

PEGGY AHWESH: CLEAVE

Microscope Gallery, May 17 - June 24, 2019

At times, the sense of where we belong as people, either tightly bound by a panoply of ideologies and familiar skin tones, or loosely affiliated through geography and labor, causes a form of lazy myopia. Societal fright increasingly leads to fight and the civility of informed discourse and perspective retreats. What remains is a fissure of distrust, selfish intolerance misplaced anger...and the potential for healing and progress, resting on fresh edges.

The four video installations comprising Peggy Ahwesh's *Cleave* exist in this psychological fissure, offering opportunities to audition alternative perspectives. Upon entering the darkened gallery from the brightness of the outside world we are ejected from the security of the light. In this moment the brain recalculates how to proceed and the beckoning of bright screens takes control.

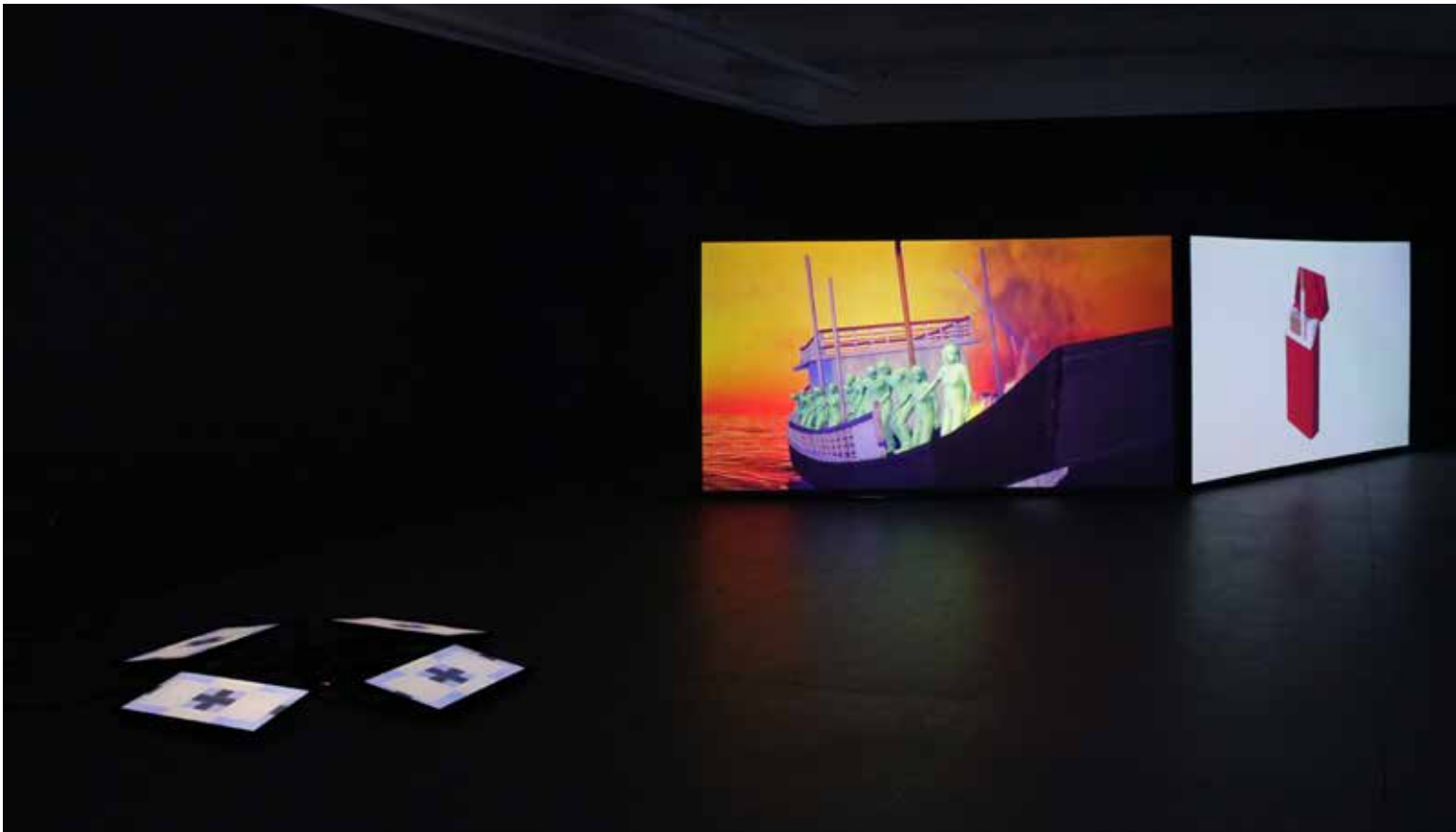
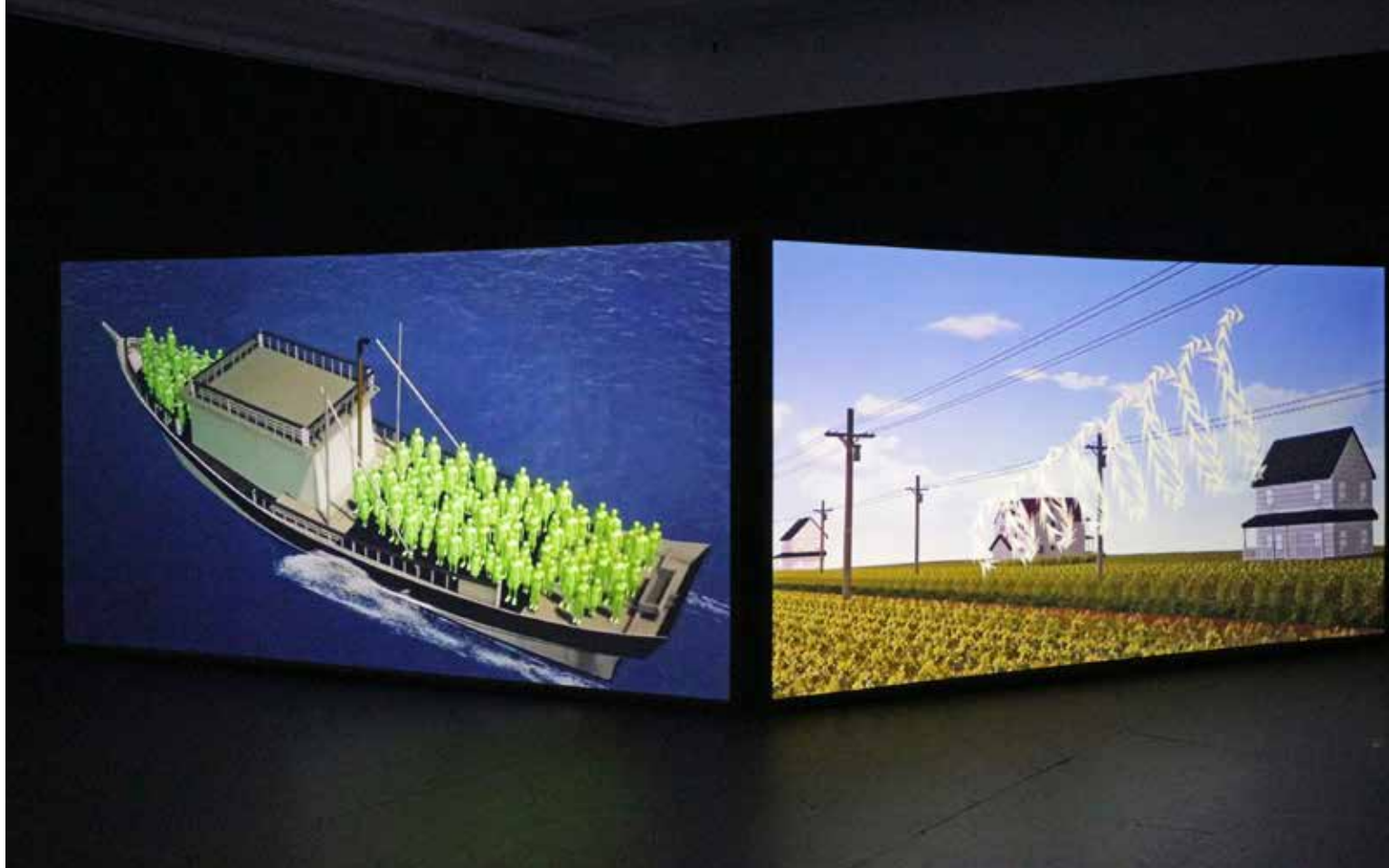
The first installation encountered *Verily! the Blackest Sea, the Falling Sky* (2017) consists of two-channels with screens at an oblique angle. On one screen, *the Falling Sky* sets featureless digital mannequins "performing" in animated scenes derived from actual news reports. That all too familiar daily recounting of timeless strife and disasters, both natural and wrought by

humans—not the least of which being the Syrian refugee crisis. The anonymous mannequins which turn red upon death, are something of a stand-in for those us fortunate to avoid the trauma, but no less transfixed by it. On the companion screen, *the Blackest Sea* drives home the forlorn state of environmental affairs while offering magnificent testimony to the majesty of the sea and the solar system above.

The scope of these planet—spanning images exposes the folly of fiercely guarded borders; lines on a map of sand often rendered moot by desperate gambles to find a better life. The *Border Control* (2019) installation consists of four displays in a geometric pattern at foot level mimicking the screen's kaleidoscopic altered footage of the border between Mexico and the U.S. A border where we witness an illegal crossing in real time, a border flaunting examples of more advanced prototypes designed to keep this sort of desperate seeker out.

Ironically Ahwesh recorded the footage from the Mexican side of the border, a subtle reminder that the understanding of certain circumstances, especially the sliding scale of what could be called truth is just a matter of perspective. This is unequivocally illustrated in the belief shaking piece *Re: The Operation* (2019).

ALL IMAGES Peggy Ahwesh, "Cleave", solo-exhibition (2019), Microscope Gallery, installation views. Courtesy the artist and Microscope Gallery.



An extruded cube of four stacked monitors, half facing away from the other half at 90 degree angles. They look away, as we look in at two conflicting accounts of the military action credited with the killing of Osama bin Laden. One version, officially sanctioned by the American government, the other sketched from the results of investigate reporting. Both wrapped in animated visuals reminiscent of a video game.

The work that feels most accessible is *Kansas Atlas* (2019), which features a field-of-view filling screen fronted by opposing iPads. The two devices under glass domes perch like sentinels on pedestals offering a collaborative bilateral view of one street in one town in the United States where directly across from each other, the infamous Westboro Baptist church swathed in the slogans and trappings of intolerance faces Equality House built as its diametrical counterpoint—a place of acceptance, social justice and tolerance. There are no animated scenes, no computer-generated recreations, no digital maquettes to hide behind, we must face the truth of who we are capable of being.

As we look through—past—the division toward the large screen, the stage is completed with headphones, broadcasting the gently firm and docent like voice of Marianne Shaneen reciting a questioning, affirming philosophical text tinged with the poetic and the mythical as a swath of scarred, undulating beautiful land—natural and not—slides beneath our bird’s eye view. We float above the geographic center, the “heart,” of the contiguous United States. A birthright for some, and an impossible dream for others.

Ahwesh’s unflinchingly complex and uncanny juxtapositions are most effective when set against what we think—believe—we know and the collective psychological and emotional trauma shared by more and more people. These moving image experiences invite us to reconsider again and once more the actions and reactions that strengthen or render asunder the bonds of all creatures sharing this planet.

JONATHAN ELLIS

