

MARWA
ARSANIOS

**A LETTER
INSIDE
A LETTER**

September 17, 2021–February 27, 2022

Level 2

A Letter Inside a Letter

Employing filmmaking, sculpture, textiles, drawing, and writing, Marwa Arsanios examines the connections between feminist politics, resistance movements, land struggles, and the natural world. Her collaborative projects evolve from a sustained engagement with specific communities, archives, and ideas, and present alternatives to dominant economic and social systems. Through a research-based practice, she conceptualizes new approaches to living in harmony with the land through collectivism and small-scale forms of resistance.

For her solo exhibition at the CAC, Arsanios presents the four films that comprise her master work *Who is Afraid of Ideology* (2017–21) — including one world premiere — alongside a series of textile works. The films knit together portraits of vibrant rural landscapes with first-person testimonies and poetic interludes that reconfigure the relationship between humanity and the environment. Featuring indigenous farmers and organizers in Colombia, Mexico, Syria, Iraq and northern Lebanon, as well as social activists and guerrilla fighters connected with the Kurdish autonomous women’s movement, the films incorporate original footage and interviews that capture anti-authoritarian struggles and transnational, militarized feminist movements from the perspective of their most outspoken, yet often overlooked, voices.

Paired with the films is a series of textile works that highlights the reciprocal relationship between feminist struggles and nature. Images of medicinal herbs described by the women are embroidered on linen and juxtaposed with renderings of animals, geographical, and architectural phenomena. In one of the textile works, these images are replaced by blue and black circles, as if the flora and fauna have been redacted. Here, Arsanios refers to the attempted erasure of natural resources, land grabbing, and destruction of indigenous knowledge by the exploitative and extractive forces raged against these communities. What is left appears to be a void or vacuum. But new life forms and alternative futures can also take shape in these so-called empty spaces. Arsanios notes: “in quantum physics, the vacuums are where particles are created.”

*Organized by Amara Antilla, Senior Curator,
Contemporary Arts Center.*

Marwa Arsanios was born in 1978 in Washington, D.C. She received her BA from Lebanese American University, Beirut (2001) and her MFA from University of the Arts, London (2007). She subsequently served as a researcher in the fine art department at Jan van Eyck Academie, Maastricht, Netherlands (2011–12) and is currently a PhD candidate in artistic research at the Akademie der bildenden Kunst in Vienna. She is one of the founding members of the research platform 98weeks, Beirut (2007–17). Her work has been the subject of solo exhibitions at institutions including Kunsthalle Lissabon, Lisbon; Art In General, New York (both 2015); Hammer Museum, Los Angeles; Witte de With, Rotterdam (both 2016); and Beirut Art Center (2017). Group exhibitions include *In Other's Words*, NGBK, Berlin (2012); *Here and Elsewhere*, New Museum, New York (2014); *All Tomorrow's Past*, Kunsthaus Hamburg (2015); *From ear to ear to eye*, Nottingham Contemporary (2017); *One and the other*, Palais de Tokyo, Paris (2018); and *Soft Power*, SFMoMA, San Francisco (2019). Arsanios has participated in numerous major recurring exhibitions and festivals including *Home Works*, Beirut, Lebanon (2010, 2013, 2015); Istanbul Biennial (2011); Thessaloniki Biennial, Greece (2015); Luleå Biennial, Sweden; Gwangju Biennial (both 2018); Warsaw Biennial; Sharjah Biennial (both 2019); Lahore Biennial; and the Berlin Biennial (both 2020). Arsanios currently lives and works between Beirut and Berlin.

Ask Yourself

- 1 In Arsanios's films, the concept of place is multifaceted. How does the idea of place relate to home, to identity, and to your own experience?
- 2 Arsanios's films take place in rural areas that are not heavily covered by news media in the United States. As you reflect on recent events in these regions, what impressions have you received about the role of women?
- 3 In part IV, Arsanios discusses the importance of the darkroom in photography: "Losing sight becomes the most important tool in order to be able to see the images that appear on the negative." What does it mean to lose sight in order to see?
- 4 In these films, women create communities on re-appropriated public land, others find themselves displaced by dispossession and political or corporate land-grabbing. What does ownership or inheritance mean in these contexts? In what ways can land be owned? How do traditional ideas of ownership conflict with land rights?



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**THAT IS THE COST
OF MAKING A VOID**