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## Lara Atallah's Mediterranean Whispers at ON CANAL

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*Lara Atallah, Untitled, Catania #1, 2018, Polaroid*

Lara Atallah, *Threshold*, at ON CANAL (<https://www.artsy.net/wallplay>)  
329 Canal Street, Aug. 2 - Sept. 1, 2018

**By Louis Bury** August, 2018

Lara Atallah's first major exhibition in New York, *Threshold*, is concerned with thresholds not just in the dictionary sense of the term, as places of entry or crossing, but also in the experimental psychological sense, as points at which test subjects can just barely notice a stimulus. Curated by Kurt McVey as part of Vibes Studio's and Wallplay's ON CANAL—a year-long series of exhibitions and pop-ups taking place across 20 empty Canal Street storefronts—and featuring *WELCOME/ WARNING* (2018), a video installation by noted new media artist Anne Spalter, Atallah's polaroid and cyanotype representations of Mediterranean shorelines are so delicate and fine in appearance as to verge on unrecognizable abstraction. But more than just Light and Space-esque inquiries about aesthetic perception, Atallah's photographic images are also subtle inquiries about what types of phenomena attract or elude political notice.



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*Writer/curator Kurt McVey with artist Anne Spalter with her installation entitled "Warning", at ON CANAL, New York, NY*

Twenty untitled polaroids—individually framed and evenly spaced along the length of a gallery wall, with light bulbs dangling from the ceiling nearby—comprise the majority of the exhibition's work. Each polaroid in the series depicts a swirl of rock and foamy water that only comes into focus when viewed up close. On account of its small size, the polaroid as a medium tends to invite, if not require, such intimate viewing. But Atallah's polaroids invite particular scrutiny on account of the images' haphazard white whorls. These gauzy splotches are the aleatory result of the artist's decision to bend and warp the polaroid prints as they dried, thus producing irregularities in the final image.



*Installation view of "Threshold", ON CANAL, New York, NY*

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This decision has significant visual and conceptual effect. From a distance, the striated white splotches appear to be part of the depicted shorelines; up close, they function as scrimms that partially obscure the Mediterranean vistas. It's a fitting effect in a photographic series quietly concerned with matters of presence and absence. The splotchy irregularities are equally suggestive in the visual associations—fingerprints, coral reefs, trilobite imprints, and spiders' webs—that they call to mind. Their resemblance to fingerprints, for example, serve as an apt reminder that the artist has manipulated the images.

The exhibition's three untitled canvas cyanotypes likewise turn on the aesthetic trace's powers of suggestion. Most commonly used during the 20th century by architects and engineers to produce blueprints, the cyanotype is a photographic printing process that in recent years has experienced a cult resurgence among visual artists[L1]. Atallah has used the process to produce 72 x 24 inch unstretched canvas photograms—photographic images made without a camera—that hang from the ceiling in gallery's center like shadowy room divider curtains. Each canvas contains a Rothko-esque rectangle that occupies almost the entirety of the canvas and has the coloration of faded blue denim; inside each rectangle are clusters of small uncolored ovoid shapes produced by solar impressions of shoreline stones.

Both the polaroid and the cyanotype series evidence Atallah's interest in uncommon photographic processes, as well as her preoccupation with oblique aesthetic expression. Her images' faint, just noticeable aberrations create a disquieting air of mystery, a feeling that something is awry in these otherwise idyllic, sun-dappled coastlines. Like photographer and filmmaker Deborah Jack, whose postcard-perfect Caribbean scenes contain hints of menace intended to evoke the specter of the transatlantic slave trade, Attallah prefers innuendo over blunt critique.



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*Lara Atallah, Untitled, Molyvos #1, 2018, Polaroid*

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The numbered place names in her polaroids' titles—*Untitled, Beirut #11; Untitled, Barcelona #3; Untitled, Palermo #5*—provide clues as to the nature of this indirect critique. While the titles' city names locate the images in terms of geography, and their numbers locate them in terms of their place in artistic series, the images' contents appear interchangeable: containing no people, animals, or architecture, each shoreline looks like it could be that of any other location in the series. What's more, the inclusion of the word "Untitled" in the titles, when place names and numbers would have sufficed, emphasizes Atallah's preference for leaving certain things unsaid.

*A moratorium on looking* (2018), a ruminative short film projected onto a gallery wall, contains the most direct political and contextual statements in the exhibition. As the Mediterranean Sea laps against Greek shores, a polaroid from the exhibition develops onscreen as Atallah narrates a poetic meditation she has written about "the duplicitous nature of [the sea's] beauty." In contrast to the beautiful touristic ideal of the Mediterranean, she contemplates "that other sea," "the covert mercenary that claims the lives of those who've lost their right to land." "What is left of us," she wonders, "when those we've left behind perish behind imaginary lines?"



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*Lara Atallah, Untitled, Thessaloniki #1, 2018, Polaroid*

While a touch overwritten, the film's meditations on the "thousands of bodies [beneath the sea's surface] we'll never see," help situate Atallah's photographic images in the context of trans-Mediterranean refugeeism and its atrocities. Yet even these statements lack a degree of specificity: who, for example, are the referents of the "we" and of the "those" who that "we" has left behind? The film and the exhibition press release never say, and while knowing that Atallah is originally from Lebanon provides further context, this biographical detail might cause viewers to make assumptions that mislead as much as they elucidate.

If Atallah's reluctance to spell things out can feel enigmatic, that reticence is at the same time a source of her work's considerable power. The hints of turbulence in her otherwise serene vistas would be less visually effective, and less conceptually apt, if they were full-blown storms. Atallah depicts the shoreline as if the sea was a mouth whispering a secret into the land's ear. We can't hear what it's saying, but we can tell by the way its lips move that it's communicating something grave. **WM**



#### LOUIS BURY

Louis Bury is the author of *Exercises in Criticism* (Dalkey Archive) and Assistant Professor of English at Hostos Community College, CUNY. He writes regularly about visual art for *Hyperallergic* and *BOMB*.

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