



The Big Mess With Us Inside It

Nabil Azab

May 6—June 11, 2023

Opening Reception: Saturday May 6th from 6:00PM-9:00PM

In tandem with the commissioned billboard project *Just How We Found It*, Pumice Raft presents this solo exhibition by Montréal-based artist Nabil Azab. Framing photographic abstraction through the cultural and political context of family history, the artist's practice engages archival and family photographs, immersing viewers within memories and ghost images that highlight the subjectivity of recollection and the role of storytelling in the formation of identity

In the October 18, 1935 issue of *The Daily Telegraph*, a black-and-white photograph from The Associated Press depicts a tightly-packed crowd of Italian soldiers aboard a troopship, sailing through the Suez Canal towards the northern Abyssinian front. For people living along the British-controlled Suez Canal, this image might represent the origin of Italian influence amidst the complicated colonial rule of North-Eastern Africa and its waterways. For Azab, this image helped contextualize why his grandmother, who was born in Port Said, Egypt, was taught Italian in grade school.

Twenty-one years after the Italian invasion of Ethiopia, an unknown Planet News Ltd. photographer captured an image of Suez Canal builder Ferdinand de Lesseps's statue in freefall, moments after toppling off its base in Port Said. Published on December 21, 1956, this image acts as an icon for the Egyptian nationalization of the Suez Canal—an event that contributed to the scattering of Azab's family across the Middle East and Europe. But rather than highlighting its direct subject matter, Azab focuses on the plumes of dust and billowing smoke surrounding the icon, engaging with his own identity through the past's persistent atemporality and its entanglement with the present. Opacity through abstraction represents the potential value of seemingly unintelligible experiences, impenetrable and hidden. In other words, opacity makes potential exponential, in contrast to the cultural flattening that often characterizes transparency, legibility, and representation (see Édouard Glissant, *Poetics of Relation*, 2006). The quality of this abstraction offers different ways of looking that do not rely on a resolution.

In Azab's practice, his grandmother's photographs are often a point of departure for his own abstract works, sometimes using a single image as the locus for an entire exhibition, as was the case in *Something good that never happened*, shown at Afternoon Projects in 2022. By scanning an original photograph or negative and subsequently projecting it at a magnification beyond its referent, Azab engages with the image at the scale of his own body so that it can be rephotographed and, in turn, incorporated into the artist's own experience. Within these moments of translation, Azab allows the images to breathe, effectively creating new meanings that manifest out of the tension between specificity and abstraction. This gesture challenges the truth claims of documentary photography while highlighting the gap between a photograph's subject matter and the porous nature of cultural memory.

Just How We Found It

In tandem with his solo exhibition *The Big Mess With Us Inside It* at Pumice Raft, Montréal-based artist Nabil Azab's billboard project presents large-scale photographic abstractions that move viewers into the realm of affect and perceptual gestalt. In this new body of work, Azab manipulates archival photographs to emulate the subjectivities of translation through generations—an experience akin to the slipperiness of memory.

To create these new images, Azab projected archival photographs referencing his family's past in Egypt, Port Said, and the Suez Canal onto his studio wall, re-photographing portions of these enlarged images to create new visual interpretations. Utilizing long exposures, Azab moved through the projected image space on foot with camera in hand, creating abstract compositions of form and tonality that render an impression of a *moment* in his family history, rather than a frozen snapshot. Here the images not only become portals to different temporalities—they also act as an extension of the exhibition space itself. Viewable from the windows at Pumice Raft, the two billboards pull visitors out of the contemplative space of the gallery into the Runnymede and Ryding Avenue neighbourhood. Adjacent to Toronto's major railway line, the location of the billboards highlights the political nature of urban infrastructure, much like the Suez Canal itself.

The two billboards can be seen from the intersection of Runnymede Road and Ryding Avenue.

About the artist:

Nabil Azab (b. 1994, Paris, France) is a multidisciplinary artist of North African descent. They live and work in kanien'kehá:ka territory (Montréal). Azab employs drawing, painting, writing and researching as fodder for abstract photographic works that resist the objectivity and disciplinarity of the medium in contemporary life. Recent solo exhibitions include *Something good that never happened* at Afternoon Projects, Vancouver (2022) and *the welling up which would not pass* at DRAC, Drummondville, Quebec (2022).

About Pumice Raft:

A **pumice raft** is an ecological phenomenon that usually follows an underwater volcanic eruption. Amongst the lava, plumes of pumice stones slowly float to the surface of the ocean. If the wind is calm the individual stones form what some sailors have reported as floating islands that appear out of nowhere. The pumice raft has even been known to ferry flora and fauna to new shores. More than an illusion on the horizon, a pumice raft represents a vessel, a conduit, a vehicle; its very constitution cultivates an environment where things can come together in the spirit of collaboration.

Pumice Raft is also a federally registered non-profit organization in Tkaronto/Toronto ON, Canada. Incorporated in 2018, Pumice Raft's activities begin from an ecological activist approach to the display of visual art and the facilitation of related education. This means that the guiding principles of the organization are rooted in a conception of place that begins with the protection of people and the planet.

The physical space of **Pumice Raft** currently resides on the land of the Haudenosaunee, the Huron-Wendat, and the Anishinabewaki ᐱᐅᓂᓂᐱᐅᐱᐅᐱ. Located on the first floor of a light industrial building at **348 Ryding Avenue**, Pumice Raft sits in Toronto's present-day Junction neighbourhood. Nearby to the west, the Humber River (Niwa'ah Onega'gaih'ih) flows south towards Lake Ontario (Niigani-gichigami).

1. Pumice Raft HQ, 348 Ryding Ave, Unit 103, Toronto, ON M6N 1H5
2. *Untitled (Just how we found it no.1)*, Nabil Azab, Laser Print on Blueback Billboard Paper, 3.048 x 6.096 metres (10 x 20 feet). Commissioned by Pumice Raft, Toronto 2023. Courtesy of the artist and Franz Kaka, Toronto.
3. *Untitled (Just how we found it no.2)*, Nabil Azab, Laser Print on Blueback Billboard Paper, 3.657 x 4.876 metres (12 x 16 feet). Commissioned by Pumice Raft, Toronto 2023. Courtesy of the artist and Franz Kaka, Toronto.

