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Polina Teif, ***Eulogy for a Dying Sea***

September 13th- October 24th, 2017

During a 2016 artist residency in Arad, Israel, Polina Teif came across an abandoned school. On the wall of one of the classrooms, she discovered a painting of the Greek titan, Atlas. Condemned to hold up the sky for eternity, according to Greek mythology, Atlas was said to stand on the Western edge of the Earth. Meeting dancer James Bailey in Tel Aviv around this time, Teif asked Bailey to embody Atlas as she shot his movements on and around abandoned buildings off the Dead Sea. *Eulogy for a Dying Sea* is an ongoing project in poetic, documentary film, as well as an exercise in ongoing and anticipatory grief.

Initially trained as a photographer, Teif began *Eulogy for a Dying Sea* as a series of stills. Switching to film, she establishes dance as a thread between framed shots, using sound toward a sense of melancholy and loss. For much of the film, the landscape appears vacant and still, further illuminated through the contrast of Bailey's movements in space. Teif chooses to title the work, a eulogy, assuming the inevitability of ecological death in an attempt to deepen her understanding and appreciation for a region steeped in a dynamic history of conflict and commerce.

From the film's outset, viewers are brought into the vastness of the sea and surrounding landscape with ambient noise like a wind picking up across the desert. Sparsely arranged, human beings appear small and shadowed against the twin enormities of sea and sun. As the music mounts as does a feeling of dread,

and a person appears in the foreground, his back to us. Teif captures a body mirroring a mountainous backdrop.

Flexing muscle and creasing skin echo cracks and fissures in the earth's surface, while upper limbs roll and reach like waves.

Just over half way through *Eulogy for a Dying Sea*, the beat drops and Teif invites viewers to re-see the landscape through the lens of human activity, both past and present. Alternating between shots of deserted buildings and a peopled shoreline, Teif creates a complex sense of place, changed and changing. People caught in acts of leisure exist uncomfortably in the atmosphere she creates. She expects dance to enliven the desolate structures which stand as markers of time. Viewers see Bailey flip into a handstand on the shoreline, his body stiff and vertical, followed by a shot of a large electrical tower. As with several moments in the film, Teif points to the complex relationship between human beings and ecology in the region, interwoven yet distinct, violent yet intimate. She invites viewers to look through constructed space (and time) at the destruction of an environment, pointing to the expansion of tourism and industries for extracting sodium, magnesium and potash over the course of the twentieth century. Teif lets the bigness of the desert landscape stand in for the bigness of what is at stake with the rapidly receding shores of the Dead Sea.

In one of Teif's previous films, *HALL*, six sculptural forms, draped in fabric, are arranged in a room. Over the course of ten minutes, the shapes collapse, one by one, into distinct heaps of fabric on the floor. With *HALL* as with *Eulogy for a Dying Sea*, Teif explores the intersections of presence and absence. She is curious for spaces marked with 'what was', both drained of the past and coloured with it. Born in Belarus just before the collapse of the Soviet Union, she grew up as an immigrant in Israel/Palestine, and as an adult, moved to Toronto to study visual art and subsequently film. Committed to a lens-based art practice, Teif draws on

the work of late Canadian artist Lynn Cohen, whose stills of “empty” domestic space call on viewers to respond and imagine the content and happenings of the space. Imagining grows in the absence, and in discussing her own work, Teif stresses a process of discovery, built on a philosophy of not-knowing. The land is literally un-knowable, rapidly changing and contested.

Atlas was believed to represent the quality of endurance. While a eulogy, *Eulogy for a Dying Sea* is also a warning. Teif invokes and portrays life and movement as an argument for it, both pointing to and questioning the inevitability of environmental destruction in the region. The film asks, is it too late for the Dead Sea? What would it mean if it was? It is easier to harm that which we cannot see the life in. *Eulogy for a Dying Sea* interrupts this process.

- Lindsay Miles