

MAUREEN PALEY.

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Lawrence Abu Hamdan, Earwitness Theatre, 2018 (installation view). Photo: Andy Keate. Courtesy the artist

Lawrence Abu Hamdan at Chisenhale Gallery

In a blacked-out and soundproofed booth at the Chisenhale Gallery two speakers broadcast stories from Saydnaya prison. Survivors of the Syrian torture centre, where an estimated 13,000 political prisoners have been executed since the outbreak of war, describe a regime of silence broken by the sound of brutal beatings being administered elsewhere in the building. The floor around this cell is cluttered with radio theatre props – a car door, a ladder, a catalogue of locks – used by Lawrence Abu Hamdan to mimic the sounds (slams, cracks, creaks) the prisoners remember from their otherwise silent incarceration, which helps to corroborate their testimony and serve the human rights advocacy that underpins the artist's practice. Yet for all its diligent research the work succeeds as art because it takes advantage of the affective possibilities of sound and space that are denied to bare legal testimony: sitting through the silence that descends on listeners after the sound installation concludes – to disturb which in Saydnaya might give the guard a reason to beat you to death – is to appreciate Hamdan's ability to translate forensic evidence into a representation of suffering which acts on the body through the senses. The exhibition is complemented by the video installation *Walled Unwalled* (2018) at Tate Modern, which further extends the artist's investigation into the means by which state-sanctioned violence transgresses and redraws the structures – architectural, political and sensory – that shape our experience of the world. *Ben Eastham*