

Palestinian Landscape Photography: Dissonant Paradigm And Challenge To Visual Control

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Outline

Claim: This paper examines contemporary Palestinian photography practice centered on representations of the occupation-scarred landscape, which challenges the dominant cultural paradigm, to challenge the visual regime of the occupation.

I. Land and Representation:

- Disappearing landscapes.
- Nativist Representations.

II. "Peace" and Photography:

- Post-1993 transformations.
- Photography and Landscape.
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Introduction

Thought to be neutral representations of nature, landscapes have increasingly been shown in art criticism to bear the imprint of human agency. Indeed contemporary Palestinian photography illustrates perfectly Deborah Bright's prescription for redeeming photography from solipsism, by presenting landscapes bearing the traces of "historical construction" (140).

This paper examines contemporary Palestinian landscape photography which has appeared virtually ex-nihilo in the mid-1990s. The paper's research problem is the paradox of photography which appeared at the time of the relative affluence and globalization of Palestinian urban areas – and its art scene – as a practice quasi exclusively documenting the inscription of the occupation on the landscape. Thus, marking a break from its romanticized representation when artists lived under effective direct occupation. The reason cannot be attributed to the disappearance of military censorship alone. This focus in particular, diverges from the dominant individual-centered representational paradigm of contemporary Palestinian artistic practice. Whereas a relatively great deal has been written about Palestinian landscape representation pre-1993, nothing major yet has been about the post 1993 period, and this paper will attempt to distinguish its major features.

Land and Representation: Disappearing Landscapes

The materiality of the land of –historic- Palestine has always been a crucial element in how its history, present and future were named and perceived: The ‘Holy Land’, Eretz (land of) Israel, Bayt al Maqdess (Holy House), etc. Or as W.J.T Mitchell noted: ‘Palestine has been reduced to the status of landscape: Framed, hedged about, shaped, controlled, and surveilled’ (Mitchell 271).

Post 1948 and the destruction of more than Palestinian 400 villages, a 1968 short story by preeminent Israeli novelist A. B. Yehoshua illustrated the pathological idea of landscape “as a place of amnesia and erasure, a strategic site for burying the past and veiling history with natural beauty” (Mitchell 262-3). In “Facing the Forests” (Yehoshua) an Israeli fire watcher discovers the ruins of a demolished Palestinian village under the embers of a pine forest that burned under his watch, revealing thus to the wide Israeli reading public the policy of planting forests to hide from view such ruins after 1948.

Regarding the post 1967 and ongoing occupation of the West Bank and Gaza, Israeli architect Eyal Weizmann demonstrates in his two seminal books *A Civilian Occupation: The Politics of Israeli Architecture* and *Hollow Land: Israel’s Architecture of Occupation* the protean manner in which Israeli occupation has inscribed its presence on the land. Among the theses he advances is that unlike historic colonial endeavors, this is not an ordered occupation of space, but a flexible, moving occupation of “structured chaos” (5) where the Israeli state is present and/or absent, and its absence relayed in this process of dispossession by non state actors such as settlers, Israeli private cellular network providers, supportive overseas communities, the Israeli High Court of Justice, etc. The arsenal deployed includes not only military force but also “illumination schemes...architecture of housing, the forms of settlements, the construction of fortifications and means of enclosure, the spatial mechanisms of circulation control and flow management, mapping techniques and methods of observation, legal tactics for land annexation” (6). This relentless operation crowned by the ongoing building of the separation wall.

Nativist Representations

For the land of the military planner and the colonial architect, there is the land of the peasants working the land and the ghettoized urban inhabitants, and its cultural representations. Historians Elias Sanbar (Leenaerts 13) and Issam Nassar noted in their recent publications how Palestine was first

photographed by French pioneers of photography and became subsequently an over-photographed destination, by religious pilgrims and tourists from Europe, North America and Russia, exclusively looking for traces of Bible scene locations, even captioning their photographs with Bible place names that were not used anymore by locals (i.e. Bethany for El-Izariyya, Shkhem for Nablus, etc.). These tourists were not looking at the landscapes, but looking for the location of events of the New Testament presumed to have remained unchanged for 1880 years. Early Zionist settlers also “Could still feel that Palestine had stood still in time and was theirs, again despite millennia of history and the presence of actual inhabitants” (Said 246); making the actual landscape and people both present and absent from the early days of its photographic representation. Palestinian studio photographers mainly captured command images of social and family events not so much landscapes.

When easel painting was introduced in Palestine at the start of the XXth century, landscapes were not a prized topic, compared with historical events’ recreations, religious scenes and portraits. Notable among them were the oil reproductions by Daoud Zalatimo of David Roberts’s watercolors of Islamic holy places or more importantly, Sophie Halaby’s dreamy water colors of the Jerusalem country side (Halaby). After 1948, landscapes disappeared altogether from paintings produced in the Diaspora, from the early “lamenting’ portraits of Ismail Shammout (Shammout) and subsequent works by revolutionary artists based in the Arab Diaspora, from the 1970s to the early 1980s’ (Posters). The exception, was the 1960s brief career of self taught naïf artist Ibrahim Ghannam who from his wheelchair in a refugee camp in Lebanon “in a cubicle overlooking open sewers... painted golden fields of harvest, thriving orange groves, and jubilant peasants at work” (Boullata).

Landscape was similarly absent from the work of Palestinian artists with more individual pursuits of artistic careers not motivated by an instrumentalization of politics and who engaged in abstract painting. However, it reappeared in force in the paintings of 1980s-early 1990s artists who remained in Palestine, under occupation and who focused on painting realistic rural landscapes, empty of any human presence, or in a specific style reminiscent of 1940s’s Mexican indigenismo, where:

Images of rural scenes and Palestinian village were one of the dominant themes of popular paintings produced in the early 1980’s. In the majority of paintings a specific place was not imaged but rather a generalized view of the rural landscape. The utopias, which in fact mean no-place, depicted a golden era

of Palestine in which the future Palestine was cast in an image of the past which in turn served to elide the present. The artists during this period did not chose to represent the consequences of modernization and occupation brought about by Israel and the accompanying sense of alienation, rather they took comfort in a nostalgic image of the past. It could be argued that these were all discursive responses to war a retreat to the comfort of past, with emphasis on the social unit of the family and the nation as a family (Sherwell).

Thus, illustrating one of the phases the national culture of colonized peoples pass through -according to Frantz Fanon- when they embark on a :” Passionate search for a national culture which existed before the colonial era” (209) spurred by the “hope of discovering beyond the misery of today. Some very beautiful and splendid era whose existence rehabilitates us both in regard to ourselves and in regard to others” (210). Another major characteristic of these later works is the anthropomorphism of the landscape, and in particular its echoing of the foreground depictions of curvaceous peasant women, where often a traditionally dressed woman is flying, crying, holding a dove, giving birth to thousands of resolute workers and farmers, etc. where Palestine came to be represented exclusively by idealized depictions of women with generous curves, representing the well known trope of land as mother earth (Sherwell 163). Whereas Charles Harrison notes that in”the dialectic between painting and picture that characterizes landscape, there is a tendency for specifically human content to appear at the level of the latent” (222). Here was not a latent depiction but a willed one (Tamari & Johnson 164). Thus, invisibility, romanticism, and “gynomorphism” were the dominant characteristics of landscape representation -executed on paper, canvas and ceramics- until 1995. Or, a form of nativism, defined by Edward Said as a form of cultural resistance to imperialism used as refuge (275-6).

These images were the only visual representation produced by Palestinians for Palestinians at the time, as photographic and TV news images were solely produced then by the Israeli and international media. Thus, these paintings and their wide public showings shaped Palestinians self image for:” Under military occupation, such exhibitions constituted a new form of political resistance. Located in schools, town halls, and public libraries, art exhibitions had a transformative effect, becoming a community event that drew ever-larger crowds from all segments of society” (Boullata).

Whereas the history of landscape painting and landscape photography may have been tied to the history of capitalism (recording landed gentry’s property or commodifying

an idealized version of a pristine landscape in an industrializing society) the paramount paradigm at work here was the representation of landscape as memento mori before its actual disappearance or its expected appropriation.

“Peace” and Photography Post-1993 transformations

The 1993 “Oslo peace accords signed at the White House, did not bring peace, indeed they brought about increased land appropriation through settlement expansion and the building of the Wall, along with unprecedented military violence, closures, sieges, invasions and pauperization. Paradoxically, this period also saw the withdrawal of Israeli military control of urban Palestinians’ day to day lives, the return of 150,000 Diaspora Palestinians to the West Bank and Gaza, relative relaxing of travel restrictions by Israelis to Palestinian holding Western passports from the Diaspora, increased visibility and curiosity for all things Palestinian exemplified by the opening of foreign news agencies and televisions of offices in Jerusalem, resulting in hiring Palestinian photographers and cameramen; curator tourism, unprecedented holding of Palestinian visual arts and cinema festivals and exhibitions in Europe, access to international residencies and awards, etc. This was of course accompanied by an influx of foreign donor funding as well as from Diaspora Palestinian non profits, fuelling a local cultural boom that saw the holding of tens of performing arts festivals, the opening of a string and new cultural centers, galleries and cultural foundations, as well as the establishment of art competition awards and the appearance of new artists and new artists collectives and the end of established careers. Also, new educational opportunities either locally with new specialties taught at colleges and universities in video, photography and visual arts (Laidi-Hanieh 5) or abroad through residencies and educational grants in the arts.

These transformations and the entry of Palestine or at least parts of its population, into globalization meant a new representational paradigm in contemporary Palestinian culture: The abandonment of previous political problematics for a centering on the individual’s private mythology: The body, memory, experiences of the individual, where the political/ collective is mediated through individual experience. Specifically, revolutionary or romanticized representations were replaced by irony, self criticism, the exploration of subaltern identities, nihilism, and self narration. This new paradigm was replicated in other areas, in poetry for example a new turn was noted towards:”s’alléger de la rhétorique et des grandes idées et construire de nouveaux rapports avec l’ordinaire” (Zaqtan 14-5) or “ce qui a changé...c’est la manière de le dire a partir

d'histoires personnelles, individuelles..L'angle de vue réaliste...qui provient de la fin des idéologies, de la globalisation galopante » (Brogniet 11). In cinema the trope of the attractive westernized urban young protagonist replaces the heroic fedayeen and suffering refugee children of 1970s Palestinian cinema. In media, this period saw the replacement of ceramics and painting by performance, video, photography, installation and multimedia (Laidi-Hanieh 6-7).

Photography and landscape:

This dissonance however is in photography. Commercial photography which flourished at the period tended to depict aestheticized landscapes or positive representations of Palestinian social life. Except for the use of photography as documentation and material trace of performances centering on the female body and its exploitation by conservative society by women artists –Anissa Ashqar, Jumana Abboud, Shourouq Harb, Inass Hamad, Raeda Saadeh, Manar Zuaby, Hanane Abou Hussein- the dominant trends in this newly formed and growing corpus of Palestinian photography has been a quasi uniform practice of documentary photography breaking with the new representational paradigm in its single minded depiction of landscapes as sites inscribed by occupation: rural landscapes, Israeli settlements, the wall, ghettoized panoramic urban scapes, and urban scapes in times of invasion, military checkpoints, abandoned urban mansions, no man's land (s) and unrecognized villages, resembling crime scene photographs.

The paradox is that these artists have unprecedented access to international venues, that their predecessors locked into the West Bank and Gaza or in their ghettoized Diaspora publics did not know. Indeed, many of the works make it straight from Palestine abroad without being shown in local galleries first. Globalization does pose the question of commodification, if the images are being sold on the intentional art circuit, they should be more 'audience friendly' but this does not seem to be the case.

Seeking a comparison with other third world practices, there do not seem to be one a priori with African photography for example, which is noted to have evolved from its early days of preponderance of studio and documentary photography where it was used as an "exposing tool" to the contemporary period where there is a shift to multi media and moving image and shift of photography as a: "probing" mode..Since artists are "more cosmopolitan and self aware of being part of the global contemporary art stage" (Rocco 350).Palestine photography is still very much in the direct exposing mode, not

the introspective, ironic or self criticism mode of literature, cinema and other visual arts.

This focus on photographing occupation scarred landscape has been accompanied by a new focus, indeed landscape fetishism in urban areas and among the intelligentsia: Two international conferences on landscape held at the University of Birzeit in 1997 and 2007, with W.J.T. Mitchell and Edward Said in attendance at the first, Raja Shehadeh's win of the 2008 Orwell Prize for political writing for his book recording six walks in the changing countryside: *Palestinian Walks: Forays into a Vanishing Landscape*, groups of hikers formed since 2005 documenting their work in a 2008 exhibition, repeat international conferences/tours of the Wall, refugee camps, and encircled villages for visiting international curators and artists (Tours), the formation of an Israeli-Palestinian artists' collective reviving erased traces of Palestinian presence in Israeli cities (Parrhesia), the successful publication and sale of calendars celebrating local wild flora (Nakhleh), publications and sale of books on landscape and built environment (Riwaq), scores of exhibitions of commercial landscape photography, etc.

Case Studies

Among the most prominent practitioners of this landscape documentary photographers are from the Diaspora: Dana Erekat's depictions of the Wall and Tareq el Ghossein reconstructions of "homeland" with sand mounds in the Arabian desert. Locally, the otherworldliness of Rula Halawani's giant wall images, settlements under the rain behind car windows, desolate villages and empty Jerusalem streets (Halawani), Raed Bawayeh's desolate hilly trails of illegal workers passages into Israel, Khalil Rabah's reconstructed rural paths and mutilated olive trees, Taysir Batniji's Gazan urban scapes, Steve Sabella's documentation of a vanishing rural Jerusalem, Vera Tamari's olive groves, Khaled Jarrar's checkpoints and giant sewer pipes as grim secret passages into Jerusalem, Jamil Daraghme's virtual seascapes caught in street water puddles, etc. Among Palestinian-Israeli citizens, their focus on abandoned and/or destroyed Palestinian villages and neighborhoods illustrates Jeff Walls' definition of landscape images as "a liminal space between approaching and distancing, filled with yearning and contradiction" (Wall 171): Sami Bukhari's panopticon like documentation of Arab Jaffa's dilapidated neighborhoods (Ben Zvi 93-102), Ahlam Shibli's documentation of her native valley, unrecognized villages, Korean and European urban scapes (Shibli), Hanna Farah's documentation of his performance in his demolished home village of Koufar Biram (Ben Zvi 12-16).

If Burtynsky's images are "profoundly Canadian" (2) for their focus on industrialization and extractive industries' mark on earth and wilderness, one can say without fear of essentializing, that Palestinian photographers' work is also marked by their origins. But instead of wild expanses, this is a narrow contested piece of land scarred by real and mythological claims, and compared to 1980s depictions, unmediated by romanticized anaesthetization. These are not images that hang in local living rooms or adorn calendars, but that find their way to major Arab galleries and biennials, Israeli galleries and publications, Documenta, the Istanbul, Guangzhou and Sao Paulo biennials, in addition to scores of European galleries and museums.

Despite Bourdieu's, Rosler's and Berger's views on the powerlessness of images at affecting change, and their short circuiting by audiences' ideology, the images continue to be produced since the mid 1990s, and have become indeed inseparable from any conception or categorization of the corpus of Palestinian photography; illustrating another photographer's –Salgado– circumvention of the lassitude at ideological discourse through art, and illustrating Jacques Ranciere's observation that contemporary art's increased investment by politics may be due to the deficit of politics and the "effacement of political inventiveness" which might, therefore, give a "substitutive political function to the mini-demonstrations of artists" (92) thus threatening art's singularity.

On the other hand, if the dominant paradigm at work in Palestinian culture is a withdrawal into the self and an exploration of personal means to express the collective, photographer's selfhood is superseded and challenged by the enveloping visibility of the occupation, an occupation of surveillance and surveying, of marking and blocking. Palestinian photography had to become a 'human-visual act' challenging the occupation's visual regime, its "optical urbanism" (Weizmann 130) whereby Palestinians are observed and illuminated from settlement hilltops, motion sensors, cameras, drones, while simultaneously being blocked from view by the Wall, ideology, bypass roads and forests hiding the ruins of their villages. If settler architecture succeeds in making Palestinian visible and invisible (they "see the Arab villages but don't notice them. They look and they don't see" (Weizmann 137) Palestinian contemporary photography can only 'bypass' this visual arsenal by making it visible, challenging this "one way hierarchy of vision' (Weizmann 133).

Adila Laïdi-Hanieh is a cultural critic and writer with interest in Palestinian arts and cultural practices, modern Arab intellectual history, and cultural spaces and processes. Born in Algeria and was educated there and in Jordan, where she studied painting with Fabr el Nissa Zeid. She earned a Certificat d'Études Politiques from the Institut d'Études Politiques de Paris, before completing her B.A. in International Relations from the United States International University (Alliant U.) in Mexico City, and her M.A. in Arab Studies from Georgetown University. She divides her time between Virginia, Ramallah and Algiers.

She published in 2008 the first cultural review of contemporary Palestine, which commissioned texts and art work from confirmed and emerging artists, novelists and poets from Palestine and elsewhere: Palestine: Rien ne nous Manque ici (Palestine: We Lack for Nothing Here). It is the first book to study contemporary Palestine in an 'introspective, multidisciplinary, and critical manner'.

Laïdi-Hanieh ran the Khalil Sakakini Cultural Centre in Ramallah from its 1996 establishment until 2005. She curated there in 2001 the international touring memorial art exhibition 100 Shabeed-100 Lives. Her work was covered by the New York Times, the Los Angeles Times, the Financial Times, Le Monde, CNN, the Daily Star, Al-Hayat, Moustaqbal TV, etc. She received on March 8, 2005 the "International Woman's Day Award" from Bethlehem University.

Laïdi-Hanieh is a cofounder of a number of arts and culture organizations and foundations –on which governing boards' she served–, such as: The Arab Fund for Arts & Culture (Amman), Al-Mawred al-Thaqafi [Cultural Resource] (Cairo), the Khalil Sakakini Cultural Centre Foundation (Ramallah), and Shashat (Ramallah). She was part of the World Economic Forum's 'Young Arab Leaders' initiative and a member of its Council of 100 Leaders of Islam-West Dialogue (2002-2005). She was a member of the organizing committee of the 2008-09 MASARAT Palestinian cultural season in Belgium, and is a member of AMCA, the Association for Modern & Contemporary Art of the Arab World, Iran & Turkey (Denton, TX).

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