

## "Men in the Sun"

Curators: Tal Ben Zvi, Hanna Farah Kufer Biri'm

Herzliya Museum of Contemporary Art

13.6.2009-13.9.2009

Artist: Abed Abdi, Osama Said, Asad Azi, Ibrahim Nubani, Asim Abu Shakra, Michael Halak, Durar Bacri, Rani Zahrawi, Raafat Hattab, Fahed Halabi, Ala Farhat, Scandar Copti, Rabia Buchari

The exhibition "Men in the Sun" explores contemporary Palestinian art, whose practitioners live and work in Israel. It borrows its title from Ghassan Kanafani's story by that name. Published in 1963<sup>1</sup>, the novel unfolds the journey of three Palestinians of different generations who seek work in the Emirates in an attempt to deliver themselves and their families from their harsh conditions of life. Lacking the necessary transit permits, the three are forced to hide in an empty water tank carried by the truck transporting them, before reaching the border crossing between Iraq and Kuwait. At the border station the guards detain the truck driver in idle conversation, and the three Palestinians die in the desert heat, on the outskirts of an unknown city. The story concludes with the desperate cry of the truck driver: 'Why didn't you knock on the sides of the tank? Why didn't you bang the sides of the tank? Why? Why? Why?'

The story of the three refugees illustrates the vulnerability and fragility of Palestinian life. Kanafani stresses the rickety temporal dimension of their being, where, among other things, they are doomed to such cruel death due to loss of time or suspended, detained time.

In his essay in this catalogue, Amal Jamal<sup>2</sup> notes that Kanafani's story reflects a profound temporal consciousness which refuses to accept the reality created in the wake of the 1948 Nakba. This temporality—namely, the Palestinians' perception of time—is based on their exclusion from history, on the emptying and suspension of their time: "Palestinians living in their homeland," Jamal writes, "also daily experience a sense of exile and estrangement from time and locality. The issue in question refers to the quality of the experience common to all Palestinians in the wake of the Nakba: suspended time, an attenuated existence over which there is no control, and the lack of normal continuity. All Palestinian communities, wherever located and irrespective of the quality of their lives, confront the same crisis. They share a festering sense of temporariness, the suspension and emptying of time, of waiting." This temporality, he maintains, is reflected in the work of Palestinian writers and artists intently dealing with the experience of loss, return, alienation and the challenge of suspended time.

The exhibition "Men in the Sun" revolves around two axes of meaning which recur in the works. One—"The Shadow of Silence"—continues the tragic, fatal silence of the three refugees in the water tank in the blazing desert. This silence echoes in many of the works in the exhibition. Silence, in this context, is a faithful expression of the impossible daily tension accompanying the circumstances of life and art-practice of Palestinian artists. The other side of the silence coin is a coded symbolical allegorical spectrum which draws away from artistic realism. Although this allegorical configuration partly responds to concrete

historical events, it is mostly latent, and does not emerge in the explicit interpretation and discourse regarding the works.

The other axis—"Temporality as a Palestinian Space of Consciousness"—is centered on temporal contemplation of the space. The time-space relationship is present in the works both in the images of emptiness or absence of people from their surroundings, and in the images of the thicket and the labyrinth. The consciousness of ongoing temporality, or the long conscious wait in anticipation of change, is present in the work of these artists from the very outset, yet is gradually replaced by a new consciousness of temporality as a type of normalcy which increasingly takes over their existence.

Via countless intersections, the show's two axes, "The Shadow of Silence" and "Temporality as a Palestinian Space of Consciousness", unfold an intricate system of affinities and contexts, visual and narrative strategies and interpretations in Arabic and Hebrew. This system reflects the artists' dialectical space of existence in the tension between being "from within" and "from without", inside and outside; between "belonging and "otherness", between national cultural fields and differentiated borders.

The exhibition is steeped in this dialectical tension. It sets out to unravel the overt and covert stitches which tie silence to speech, temporality to normalcy, the sense of collective urgency to the position of the subject seeking a place for himself in which to create and exhibit, while also striving to change the charged history of representation and the positions stemming from it, and to sketch a horizon of change.

<sup>1</sup> Ghassan Kanafani, "Men in the Sun," in *Men in the Sun & Other Palestinian Stories*, trans. Hilary Kilpatrick (London: Lynne Rienner, 1999)

<sup>2</sup> See Amal Jamal's essay in this catalogue, "The Struggle for Time and the Power of Temporal Awareness: Jews and Palestinians Lost in the Historical Labyrinth," 2009. (trans. Nina Reshef).

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