

TAREK AL-GHOUSSEIN

THE CENTRIPETAL MOVEMENT

By: *Cristiana de Marchi*

Arturo Bandini had a strange experience. One night he approached the Pacific Ocean and nearly drowned. Regardless of the dramatic circumstances he was facing and of the fact he was fighting for his life, he never stopped "mentally photographing" the scene and thinking about its best translation into a literature page. Bandini is an alter ego and a fictional character, just like Tarek Al-Ghoussein seems to embody a metaphor in his works. The *K Files*, his most recent series to date, presented within the Pavillion of Kuwait curated by Ala Younis at the 55th Venice Biennale, is indeed paradigmatic of a path. Over the past decade Al-Ghoussein has deeply evolved in his practice,

moving on a tensed line, always avoiding the risk of falling in the precipice of repetition and significantly renewing the subject matter of his artistic research. We might dare to say that the interpretation of his work has been initially circumscribed to a literal reading, a descriptive rather than a metaphoric one, thus associating over a considerable frame of time Al-Ghoussein's practice with a clich  that a certain western critic was pleased to recognize in the work of a "politically engaged" Palestinian artist. Undeniably the elements often mentioned and recalled while referring to and analysing Al-Ghoussein's early works - the position of Palestinian citizens both within the boundaries of their nation and as exiled, the image of the Arabs

depicted and transmitted by the western media, the representation of the Palestinian as a terrorist... - constitute a relevant segment of Tarek's practice. Nevertheless they represent a starting point, or a revolving one, the central point on which, like a hook, a rope is attached and from where, in a tensed centrifuge movement, it is projected outside, following a trajectory which is still circular, held, yet pointing at a wider horizon. Issues of identity, the national as well as the individual one, along with the relation with the physical place where one happens or is denied to live, with the consequent questioning about belonging and longing, have been frequently evoked and are openly proposed by Al-Ghoussein as a key to interpret his work.

In their recurrence, self-portraits are a tool for a deep and insisted observation, a merciless self-analysis that engages with the context, an adoptive one, which grants the indispensable detachment to allow a proper investigation. It is interesting to note that both elements are always on focus, apparently pointing to an equal interest for both the self representation and the representation of a territory that in its neutrality, in its anonymity - such as the deserted lands of UAE, which have offered an ideal background for Tarek's staged photographs - seems to have acquired the status of an alter ego. Although for an artist the objective of creation cannot be to cover the distance from A to B, yet it is often a matter of displacement, in its strict etymologic sense. After exploring and apparently exhausting his personal



Untitled, C series, 2013, photograph, 60x90cm - Courtesy of the artist and Taymour Grahne Gallery, New York.



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and national mythology, with *(In) Consideration of Myth*, an assumingly long term project started in 2012. Al-Ghoussein has moved into a new direction, and he has done it by returning to the origins, in a progression that does culminate with the project presented in Venice. In fact *The K-Files* take him literally back to and face him with his adoptive Country - perhaps the only one we can ever claim as ours - where he re-enacts the exploration around themes of individuality and spatial dimension and reverts the terms of the research as well as the balance of the elements. Born in Kuwait to Palestinian parents, Tarek Al Ghousein embodies, and through his practice does translate, the quest for a definition of identity issues into an investigation around themes of displacement and political manipulation of an imagery that could be easily contested. Through this analysis -and Tarek seems to absorb and delve into the scientific spirit in his exploration of the placement of the individual within a wider geo-political context- the transition from the structural and tangible experience to a more abstract one becomes palpable, thus moving into a mental space and dimension. Indeed the work of Al-Ghoussein has significantly developed over the past

decade, in its conceptual aspects and motivations as well as in its formal results and outcomes: if the first series from the consistent body of work generally referred to as Self-Portraits were focusing more on themes of inclusion and exclusion, the successive series metaphorically reflect on issues of spatial control and freedom of movement. "Whereas the barriers that were the focus of earlier work form identifiable boundaries that can either include or exclude, the roundabout is a space defined by movement. The E series considers the location of the individual within larger systems of order that may affect our ability to move freely." These series have in common the confrontation of the individual to an open space whilst the last body of work, presented within the Kuwaiti Pavilion in Venice, partially shifts the attention to and literally enters into the closed spaces and volumes of selected Kuwaiti buildings. Although the openness still remains an ideal dialectic element in Tarek's images -such as in the ecstatic *K Files_473*, where the artist establishes a complex relation with the water element, by turning his back to it, anchored to a provisional ladder, caught in the very moment before the contact with the sea becomes unavoidable-

architectural settings are introduced as true elements of confrontation. Indeed this body of work partially responds to the curatorial demand and concept elaborated and proposed by Ala Younis for the first Kuwaiti Pavilion at the Venice Biennale. In her words, "National Works disassembles symbols of grandeur in paused/post glorious times, in an attempt to re-interpret Kuwait's modernization project." Tarek Al-Ghoussein exploration of the relation of an individual with a past that he can hardly recall (born in Kuwait, he has lived his childhood and youth abroad) and with a present in which he is not fully participating (having lived for more than a decade in the UAE) is universal and paradigmatic and it does perfectly fit in his poetics of displacement and investigation around the meaning and sense of belonging. His presence on the scene, whilst prevailing in his previous series, becomes nearly an undetectable silhouette, thus following the process initiated with his *(In) Consideration of Myths* series. A certain impossibility to confront, at an individual scale, the grandiosity of the architectures that symbolize the ambition of a Nation permeates the series, where the imponderability of human presence haunts the scene. The individual seems to acknowledge the disproportion, by accepting the position

of being a spectator (*K Files_117*, *K Files_496*) or by standing in front of imposing architectural elements thus physically illustrating an unbridgeable gap (*K Files_323*, *K Files_496*). The intense photograph (*K Files_Sheikhs 171*), showing Al-Ghoussein reverentially faced to the celebratory sculptures created by Sami Mohammad, seems to engage a dialogue between the two artists representing Kuwait at the Venice Biennale rather than between the individual, the citizen, and the ultimate representatives of the Nation. Indeed a strong message is sent about the mediation offered by the artwork, as an instrument to represent and reduce at the same time the inapproachability, almost the abstraction of the National concept. Myths are like rocks, a solid surface where metaphors are incarnated to often solve moral doubts. Yet myths also resemble quicksand, a terrain of uncertainty where the moral interpretation can be regarded as a metaphor itself, which is epitomized by Sisyphus' endless cyclic struggle. Tarek Al-Ghoussein makes a poetic statement out of this figuration, by moving between the centre and the periphery in a continuous tension between attraction and repulsion, the universal laws of physics no one can ever escape.



Untitled, K-Files series, 2013, photograph, 60x90cm - Courtesy of the artist and Taymour Grahne Gallery, New York.



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