



Lifta: The Cipher of the Landscape - A Photographic Essay

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*No life is long enough for me to join me from
my end to my beginning
The shepherds took my story and hid it in the
grass covering the magic debris where tents
once stood*

*And like this with trumpets and choral rhymes
they cheated oblivion*

(Mahmoud Darwish, Murale)

Two old fishermen on the beach of Shatti refugee camp in Gaza. The older one is wiping his eyes while his friend tries to make him laugh. Rula said they had just been singing a song about the old days, about fishing off the coast of Jaffa before 1948. They were mending a net and singing with abandon. Then suddenly, the older fisherman began to cry and his old friend did what friends do – tried to bring him back from sadness with a joke. A small momentary exchange between memory and loss and the redemptive power of laughter and friendship.

Lifta. Photographic Series by Rula Halawani.



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Through these portraits we see Palestinians as they mostly see themselves, as they inhabit their own being rather than the various ones one imposed on them. There are no masked young men, no wailing mothers, no terrified children; the media spectacle of Palestinians is missing. But take another look and you will find them here too. The young man with the wry smile sitting in front of half-headless female mannequins; the beaming bride and the little boys in black belt formation – they too have resisted, lost, mourned, been terrified, angry and filled with despair. Just as the masked youth, wailing mothers and their children also celebrate, laugh, play or fall in love and from time to time – simply get bored. These portraits don't invert the dominant images by presenting their opposite. Instead, they do something much more subversive. By challenging the viewer to recognize the absences that are so fundamental to how Palestinians are represented, we are forced to recognize our own limited vision and the impossibility of capturing their complex totality.

But it is the landscape that dominates here; dominates because it is being consumed. And it seems to take with it both inhabitants and photographer until all we have left on its surface is submerged consciousness. It has become the cipher which hides the meanings through which we might be able to make some small sense of what has happened here – what has happened to a place and a people and an idea we have come to call *Palestine*. We can feel it, that something monstrous and epistemic has befallen us but our powers to comprehend it are failed by words. Invasion, settlements, checkpoints, the Wall – this is our language for what's in these images. But these



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words for events and objects are far too small to represent the enormity of what they have done.

These series that make up the corpus of Rula's work can be seen as extended triptych. What begins as an odyssey to decipher the meaning of the signs violently unfolding across the landscape finally dissolves into the painstaking investigations of a forensic pathologist. And at the last, we find only ghosts.

Negative Incursion captures the only "event" among the five series, Israel's 2002 military invasion of West Bank towns. It is also the last time we see people central to the images. The landscape like the bowels of a metal forge has been burnt charcoal black. Grey embers smolder; we can feel the intense heat of the pavement under the young men's bodies. The only thing that is truly alive are the tanks. A steel Minotaur charges over us tusks raised. Even at rest it is alert, lording over its prey on the pavement. The people who inhabit this landscape have been burnt to white ash. But they act as if they don't realize what has happened to them, as if they can only see what has happened around them. One of the young men on the pavement still wears his spectacles, a family of ghosts has made a make-shift tent, the old man who is slowly vaporizing still clutches his worry beads.



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And then color returns. There is a growing and living landscape. It is green and drenched in the goodness of water. But it is strangely ominous and threatening. You try and drive past it quickly, leave it a blur, look at the tree instead of what lies behind it. But its no use, even as you focus ahead, the road engulfs you with fear. Until finally you can't escape that the landscape is only sky and the dark smear of a settlement. Irrationally, the only landscape that grows here is the one that kills.

Intimacy: one land, two people, four hands. The only intimate exchange left between Palestinians and Israelis takes place across the smooth surface of a concrete block. One set of hands is assertive and expansive; it demands and takes. The other set is reticent and self-controlled; it waits and offers up what is demanded. The pattern never changes only what is being demanded and offered; an I.D. card, an open briefcase, a voluptuous black plastic bag, a backpack, your portly belly. The roles are fixed; you are either a wait-er/ present-er or a demand-er/taker. And the script that you repeat endlessly everyday is as monotonous; wait-demand-present-take-wait-demand-present-take... There are no other roles and no other scripts between the four hands on the one land of the smooth surface of the concrete block.

Wall: the making of a consecrated concrete machine. These are not images of a wall they are images of the production of divine terror. That is the purpose, we see it in pieces – it is made, constructed bit by bit. Its slabs lie waiting to be stood up and



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placed in formation. People have made this wall; generals, engineers, construction workers. There are still gaps but they only fill us with the anxiety of expectation – finality is inevitable. They are building us a tomb and the last gap is for the lid. Then it stands complete, marked by an obelisk and like a medieval cathedral it awes the believers and instills fear in the hearts of the sinners. And we are both.

What's left? The images in *Traces* are like the forensic documentation of a mass grave. An anonymous crime has occurred. There are not only victims' remains but also evidence of the perpetrators' tire tracks. There are bits of cloth and plastic mummified with soil or flattened by heavy wheels. There are dried twigs and root threads, crushed, turned over. There is a series of small unfilled graves, as if the diggers didn't have time to hide their work. But perhaps among these images of the land laid to waste in the building of the Wall there are some slight hints of genesis too; life before time suggested by the snow-like mud-scape or perhaps the origin of life-forms in the murky waters of a puddle?

And we do reach a beginning; or at least where this journey really began, not in 2000 but in 1948, in Lifta the phantom village. Of the more than 400 villages emptied of their inhabitants at Israel's founding, Lifta at the entrance to Jerusalem is among a handful that was left physically standing until the present day. Over the years what to do with its discomfiting presence has been the subject of a number of Israeli

proposals; make it a nature park or use its “desirable” vernacular architecture as the center of a luxury housing development. But none of these schemes ever came to fruition so it remains as it is – a haunting monument to the absent presence of its and the entire land’s original inhabitants.

The images are taken from inside the crumbling village homes, but our point of view is as if looking in from the outside. Blocks of light, like piercing eyes, survey the domed rooms scarred and blackened by mold. At times the rounded interiors seem to mimic the inside of a skull, the light – eye sockets. At others, two glowing windows, like a parent and child observe the suitcase that lies under a stardust sun. A tent sits on the floor its back to the invading light. The leitmotifs of refugee homelessness, the suitcase and the tent have come back to inhabit the refugees lost home. But they are not alone. Their owners left outside peer in. And it is to their powerful glow that we are drawn.

So here in the magic debris of Lifta, at the beginning that can’t reach its end, perhaps we have found how oblivion is cheated – not by the village’s still standing rooms, but by the survival of the story of survival.

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