

Jawad Al Malhi

By Tina Sherwell

The Jerusalem based artist Jawad al Malhi has explored the site and experience of marginality for the last twenty years via painting, installation, photography and video. With his studio at the entrance of Shufhat refugee camp, the largest camp in Jerusalem, that has recently been surrounded by the Partition Wall and a major checkpoint at its entrance, he advocates the importance of being a witness to the times through his art work. At the early age of nineteen Al Malhi began documenting daily life in the camp through monumental oil paintings, which he created on the sacks of sugar and flour that were distributed to the refugees. His early paintings captured the intimate details of daily life, such as community efforts to deal with the flooded streets during heavy rain, children's games and life in the home, the figures that inhabited his works evoked a strong sense of unity reflected in their form throughout these works. In 2005 he re-visited these works with the installation *Going Nowhere*, in which the oversized bicycle stands idle outside the white painting, which is created on sacks of food that are still distributed to the refugees, while the children and the biker appear ghost like, he seems to no longer play but peddles with the burden of riders on his bike.

The series *Apparitions* created between 2004-2006, distilled the artist's observations of workers who leave the camp in the early hours of the morning, in the slow silent march towards the checkpoint to work inside Israel. These are the Palestinian manual labourers who work as cleaners assistants in underground car parks and the construction industry, an unseen population in the city of Jerusalem and beyond. The paintings are inhabited by their silhouettes falling into an infinite nightmarish space, while the bodily forms of accompanying miniature figurines are sculptured by the toil of work.

Al Malhi's recent work that has been shown at *Provisions*

for the Future, Sharjah Biennale, 09, Palestine c/o Venice, (Venice Biennale 2009), and Middle of the Middle East at Sfeir Semler Gallery, Beirut (2008) explores questions of marginality via the architecture and geography of the refugee camp by exposing different viewpoints and positions of accessibility to the scene of the camp. The artist created a series of panoramic views of Shufhat camp in Jerusalem, taken from the neighbouring Israeli settlement not accessible to Palestinians, which overlooks the camp, enabling the exploration of the image of camp from the position of an onlooker. The series is accompanied by narrow photographs taken from within the interior of the camp accessible only to the familiar. Panoramic views of Jerusalem have historically been dominated by images of the Old City and its Holy sites, thus Al Malhi's photographs offer an alternative scenario, testifying to another reality that is manifest in the 'promised land'.

"I return to this settlement, to this forbidden space, to photograph from the place of my childhood games. These are the hills where I used to camp and run wild, I was from 'the project' and so I thought I was someone special, it was only as I grew up that I came to understand the way we were viewed by others that we were outsiders to all and that the only sense of belonging came from within."

Al Malhi's photographs examine this contingent space, its architecture and the large physical presence of the camp characterized by concrete buildings. Particular attention is paid to the concrete forms and the haphazard and chaotic structures that speak of aspiration, human impulses and urges of reproduction that are a testimony to the absence of political solution to the question of refugees. Concrete is commonly associated with stability but in camp's architecture landscape it suggests the opposite as building derives from necessity. Building is always postponed in the hope of return, however circumstances dictate need, which is



Jawad Al Malhi, *Apparitions*, 2005
Acrylic on canvas with silver cast figurines, 272 x 212cm



Jawad Al Malhi, *House No. 197*, 2007-2009
 Photograph, 600 x 72cm
 Image courtesy of the Artist

reflected in the haphazard built structures. The buildings are never conceived as a whole from ‘foundation to rooftop’ but rather are built in piecemeal fashion for temporary use as their occupants wait to leave. This constant temporality has shaped the culture of the camp and the mind set of younger generations, inevitably vacating time of meaning, which Al Malhi observe in his video works, keen not to represent the camps population as victims Al Malhi’s panoramic works show an absence of people, while his video works, focus on individual subjects and their containment within the confined spaces of the camp.

Via video the artist explores the experience of claustrophobia, “This question of claustrophobia has led me to study small groups and their activities by day and by night. I positioned myself as an observer to record the inhabitants of the camp. The community of the camp has disintegrated and splintered in relation to their previously shared social values. We have been transformed from a community into small collectives who inhabit a space because of circumstance and necessity.”

Positioning his camera in different locations of observation the artist documented how time unfolds

and elapses by day and night for the workers of a gas station that was situated on the margins of the camp. The young men live in a port -cabin that houses a large petrol tank, petrol being emblematic of the Middle East. The observations reveal their interaction with the street and their power relations and control over the geography of the container and their isolation by day and night. Time shows itself to be monotonous, mundane and endless in the confines of the camp in which the control of small space takes on a new precedence. This is most evident in the fact this gas station no longer exists, it was burnt down by members of the camp, after its owners refused to relocate the container. Other video works such as *The Painter*, filmed from the overlooking settlement, portrays the silhouette of a man rhythmically painting his house by neon light on a long hot summer night.

Al Malhi current projects explore the space between moving and still image in relation to the geography of the camp and the surrounding segregated landscape which will be shown at the Delfina Foundation in June 2010, where he will be on Delfina and A.M Qattan Foundation artist residency. During his residency he will be undertaking research that explores the legacies of relations between United Kingdom and Palestine as

they are articulated in public space and monuments. He is also currently working with young people in Shufat camp on a pilot project based on documenting the experience of the camp, its history and changing geography to compile in the first part of An Atlas of Refugee Camps. His site-specific installation, *The Qalandia Tourist Information Bureau* that was short-listed for the Frieze Cartier Award is yet to be realized which explores the question of site-seeing, as it defined in a context of non-visibility: The Partition Wall. The Wall and the checkpoint work to the opposite ends of the aesthetics of tourism functioning to restrict viewing, prevent mobility and access to the landscape. At the same time, Palestine is increasingly becoming objectified in 'war tourism' as a place to be visited. *The Qalandia Tourist Information* explores the dichotomies of vision, visibility and site-seeing in Palestine.



Jawad Al Malhi, *Going Nowhere*, 2005
Detail: Oil on burlup sacks (250 x 250cm) and bicycle
Image courtesy of the Artist



Jawad Al Malhi, *Still from Gas Station*, 2007-2009
Video duration 56 mins.
Image courtesy of the Artist

