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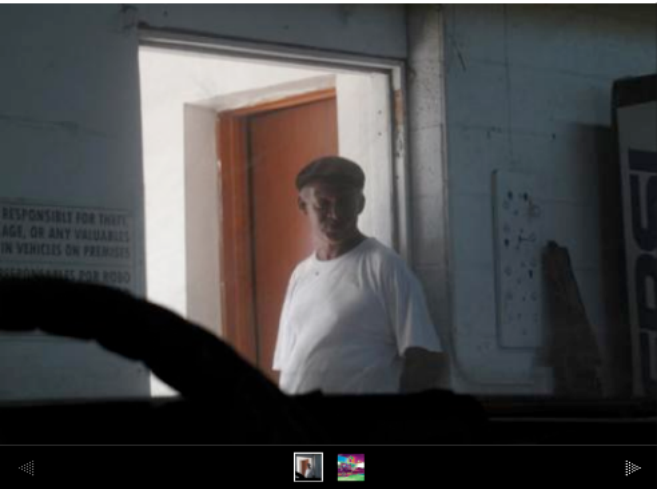
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Art

Shadi Habib Allah, The King and the Jester

The artist's video explores the tensions underlying the ordinary. By Nana Asfour



Shot in an auto paint and body shop in Miami, Shadi Habib Allah's single-channel, 25-minute video, *The King and the Jester*, disquietly follows the daily interactions among workers, capturing fleeting conversations, from an impassioned discussion of Werner Herzog's *Grizzly Man* to an obtuse exchange about diamond theft. If some of the language seems stilted, that's because it's scripted. Truth, as seen by Habib Allah, a Palestinian artist by way of Columbia's M.F.A. program, is fluid and unreliable (a sentiment apparently shared by many of his fellow Arab artists and filmmakers).

While there is no narrative structure—just a series of disjointed scenes—the film is strangely compelling. The artist repeatedly locates and frames the beauty within junk, virtually transforming the garage setting into an art installation in the Alex Hubbard vein: a thick yellow cable rope swirling in front of a long, vertical fluorescent light; a fuchsia car parked next to a bright-green fence; a split view of the outside of the shop in the dramatic black-orange night and of the muted, gauzy greens of its interior, where a car is being spray-painted.

As much a poetic study as a rumination on human and racial relations, the thoughtful and provocative film abruptly ends with the shop cordoned off by police tape. An unnamed crime has been committed, and the cops are on the scene, interviewing the Arab owner, who was seen earlier in the film reclining on a purple velvet couch as he ordered his employees to massage his aching feet. Whatever has gone down, a sense of routine has been suddenly—and perhaps irrevocably—upended.

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