

The Painting as Real: Hani Zurob

By Adania Shibli

References to photographs as a reflection or a representation of the real, or even as hyperreal, are quite common. Visual theorists, such as Martin Jay, explain such references not only to photographs but also to paintings that are a produce of perspectival gaze, by the fact that the camera obscura model, assigns a place for a viewer who is disconnected from the viewed scene; for example, an objective viewer of the world. Other theorists, namely Norman Bryson, explain that such type of images, generate this sense of resemblance to the real world, based on the ratio of the depicted objects in the frame.

Still it never occurred to me that paintings, which are not even generated based on perspectivalism, could also be ‘representing’ the real, until I became familiar with the work of artist Hani Zurob, and in particular for his collection of paintings *Standby* (2008-2009).

Standby reveals deformed faces and bodies, painted in dark colours – using mainly bitumen, spread inside the frame almost randomly, leaving some parts of the canvas inside the frame empty. The paintings come to act as a representation of the real, just as photographs may, not based on the method of perspectivalism, but based on what they reveal – and equally conceal, in their very own method.

In a text referring to *Standby* Zurob writes:

“The choice of bitumen as a basic material for my ‘Standby’ project is [...] the fruit of a physical and psychological background during a specific period in my life... Darkness and grey colours have always dominated the home in which I was born, Rafah Camp during the days and nights of the first Intifadah [...] during which we witnessed the difficult conditions of curfew imposed by the [Israeli] occupation.”

Zurob continues to describe how he eventually found a refuge during these prolonged days of curfew in the furthest corner of their house which was full of his father’s books and magazines, with several of them containing drawings in them. These drawings, in their turn, prompted the young Zurob to copy them using transparent paper; and as he got better and better, he started adding his personal touch to them. It is this personal touch then, one can hold accountable for the deformed bodies and faces, composed of thick dark lines of bitumen piled in the centre of the frame. And this personal touch is again nothing but a personal experience of a deformation, or to be more precise, a deliberate destruction of bodies in the real world of the artist. Referring to the major Israeli military offensive to a number refugee camps and cities during the spring of 2002, Zurob writes in the same text quoted earlier: “Ramallah had been transformed into blocks [...] of bitumen material spread out everywhere; all roads had been destroyed and become blocks of raw material made of cement, bitumen and sand[.]”

Hani Zurob sent me a couple of images of some of his recent paintings, in fact for the sake of writing this text. In one of these paintings, which are dominated by bright red colours, there appears in the lower middle part of a frame, a figure of a child on a bicycle, heading towards the other distant end of the frame, where he would only become more unreachable. I say to myself ‘Something had happened then!’

These straight lines and patches in bright colours, filling the frame, are the exact opposite of the deformed dark bodies, spread in parts of the frame in *Standby*. The severe rupture in style and colours must equal a severe rupture in reality.

And there I realize how Zurob’s work act as ‘real’.



Hani Zurob. *A flying lesson*, 2009. Mixed Media on Canvas, 240 x 100cm. Image courtesy of the Artist

Hani Zurob was born in 1976, in Rafah (Gaza). In 1994 he left to Nablus where he completed his studies in Fine Arts (2009). He then settled in Ramallah until 2006.

In 2006, Zurob got a grant that allowed him to reside at the Cité internationale des Arts in Paris. Since then, he held different solo shows in Atlanta, Marrakech and Paris. He has also participated in several group exhibitions and artistic events such as: Palestine: La création dans tous ses états held at the Arab World Institute in Paris (2009) and then at the National Museum of Bahrain (2009), Gaza 61 + Seoul 59 at the Young Gallery in Seoul (2009), Paris, Damas: regards croisés which was organized by Europia Productions, held at the Arab World Institute in Paris (2008) and then at the National Museum of Damascus (2009), Made in Palestine at the Station Museum of Contemporary Art, Huston, Texas (2003), the 11th Cairo Biennale (2008), and The Still Life Symposium at the Henry Moore Institute in Leeds, UK (2008).

In Palestine, Zurob had staged many solo exhibitions and was awarded the Al-Qattan Foundation Young Artist Prize (Ramallah) in 2002.

Being the Bourse Renoir 2009 prize-winner, Hani Zurob is currently living and working between Renoir's atelier in Essoyes and his own atelier in Paris.

Adania Shibli has been publishing fiction and narrative essays specifically on visual art since 1996. Shibli holds a PhD in Media and Cultural Studies, from the University of East London, London, and has been engaged in academic research and teaching.



Hani Zurob. *Untitled*, 2010. Mixed Media on Canvas, 200 x 160cm.
Image courtesy of the Artist



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