform. To learn more about *Artist First*, visit [mercerunion.org/artistfirst](http://mercerunion.org/artistfirst).

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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### About Mercer Union

Mercer Union is a non-profit, artist-centred space for contemporary art in Toronto established in 1979. The gallery has a unique track record of presenting innovative exhibitions by diverse Canadian and international artists in formative and established stages of their careers. Mercer Union is dedicated to supporting the production of new and experimental work, assisting artists in realizing ambitious projects. By fostering an intimate and supportive space for artists to develop and take risks with their work, the gallery's exhibitions play a pivotal role in shaping the cultural landscape of Toronto, Canada, and beyond. Mercer Union's exhibitions, educational programs, artists' talks, events, and publications — both on and off site — encourage critical inquiry and conversation.

### Press kit and photos

[bit.ly/MercerUnion](http://bit.ly/MercerUnion)

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