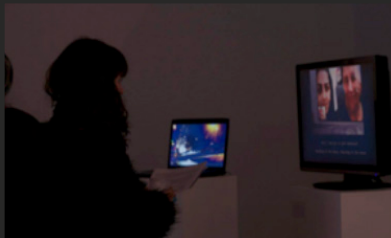


From Rochester with Love

Dr. Hala Georges



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Title

This research output, entitled 'From Rochester with Love', represents a body of six films (video) that attempt to reshape the viewers understanding of the Syrian war. The films (and other artworks) were presented in the Herbert Read Gallery, Rochester in February 2016 in the exhibition titled 'From Rochester with Love'. The works were made between 2014 – 2016. The production of the work was funded by grants from the Herbert Read Gallery and the Arts Council of England. A total of £5,000 plus additional institutional support was awarded for the production of these artworks.

Submission Details

Researcher	Dr. Hala Georges
Collaborators	None
Title	From Rochester with Love
Output Type	Artefact
Output Component(s)	Moving image
Dates	2014 – 2016
Dissemination	Public exhibition, artworks
ORCID	https://orcid.org/0000-0002-9276-9700
DOI	https://doi.org/10.24339/y75j-rm89



Figure 1.
Print on Wall & Film
Installation - Details from
Exhibition



Additional Information

This body of work focuses on the research and development of six films that were exhibited as part of a solo exhibition entitled *From Rochester with Love*, Herbert Read Gallery, Kent, UK. The aim of the arts-based research was to present the Syrian war from a different perspective; to provoke empathy in the viewer by portraying ordinary Syrian people's experiences of the war. The purpose of this was to counter the usual media war imagery people are accustomed to. The public exhibition told the true stories of a number of Syrian participants, through the exhibition installations of short films and illustrations. I positioned myself as both a participant, as a Syrian Woman, and an observer in the process, (I am now based in the UK), which helped to create a new understanding of the Syrian situation. The six short films are a combination of documentary, creativity and experimental forms of moving image, which led to a multi-platform experience in the gallery. The films have also been disseminated further nationally and internationally.

The six films included in this research output are:

Skype Call with Mum (2014–2015)
 From Rochester with Love (2014)
 Faces (2014–2015)
 From my Car's Window (2014–2015)
 My Homeland (2014–2015)
 Rhythm of Revolution (2014–2015)

Figure 2. (previous page)
 Overview of Exhibition

Research Context

The aim of this research was to enquire into what methods can be applied to trigger an international audience interest, and attract their attention to the Syrian war, without resorting to the violent imagery that has been exhausted by the media. Other inquiries focused on finding methods to create personal, ethical and compassionate art that does not generate the viewer's anger and boredom but their understanding and empathy.

These six films and subsequent exhibition aimed at raising awareness of the impact of this war on Syrians' everyday lives. The films achieved this, not by repeating facts and numbers produced by United Nations reports, which are fully accessible and available for people to learn about on the internet and via other news media, but by giving a voice to the untold and hidden stories of affected Syrian citizens. The objective was to make films that would enable the viewer to gain better appreciation of the humanitarian situation of the Syrians, also to consider the implication of the war in the surrounding areas; Lebanon, Jordan, Iraq and Egypt. Interviews with my family members and friends inspired the aesthetic choices I made, this personal content were the basis for my filmworks.

An important goal was to initiate a conversation about the real struggle of Syrian people, especially civilians who had no direct involvement with war, but suffered tragically from the consequences of it for a number of years. It also opened up discussions about how emotionally fatigued people are in the west, developing into what is known as 'compassion fatigue' a condition characterized by emotional and physical exhaustion leading to a diminished ability to empathize or feel compassion for others. (Figley, C 2002). This could occur as a result of bombarding audience with repetitive and dehumanising war imagery from the media (Moeller, 1999). The films portrayed to the viewer the reality of what the Middle Eastern war meant for civilians, there is no blood or the sound of bullets in the visuals for the film.

Research Question

How can a visual researcher address and respond to the personal impact of the current Syrian conflict and the inherent ideological battles within it without resorting to standard forms of war images?



3

Figure 3.
Overview of From
Rochester with Love
Exhibition, 2016,
Herbert Read Gallery,
Canterbury UK

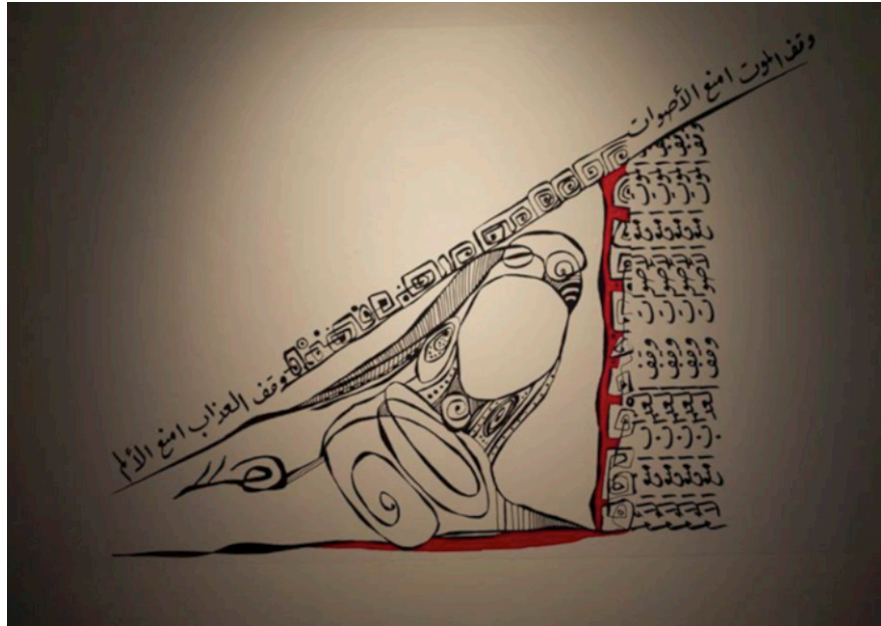
Research Methods

I worked with 10 participants to make the films. I requested that they answer a list of questions concerning their daily lives in the midst of war, how they were coping (or not) with the situation, and finally to tell their story in their own words. A regular message was sent to all participants to contact me when they could, using whatever means possible. I also included myself as a participant reflecting on my visit to the country during war. The process of making the experiments and collecting data involved a huge amount of stress and emotional time. The lack of power in Syria and weak internet connection with the country meant that contacting participants was challenging and unpredictable.

I explored general topics related to the Syrian war, then gradually, throughout my research, I re-focused the project on the personal and that is, to emancipate the spectator from the artistic clichés (Rancière, 2014). In this case, to emancipate them from the typical Middle Eastern artwork that most likely to either victimise people involved or present them as terrorists.

I experimented with two approaches: the first one depended on much editing, visual and sound effects, while the other one offered less editing and took more of a narrative path. Taking the domestic and personal approach and relying on the power of the story itself not only offered a new perspective but also opened a unique potential for my practice-research. What I found a fascinating challenge was developing the relationship between the art direction, the visual effects and editing of the films to maintain the personal content. I found that as the stories at the centre of each film were powerful and therefore it did not require additional visual effects. This reminded me of Frederick Wiseman's belief in the idea of long and static takes and minimal editing for highly structured documentary (Anderson & Benson, 1991).

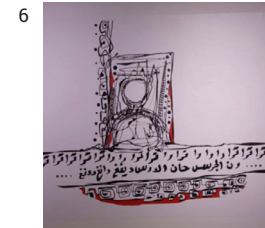
The hybrid mixed nature of the practice prevented it from falling into the classic type of documentary filmmaking.



4



5



6

Figures 4+5.
Prints on walls - Details
from Exhibition

Figure 6.
Syrian Living Room
Installation & Films
Projection - Detail from
Exhibition

Instead, I combined elements inspired or taken from reality with the formal requirements of a watchable film. The films are experimental, offering an associational or indirect form of filmmaking (Bordwell, 2008). It can also be rhetorical and moving, depending on true information or 'arguments from the source' (Bordwell, 2008).

I do not claim one clear categorization for my research project, on the contrary, it is a fusion of documentary and experimentation. To arrive at the artistic outputs, I investigated ethical issues of war images and searched the alternative creative response that focuses on the personal standpoint, explored relevant literature, theories by Lucy Soutter (Soutter, 2013) and Susan Sontag (Sontag, 2013), and many examples of creative artwork by Syrian and Middle Eastern artists. I also examined Mona Hatoum's artworks.

The above research steps all prepared me to produce the collection of short films presented in the exhibition From Rochester with Love. When it wasn't possible to collect data from Syria, I created a number of illustrations in response to two major events during war that had a personal impact on me and to some of the participants. However, the illustrations remain as 'supporting material' to the project and not the main creative research. I chose to represent them in a limited number in the exhibition, to refer to the fragmented nature of the project, due to the difficult circumstances and weak internet connection with participants. They are a record of experimentation and effort to find alternative solutions when there was no way to collect any sound or visuals from inside the conflict.

The illustrations (wall prints) represented Arabic calligraphy and drawings that show another way to respond to the issues whilst communicating a sense of the Syrian culture. The other spatial installation acted as an ordinary Syrian living room, including a sofa, toys, a table, and a traditional Damascene carpet, giving an experience of the domestic and inviting audience to visit affected Syrians, who used to live in a similar space but had to escape death in a rush. The significant element in

this installation is the torn Damascene carpet, which was sent by my mother from Syria to UK in multiple parcels. This carpet was used in my family home's living room for as long as I remember, displaying in the show added an authentic and domestic touch. However, it wasn't possible to post the carpet in one parcel to UK giving the circumstances. Therefore, my family had to cut the carpet into small pieces and post each piece separately. It was heart breaking and a logistical challenge, but, this process was a true reflection of reality, proving how difficult it was to connect the two sides of the world.

The exhibition was an important part of the dissemination of the six films, as it created an event and supported the need to present alternative narratives about the Syrian war to an audience of spectators.

Through the exhibition design I echoed the personal perspective at the centre of each work. There was an invitation to approach the monitors and to engage with the films on a one-to-one basis. It also reflected the nature of the fragmented and disrupted project-making process of collecting data from Syria in the time of war. As it endorsed the experience of the screen-based relationship that was established over the few years of making the films, between myself and the participants.

The choice to use multi-screens was essential, because it strongly represented the change in the form of my connection with family and friends, my relation to home, which led to a new form of communicating with home. Through an exaggerated number of monitors, the communication became extremely dispersed, till it felt and looked almost unreal. Yet, with a closer look, each screen offered a one-to-one encounter with the participant, introducing them to the viewer on a human level.

This encounter aimed at spotlighting their daily suffering and shortening the distance between them and the audience. Creating an abandoned domestic interior with meaningful physical objects, enriched the exhibition and the experience of getting to know the participants. The living room set invited people to sit and familiarise

Figures 7 – 9.
Syrian living Room
Installation, Detail
from Exhibition

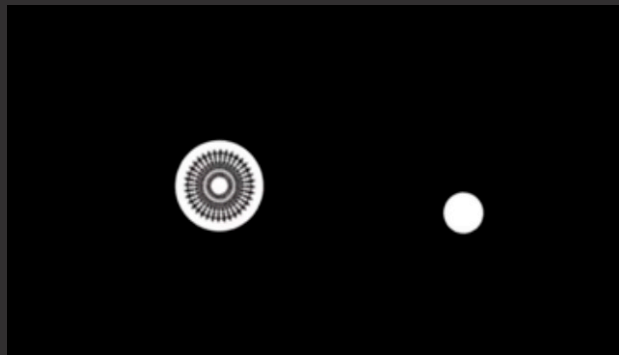
themselves with the left-behind objects around them from books, family photos, so they get to know those people who used to live in a similar space.

In this way, the set embraced the perspective of the project; the perspective from behind closed doors, a perspective from the living room. The Syrian homey but torn carpet told the story of the challenging and restricted communication with family and home. It also represented the devastating destruction and destroyed homes and misplaced families all around Syria.

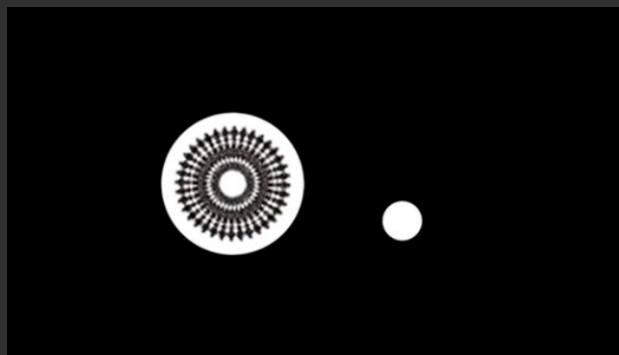




10



11



12

Figures 10 – 12.
Stills from Skype Call
with Mum film

Skype call with Mum 2014–2016

Screened:

February 2020 at Goldsmith University, London.

May 2018 at Yale London Club in London.

December 2017 as part of Passion for Freedom Exhibition in London.

October 2015 as part of TIAF Festival in London.

Around the time of making this film, I lost connection with home and family in Syria. In response, I decided to record my mother's voice the first time I had a chance to speak with her. The sound of violence around mother was louder than her voice and the call was interrupted and eventually disconnected. This animation video responds to the 52 seconds conversation over Skype.

This video, like others in the series, was an endeavour to help ease my participant's pain through conversation, as well as through the use of creativity interpreting indescribable emotions. It was an important tool used to process the grief my family, friends and most of what the Syrian people were going through. The attempt to connect with mother here, was represented in the motion of the two circles, which make an effort to touch each others edges, however, no matter how much they tried to connect, they can not. The sound and act of violence, which are represented in the solid colour of red, came to interrupt this desperate connection.

On a personal level, this piece means a lot to me, because I made it in response to my need to document this difficult and long-term situation, and it was the beginning of realising the importance of individual experiences. Remembering that the longest conversation with home lasted for 5 minutes and it happened every few months.

The sound of war as it existed in the piece remains a reference to the bigger picture and the broader context of the video; the lack of communication with affected people, the horror, the feelings of loss and confusion, the awaiting, and many other mixed feelings.

The visual language here is interpreting involved emotions supporting the video message, which is to celebrate, empower and translate emotions involved in the story, as an attempt to develop a unique perspective far from the clichés of violent images. Graphic and Arabesque shapes are representing my voice and mom's voice, while the mixed feelings are represented using solid colours.

From Rochester with Love 2014

Screened:

June 2016 at Huguenot Museum in Rochester.

October 2014 as part of The International Directors Lounge in Vienna.

February 2014 as part of The International Directors Lounge in Berlin.



13

From Rochester with Love is a short visit to the place I lived in in UK, while I open my heart to talk about my home and unforgettable memories. The video combines the voice and image of two different and contrasting parts of the world. It symbolises a visit to the world of every refugee or immigrant, who had to leave their home country and everything behind to survive. It wonders about the future and embraces the past while having a painful present.



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Figures 13 + 14.
Stills from From Rochester
with Love Film.



Figures 15 + 16.
Stills from Faces film

Faces 2014–2015

Screened:

September to October 2016, as part of My Homeland solo exhibition at the Foyer Gallery, Farnham.

When I first opened the video footage from my family; it was black, empty and then it started to be filled with stripes. I initially thought that the image will clear up but it didn't. All I could see was abstract lines moving up and down. It was obvious, however, that the lines were moving with the voices of my sister and two nieces whilst having a casual chat, telling me different stories and singing.

I was eager to respond to this message. Particularly, to my shock and disappointment of not being able to see my family's faces. Even watching a pixilated image of them was no longer an option, and the communication with participants was getting worse. In a way, the image of home has been forced to change and take a shape of cold lines that I can't relate to.

The bad connection of internet and telephone, the lack of power, and the difficult time participants were going through forced the project to deal with a graphic and abstract language. Although this abstract language in particular was not created in purpose, it is still offering an abstract substitute to the realistic footage. This confirms my coherent approach to rely on the power of narrative rather than on visual effects and sets the difference between my work and another abstract video art. This video was a result of the event, which led -with the synchronisation between motion, music and the meaning of words- to represent the un-representable.

From My Car's Window

2014 – 2015

Screened:

October 2018 at Cornwall Book Festival in Cornwall.

September 2014 as part of Liberated Words event in Poetry Film International Festival in Bristol.

Inspired by poetry, this video combines Syrian folk music, Syrian poetry by Nizar Kabani (translated to English), and shots from London in winter-time. The shots that were taken from my car's window show four minutes from rainy London while talking about the city of Damascus, and the relationship between a displaced one far from their torn home town. In this way, it combines two contrasting worlds in one frame, rejoices them and celebrates both.

17



18



Figures 17 + 18.
Stills from From my Car's
Window film



19

Rhythm of Revolution 2014–2015

Screened:

September 2014, Athens Cinema in Ohio, USA.

20



Figures 19 + 20.
Stills from Rhythm of
Revolution Film

This piece is a symbolic response to the violence of the Syrian conflict. Starting with belly dancing, which embraces the Arabic and Middle Eastern culture, beauty, history and art, until it is interrupted by the current reality of violence. I represented the current reality of violence that most of Arabic countries suffer from by putting a belt of bullets around the waist in a reference to the violence that entered our culture and became part of our daily lives. The belly dancing tradition functions here as a symbol for the beautiful and cultural Arabic attributes that have been distorted since the chaos started in the Middle East in 2011. Dancing to two contradicted sounds of bombs and music points to the involvement of the current war in people's lives and to the unfortunate attachment of Arabic identity with violence since 9/11.

My Homeland

2014 – 2015

Screened:

September 2018 at Athens Cinema in Ohio, USA.

September to October as part of My Homeland solo exhibition at Foyer Gallery in Farnham.

The video starts with the anthem of Palestine and Iraq called my 'My Homeland' in the Latin Catholic Church of Lattakia - Syria in 2014. The anthem was written for Palestine since the struggle started with Israel. Iraq then adopted it by the American invasion of Iraq in 2004, to be followed by Syrian churches just recently adopting the same anthem. This adoption of a national hymn that is associated with a country's struggle made it very popular, and it has been memorised and liked by every Syrian going through similar circumstances to Iraqis and Palestinians. It created a sense of unity and solitude between these affected nations. The piece uses the display of this anthem on a Sunday mass to represent what the notion of 'Homeland' means after the war and how it came to take on a different meaning. The anthem supports the video message in many ways as its melody is nostalgic while its words have powerful and heartfelt meanings. Throughout the video, Skype video-calls between me and my family emerge, to show how the notion of homeland changes from belonging to a country to belonging to faces of people we care for, which are only visible through the computer/phone screen.

The situation showed in the video; the change of home concept to faces we see through a digital screen, the lack and difficulty of communication, displacement, the new technological means of, that all apply on most of the immigrants, refugees, and exiled people who left their home for any reason and had to deal with similar situation to mine.

21



Will I see you in your eminence?
Reaching to the stars, Reaching to the stars

22

MY HOMELAND



Will I see you? Will I see you?
Safe and comforted, Sound and honored

Figures 21 + 22.
Stills from My Homeland Film



Insights

I believe that my aims to provoke thought about the Syrian conflict and raise awareness of the tragic situation have been achieved to some extent. The most common feedback I received from viewers and attendants of the talks, is that the work moved them in a different way than the media does, they noticed that my portrayal, was 'more real'. I also learned a lot during the process and I have decided to do more creative work in response to the Syrian situation. One of the things I learned is that people engage with 'real-like' material more than the abstracted ones. For example, the living room installation in the exhibition was tangible for the visitor. It became more central to the project than I had imagined; most people liked to explore it fully and spend time being in a similar environment to the Syrian participants, that they had heard from in the films.

Interestingly, all the Syrian participants were enthusiastic and eager to speak up about what they were going through. For example, to make Skype Call with Mum video, my mother had to be very close to the window to get the strongest and clearest sounds, which was dangerous to her life. There was a definite desire for their stories to be heard and seen, especially by the western audience. This was an attempt to connect with the UK, not as victims, but as humans with a story to tell. I noted that the participants had a desire to change the way most of the Western media represented them; either victims or terrorists and to try to address the authentic reality beyond these two world views.

In a lot of ways, this research has allowed for a closer distance between the Middle East - represented in Syria- and the West (represented in UK and multiple countries in EU where the project has been disseminated). It has invited international audience to see the situation from the perspective Syrian society. To understand how their everyday lives, education, mental and emotional wellbeing have been affected and what it means to have a war with a power that has no rules; anyone can be killed,

Figure 23. (previous page)
Overview of Exhibition

at any time, at any place. These actions are in the name of religion and political dominance.

In general, the feedback I received for the project had a common theme; the series of videos were 'an eye opener' to the physical pain of actual people living through the war. I would like to believe that the research practice has aided the audience's curiosity about the Syrian situation. At the same time, I hope they take away another side of Syrian culture and empathise with them as real human beings in Middle Eastern political crisis.

“The exhibition is professional, we are so impressed with the staging and individually we keep getting flashbacks of the images, which give us a cause to pause in what we are doing and we believe it will have this effect on anyone who sees it.”

Feedback gathered during the exhibition from an anonymous couple

Public engagement

The 'From Rochester with Love' exhibition was held at The Herbert Read Gallery which is located within the University for the Creative Arts in Canterbury Kent, UK. The exhibition attracted a varied international and British audience. Both the academic community, made up of academics, students, architects, designers, and artists; and an external public, which included local arts organisations, art professionals, industry contacts, an important network of schools, and other general public. Furthermore, given the specific content of the artworks, it engaged audiences who do not regularly go to art exhibitions, but are interested in politics and global news.

During the period of the exhibition I was committed to explaining the background of the project and to put the content of the research in its political, social and artistic context. Therefore, I gave three talks to different set of audiences. This included presentations about the project genesis, the way to approach and understand the participants stories, and the aims and objectives of the practice-research. One talk was at the Beaney House of Art and Knowledge, Canterbury open to the public on 12.03.16, and two other talks were held at the University for the Creative Arts (UCA) in Canterbury addressed to students of Visual Communication and Fine Arts as well as to the public (on 03.03.16 and 16.03.16). The attendants of the talks in total were 75 people. A time to ask questions after each session was available, which led to fruitful discussions with the audience.

Herbert Read Gallery (HDG) has a well-established marketing strategy, with a special focus on digital marketing. We hired a marketing professional with a specialism in cultural projects to help us distribute the information about the work to media outlets. We also collaborated with the press office of UCA to distribute the press release and contact specific journalist and bloggers. We contacted 1400 subscribers of the gallery through mailing list, and all the staff and students from UCA's four campuses in Kent and Surrey. We also distributed flyers in

town, to shops and a good number of houses, alongside an online distribution of information on Art Rabbit, Kent Online, and Creative Canterbury. We also used the HRG popular social media platforms, including a well-followed facebook page.

Finally, we contacted CounterPoint art organisation in London, which supports the arts by and about migrants and refugees, and they assisted on the promotion of the project through their networks.

The public relation campaign helped to spread the word and to attract audiences from different ages and backgrounds. The evidence gathered (by an electronic counting machine held on the gallery's door) that 3700 attendants in total attended the show, which is a 'very good result' according to the curator of Herbert Read Gallery, Emma Braso. The show also led to 500 online viewers of videos. The help of a marketing specialist led to many online and print platforms to list the show in their publication including: Culture 24 (Best exhibitions to see in South East England), Wow 247, After Nyne Magazine, The Pool, WoW Magazine, Kent Life, Kent Online, Kent and Sussex Courier, Canterbury Times, Ashford Herald, Maidstone and Medway News, Dover Express, Local Secrets, Sevenoaks Chronicle, and Index Magazine. Also Kent Messenger TV made a report on the show that was broadcasted on 01.03.16. (Please see the Media coverage report attached).

Audience attended the exhibition were estimated at 3700 people. Audience that watched videos from the show online were estimated at 500 people. In total, number of lectures and activities, and exhibition attendees is estimated at 4276 people.

A sample of written and verbal feedback is included in Appendix 2.

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Appendix 1

Factual context about the Syrian war

The Syrian crisis started in March 2011. This vicious war has taken the lives of more than a quarter of a million people, including 11,964 children and 71,781 civilians – according to the last survey in September 2020 (ref). It also led almost half of the twenty-seven million Syrian population to be displaced. Over seven million people have lost their jobs and houses, and more than four million Syrians became refugees in different countries around the world. A huge part of the Syrian heritage, which is part of the world heritage, has been destroyed and demolished (Syria's war | World news | The Guardian, March 2019). What makes the situation more complicated is that some of the parties involved in the war are based on religious or unannounced agendas leading to add more confusion to the Syrian citizen - from armed rebels to extremists Islamists. Extremists, who came not only from Syria but from all over the world, tried to take over Syrian areas gradually (Middle East | News | The Independent, June 2015), so that the northern part of Syria, from which both of my parents came, is completely taken over by ISIS including my family's country house and olive groves. This religious extremism is not only a national threat but it has expanded to become an international one (Middle East | News | The Independent, June 2015).

Appendix 2

Samples of feedback of the exhibition

I had gathered qualitative evidence during the exhibition to inform my evaluation of the experience. It consisted of observations, gathering opinions, and documenting feedback from appropriate sources.

'I very much enjoyed your exhibition, which demonstrated the strength of your practice.' By Vice-Chancellor of UCA Prof. Simon O'field-Kerr.

'Truly Thought-Provoking show' by Pool Magazine.

'The exhibition is professional, we are so impressed with the staging and individually we keep getting flashbacks of the images, which give us a cause to pause in what we are doing and we believe it will have this effect on anyone who sees it.' By an anonymous couple.

Quotes from social media tweets and comments on the show 'This called, the perspective of humanity'

'The conflict in a new perspective by Hala Georges' 'Went to see @Hala_Georges art show opening 'from Rochester with love' this evening @UniCreativeArts. A must see!' 'Enjoying @Hala_Georges' exhibition, Moving family scenes from Syria' 'I have just seen the most powerful and moving exhibition by @Hala_Georges at the UCA in Canterbury on the Syrian conflict'

'We really enjoyed it. The living room installation is very effective' 'Congratulations on such an extraordinary and compelling exhibition. I hope many people stop by to see the work.'

Documented oral feedback 'Very moving' 'An eye opener show' 'Thank you for showing us what we didn't know, I feel sad for Syrian people but privileged to be here.' 'Very inspiring to what we are planning to do in Calais in response to the refugee crisis.'

All images used in this document are produced by Hala Georges and the curation team at UCA. We consent to UoN to have full permission of usage for the 2021 REF submission.

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