

In defiance “I remember 1948” Palestine

Rayyar Farhat

To dwell on the past is unforgivable- if you are Palestinian. A Palestinian is not permitted to remember 1948. After all, what else do the Oslo Accords and Roadmap signify but a hegemonic global demand that Palestinians forget the past and move on; to make do with what they have, to negotiate away what they don't. The Palestinian people have not been allowed to collectively mourn Al Nakba, the “Catastrophe” that began with the 1948 forced exodus from Palestine at gunpoint by well-armed Zionist militias. It is just not permitted. While international fora and declarations fastrack a future still in denial of an ongoing Israeli genocidal impulse, Palestinians are being asked to commit themselves to a collective historical amnesia. The “I remember 1948” exhibition is an attempt to create a space for collective remembering and mourning. It was based on a series of storytelling days held between 2002 and 2003, during which Palestinian elders now living in Sydney, Australia recounted their experiences of exodus during Al Nakba. The organisers of “I remember 1948” invited Arab artist, inspired by these stories to contribute to the exhibition.

In some respects this is a very beautiful exhibition, which testifies to an intimate knowledge of a place called Palestine. Some of the pieces include the use of cultural materials or icons, clay, olives and orange blossoms. However, much of the artworks themselves contain contradictions; images of bloody dismemberment weighed down by the relics of destruction. Jayce Salloum's “Untitled” audiovisual essay is one of the most disturbing. The film consists of images of orange blossoms swaying in the wind, accompanied by a low humming like one hears on hot summer days. This is then disrupted, interspersed with various footage, some from the Sabra and Shatilla massacre, bloody limbs sticking up from the rubble, half bodies, as if they could never have been human. To remember anything that is Palestinian not only relies on the celebratory treatment of cultural icons which testify to a time lived in the land of Palestine, but inevitably it brings with it thoughts of the bloody break and all the inhumanity that has come to characterise Palestinian existence away from Land. The installation ends with images from an electronic board at the stockmarket- the world goes on.

For the Palestinian refugees of 1948, the world does not go on, time is frozen within the defining moment of being forced out of Palestine. Yet Palestinians had every hope of returning and carried with them keys to their homes and title deeds. Fatima Killeen's mixed media piece testifies to this perpetual longing for return. It consists of a canvas of bits of iron and tin, such as found recycled to line the walls of dwellings in refugee camps. Rising out and floating on top, is a huge plaster key. This represents the key now strung around the necks of many refugees, kept close to the heart, the key to the home that they were forced to leave behind. If one looks at this key head on, its multi-dimensionality becomes hard to distinguish. Instead it appears as a negative space, a gaping hole left unattended on the canvas; a space where an object once existed but whose materiality from another vantagepoint is challenged. This artwork becomes an effective metaphor for the denial of the Right of Return, a gaping hole in the shape of a key, within all subsequent so-called peace plans.

Alexandra Handal's “RememberOnce” attempts to express something of the horror of the genocidal sweep of the country in 1948, but the whole tone of the piece implies exhaustion in the authors' voices. It consists of 33 images overlain with text, 3 rows of 11 images. The pictures have been lifted from Israeli tourist brochures, yet these otherwise idyllic

depictions are fuzzy, out of focus. The overlying white text is often very difficult to read. However this difficulty reinforces the exhaustion of the storytellers behind the text. How many times can a horrific story be told before it loses its effect and desensitises the listener. Handal, in naming her piece demands that we only need to remember once, enough to understand the horrifying reality of 1948. Yet repetition creates a meaningless horror. Indeed the viewer soon realizes that by not being able to read the text word for word, gains a generic sense of the horror created by gaping holes in the stories. Meaningless horror heaped upon meaningless horror is recounted in the “Deir Yassin Remembered” section, where Noarieh Khalit describes the murder of her cousin on the steps of her house, he was slashed from head to toe. Haleem Eid’s text describes the dismemberment of her pregnant sister and in the “Cleansing of Al Barsa” and the systematic executions of men by the Haganah militia is described by the women of the village who then had to bury the bodies. Horrific scenarios contradict the sanitized images, which are now meant to constitute Israel. Yet the lack of clarity of the images reinforces the feeling that something has gone unscrutinised and uninterrogated; that Israel’s existence is predicated not only upon the dismemberment of Palestine but also on the dismemberment of Palestinian bodies.

Horror is evident in the drawings by Beessan Semaan. The harrowed gaunt faces in the series “It wasn’t Raining”, stare out from a voided landscape, as if they have come from nowhere, and with deep black eyes, in which no light is reflected, they appear to stare into a non- future. We are inevitably forced to ask the question of what extent of inhumanity could these eyes have witnessed and yet we do so aware and afraid that we may lose something of our own sense of the world. We can do nothing but pass these figures by, the way in which perhaps many people have done so when crossing borders or passing refugee camps. Semaan’s figures come to represent all those who remain nameless and who have experienced unspeakable horror but whom the world, too afraid to acknowledge, continues to pass by.

Exhaustion, fear and horror turn into indifference towards those who have become dispossessed in Khaled Sabsabi and Maissa Almeddine’s installation “1492, 1788, 1948, 1967, 1982, 1991, 2003 etc etc etc”. The voice of Fouad Charida, a survivor of the 1948 catastrophe, “Al Nakba” can be heard. This recording was taken from the December 2002 storytelling day, when Charida recounted his exodus from Palestine as an 8 yr old boy, traveling on foot, losing his family on the way, only to find them later across the border in Lebanon. However, in this installation, his is a disembodied voice, signified by a thin flat line across a small screen. Soon his story becomes unclear, as it is often times obscured by an echo and sometimes the echo overtakes his narrative, then again the echo itself no longer follows the narrative but tells a different story. This disturbing development cheats the narrator of any gravity of meaning to his words; the echo returns but no longer contains within it the story it is meant to be echoing. As Sabsabi and Almeddine say, this is just another story of invasion, like so many other stories that it becomes “expected” and “meaningless.”

However Bouchra Beydoun’s “Ana Zahra, Ana Ahmad” (I am Zahra, I am Ahmad), gives identity to the victims of Al Nakba. Beydoun’s diptych contains personal affirmations of people displaced but who in the face of this, are insistent that they have come from somewhere and who recount their names and the names of their towns; their words float out into the world as testimonies in air. These people have stories, histories, identities; they are children of parents whom they have lost. According to Beydoun, as a little girl she would listen to a radio programme that had been created for the Palestinian families who were separated during "Al Nakba" and had no way of knowing what had happened to their loved ones. The Palestinians waited daily to listen to the radio, hoping to hear from

someone they knew. In one half of her diptych, thick swirls of painted words float above a distant horizon as one voice, spreads across a canvass of earth and electrified sky and claims "I am Zahra, daughter of Khaled and Rehab, from Gaza, send my greetings to my father and mother, and reassure them about me". These insistent affirmations of identity would have been spoken so many times before, perhaps at a checkpoint, perhaps in a refugee tent, or perhaps on the telephone.

The conviction that people came once from somewhere is also evident in Fouad Hammadi's "Memory Box" which represents what is left of "tired", "distorted" and "simple" memories of his town. And indeed one is given the impression that this simple picture is a memory acquired in early childhood. The canvas depicts a view squared by what could be the boundaries of a window, surrounded by blackness, as if staring out into a sunny day from within a darkened room. One perceives a palm in the distance rising above a sun-toasted courtyard within which a mule and a few figures loiter. The image is full of bold vibrant colour, but with none of the subtleties and it purposefully lacks depth of reality. It is as the artist claims a very naive depiction of the slow paced life of the peasantry; a momentary glance but one which, is also now reified to the point of representing all feeling and all memory for the old life. This is a far-away and unreal place, and we are left with the distinct feeling that so much has happened in the interim.

Hamadi's "Moment of Departure" however is somewhat different; this is an image steeped in the reality of dispossession. In one sense it alludes to a disjuncture between space and time, and hence a standing still, a moment of immanence. But contradictorily then again implies rapid movement, and impending change. According to Hamadi's caption, the image of a window, from behind which a woman in the shadows looks out from under a koufieh, represents her last few moments before departure. This feeling of fleetingness also overwhelms the viewer so much so that one momentarily believes that they are in the picture walking by this wall, rushing by this window from behind which we glimpse the shadowy peering figure. There is a feeling of inevitable change and destruction and this is reinforced when, on the bottom left hand corner of the wall, we read the words "Phalastine-al- Habbeebat" - Palestine the beloved. These words, which are so incredibly sentimental, could only have been written by someone saying goodbye. A broken faceless clock lies on the ledge of the window, with its hands strewn beside it. Again we feel the tension between stillness and motion, not only because time has stopped, but also because time moves on and instead we are left with a fraudulent type of time; a fraudulent history. Graffiti that surrounds the window, written over the stone wall makes no sense, words that sound like they should mean something but actually don't resemble any sensible known words in existence. However on closer readings one can see they are incomplete, broken. On this stone one reads FAL, on the other SAT and on the one below that YEN. Together these syllables, the reader soon realizes, should read in Arabic the name FALASTEEN - Palestine.

The memory of Palestine persists in very tangible forms in Fatima Killeen's other piece and testifies to centuries of sensuous interaction with land, upon which a Palestinian peasantry have left their mark. "Homeland: the forbidden fruit" is a beautiful painting which consists of a vibrant green wreath of oranges against a light earthy brown background of dotted lines, ridges and serial bumps on the canvass. It is as if the artist is tracing with her mind a topographic map marked by its cultivators with its orange groves, footpaths, terraces and streams from an inherited memory of the peasant landscape. The artist, recounting her legacy of stories of dispossession, says it is a land that peasants were not allowed to return to. Instead the orange groves that had been cultivated for centuries,

where uprooted and replaced by the trademark concrete of alien invaders unsympathetic to the ways of Palestine.

Salwa El- Shaikh also alludes to a past where sensuous interaction with the land testifies to a pre 1948 Palestinian peasantry and memory. Her "Untitled I" is a beautiful earthenware pot, of the type used by Palestinian women to cook food, over an open fire. This pot is decorated with the same patterns Palestinian women embroider onto their cloth. However it is also a disturbing piece just as it is beautiful- choked with rubble, that of a once standing home and stone and hence no longer functional. Perhaps this analysis is too literal a reading of the display, but one can't help feeling that it also signifies the end of a life in Land and that many a pot were left behind, strewn and buried by earth at the start of the exodus. However similarly her "Untitled II" a series of thrown and carved milky white, filigreed miniature pots, also testify to a history of sensuous interaction with land and of intimate knowledge of earth from the land, of its characteristics and potential transformation under the hands of Palestinian women.

There are two artworks that more directly represent the post-1948 Palestinian freedom struggles. However they are very different from each other; while one is celebratory and optimistic, the other portrays the inevitable violence done to freedom fighters; whether they stand still or whether they act, either position is untenable. In "The Prisoner" by Fouad Hammadi, the figure is broken, the head dismembered and while one bloodied hand holds a rifle towards an unseen antagonist, there is a gun pointed back at the prisoner's head. The figure is condemned an eternity to remain in this impossible position, imprisoned, for if he exercises any agency, in doing so he will also lose his life. This is a perfect expression of what bastard choices those living under occupation are faced with; either way they are condemned to some sort of death, internal or physical. However Mohamed Khaled's vision of the world unmistakably belongs to one who also has intimately lived with the struggle for Palestinian rights but has gained spiritual sustenance from bearing witness to it. It is the gaze of a person who sees the world from under the veil of a Koufieh. It is a beautifully bright world upon which the koufieh is emblazoned, in the sun, the sea, the earth and the sky. It is a Koufieh world. Khaled remembers the koufieh as it was worn by the politically active youth in the refugee camps where he grew up with all the excitement of watching the flourishing of a resistance movement. Looking at the world and into the future from behind the veil of a koufieh, it came to symbolise all the promises and possibilities of youthful resistance. It is easy to see why this piece was chosen for the poster announcing the exhibition.

What is contained within this exhibition as a whole, is a truth that no treatise since 1948 has been able to approach. It is not only an acknowledgement that a process of genocide began in Palestine in 1948 and continues today, but also a defiance of the denialism with which most of the world has treated the "facts". The exhibition is evidence, it is testimony and it is a pledge. Because it is all these things, it is also a tribute to those who survived 1948 and who continue to talk about a place named Palestine.

Rayyar Farhat is completing PhD studies in the areas of food security and agricultural trade. She has research interests in peasant studies and agrarian resistance movements. She is a supporter of Palestinian movements seeking to realise the Right of Return and the Right to Self- Determination