



The Shadow of the City

Interrogating Contemporary Spaces of Jerusalem

By Tina Sherwell

“The space in which we live, which draws us out of ourselves, in which the erosion of our lives, our time, our history occurs, the space claws and knaws at us, is also in itself a heterogeneous space.”¹

Many of the artists in the exhibition *The Shadow of the City* explore the multi-variant spaces of the contemporary city of Jerusalem and the residues of the past. The work takes us from the cemetery to refugee camp the old city streets to the isolated suburbs. They cast light on the contemporary paradoxes of a city whose everyday existence struggles under the weight of religious significance, historical iconography, national aspirations and military occupation. The city today is surrounded by a ring of Israeli settlements and checkpoints that create a continuous fortress around Jerusalem. While stringent residency regulations are enforced on the Palestinian population of occupied East Jerusalem, constraining daily life.

1 Michael Foucault, “Of Other Spaces.” *Diacritics* Spring, 1986. p22-27



Jawad al Mahli, *Tower of Babel re-visited*, 2009
Photograph, 600 x 72cm

The city's spaces are a testimony to its layered history as its terrain has been carved by conquest, colonialisation and occupation- as W.J.T Mitchell suggests, "landscape is a medium in the fullest sense of the word. It is the material "means" (to borrow Aristotle's terminology) like language or paint, embedded in a tradition of cultural signification and communication, a body of symbolic forms capable of being invoked and re-shaped to express meaning and values."² Each ruling power has attempted to shape the city into its ideal image, notwithstanding however, such interventions are never hegemonic and individual and communal transformation and resistance over the years have persisted in creating a heterogeneous space and lived reality in this iconic city.

Jerusalem does not only exist under the weight of its history but also the imagery that has been created of it. As the centre of the Holy Land, paintings, photographs

and travel narratives of the city have filled the European imagination for several centuries, while its position as the third holiest site in Islam adds to its revered representation among the Muslim peoples. In modern Arab art it holds a pivotal position as a lost golden city, a place that has re-occurred in representation across many of the canvases of Arab artists, an unreachable revered destination. While in Palestinian art it has become a monumental icon of national identity and aspirations, in which religious sites are the dominant symbols of the city. Thus it is this case that the city of Jerusalem has more than often been represented through

particular lens that has contoured its representation, shaped by the ideological projections and desires, towards the city. However notwithstanding artists both Palestinian, Arab and international have been engaged in deconstructing and challenging such iconography, particularly through research of the multi-variant spaces of the city.

2 W.J.T Mitchell. "Imperial Landscape" in *Landscape and Power*. Ed. W. Mitchell, 1994 p.27



King Hussein of Jordan began construction in 1964 on his West Bank palace in Tel el-Ful, but construction was halted when the Six-Day War broke out. King Hussein's palace was never finished and all that remains is the skeleton of the building.

Shufhat Refugee Camp, established in 1965. The size of the camp is 2 km sq and is rented by UNWRA. The residents of the camp are refugees from 1948 from the villages around Jerusalem. 500 refugee families were transferred from the Old City of Jerusalem to the camp in order to evacuate the area that became the Jewish Quarter.

French Hill establish Israeli settlement Jerusalem after Israe

Twenty-six artists participated in the exhibition, which included works, which had evolved out of ArtSchool Palestine 2008-2009 residency programme. The artists in this exhibition chose to explore the 'other spaces' of the city, outside the iconography of the city creating representations that interrogate and engage with silent narratives and fragmented space of Jerusalem city spaces which is not dissimilar to Michael Foucault's definition of heterotopias one's position to which he describes in the following way, "I am over there, there where I am not, a sort of shadow that gives my own visibility to myself, that enables me to see myself where I am absent."¹

Several artists in the exhibition explore paradoxes of the city, via postionality, positioning themselves often in the space of the other or in contexts to shed light on the geographical reality of the city and its transformation. Sarah Beddington, in *Elegy to Mamilla*. The cemetery dates back to the time of Salahaddin and was a major burial site up until the 1920's for dignitaries, religious figures of the Al Aqsa Mosque, scholars and military leaders- thus is an important historical site for the Arab history of Jerusalem. The cemetery is a space

within the community that encapsulates temporality of humanity and is marker of the presence of absence as Foucault's notes the cemetery captures "slices in time" it begins with "the loss of life, and with this quasi-eternity in which her permanent lot is dissolution and disappearance."² However loss is not through departure of the dead and natural disappearance of the subject but through the leveling of the site, where bulldozers eradicate the past and the sacred site of memory and remembrance. Beddington takes an unrevealed vantage point enabling her to film the works on the site from dawn until dusk. She captures the movement of workers and the slow methodological destruction and transformation of what will be the location for the future 'Museum of Tolerance'. The lingering shots and passages in the film, with the narration of the inscriptions of the tombstones create a poignant sense of loss and absence- The juxtaposition of this imagery with tranquil scenes of surrounding landscape make one question the authority of historical narratives and inscriptions and fabrications of the natural landscape highlighting the buried and destroyed histories at these locations, tranquility of Jerusalem's sites uncover violent cleansing of multi

1 Ibid: Foucault p.24

2 Opp Cit: Foucault p.26



ed in 1968. The first
established in East
Occupation in 1967.

Pisgat Ze'ev established in 1982.
Construction of this Israeli settlement
ran between 1982 -2001 on occupied
Palestinian land and today has 50,000
residents.

The Partition Wall surrounding Shufhat Camp
construction commenced in 2003, and is
accompanied by two checkpoints. The Wall
separates the Jerusalem refugee population
(approximately 35,000 people) from access
to their city.

cultural history of the city as Mitchell suggests, “ the face of the holy landscape is so scared by war, excavation and displacement that no illusion of innocent original nature can be sustained for a moment.”³

The transformation of the landscape and the legacy of conquest, occupation and displacement as architectural manifestation is explored in the large photographic panorama by Jawad al Malhi. The landmarks of power with the first Israeli settlement in East Jerusalem (French Hill), King Hussein’s incomplete Palace at Tel el-Ful and the newly built Partition Wall that now surrounds the refugee camp separating its Jerusalem inhabitants from their city are all captured in the photograph. The panoramic view provides an alternative image to the established view of the old city found in photographic representations of Jerusalem- Malhi explores the inscription in the landscape that has resulted in sixty-one years of displacement. The accumulative architecture of the camp, whose development is temporary, incomplete and piecemeal, lies in contrast to the opposing Israeli settlement. The chasm and absence of communication between the two communities is evident and underlined

by the snaking wall in between the two communities. The panorama provides a dissection of the body of the landscape rather than a utopian, timeless panorama of the old city’s religious sites and gateways to heaven.

The paintings by Sliman Mansour bear witness to the colonial desires and aspirations, taken from aerial photographs dating back to the nineteenth century that were used to acquire knowledge about Jerusalem. These legacies of power and colonial enterprise vis a vis the landscape are revisited by the artist in his paintings *Uncertain Landscapes*. Oraib Toukan’s probes the anomalies of the State and in her work 501 objects, testifying to the performance of the State. In 2008 the Israeli government auctioned off diplomatic gifts, many of which were from Arab countries. Toukan reworks the auction catalogue examining the politics of exchange.

The layered history of place and the inscriptions of displacement accompanied by the violent acts of erasure are captured by Alexandra Handal in domestic spaces in Jerusalem in the *Bed and Breakfast Notebooks*. In East Jerusalem’s Musrara, Israeli’s have occupied old Palestinian houses have been where they run bed and breakfast hotels. Her film encompasses layers of narratives that explore the intimate banal details of

these spaces, as they undergo renovation- renovation that entails the erasure of the past, the erasure of the traces of their original residents. Her shots capture the old tiles, the arched ceilings, and the wooden windows and melancholically linger over the remains. We hear the sounds of drills and workmen and see their tools and paintbrushes scattered here and there, accounts of exodus and the fear of remaining amidst the violence that ensued. The narratives and imagery are intercut with unveiling testimony of the artist's body search by an Israeli soldier, which serve to create a sense of foreboding and intrepidation, as personal space is violated.

The artists in the exhibition not only engage with the erasure of histories but also the potentiality of the city as a space of imagining, whereas traditionally distance and separation from the city has motivated artists to create utopian representations of the city, Asad explores the inability to reach Jerusalem and temporal and spatial separation from city through figuring the endless postponement of arrival. Using the airport flight announcement electronic-boards, we watch and wait for the flight to Jerusalem, which is continuously postponed and delayed. Asad vividly catches the suspension of time that the question of Jerusalem has existed in and the space of waiting- of being neither 'here nor there', which is experienced by so many Palestinians.

Too Many Steps in the Wrong Direction takes us on a fantastical journey through the streets of the old city of Jerusalem, in which fantasy is combined with the everyday shops and souvenir stores and historic sites. In Anna Boggon's animation work, a disembodied pair of old high heel shoes make their way through the old city. The miniature shoes provide us with a different perspective of the city, for the miniature has toy like qualities and the toy as Susan Stewart describes, "The toy opens up an interior world lending itself to fantasy and privacy."⁴ The shoes take on a persona of their own, sometimes bold, sometimes intrepid yet they are also able to traverse reality, by dancing in the streets, jumping into the sky, for as Stewart suggests the miniature "does

not attach itself to lived historical time" the miniature create[s] an 'other' time, a type of transcendent time..."⁵ which in Boggon's work holds the promise of exploration and fantasy.

The potentiality and possibilities of the space of fantasy is vividly explored in Larissa Sansour's *A Space Exodus*, which takes us on a dream-like journey proposing the first Palestinian on the moon. Sansour has created an adaptation of Stanley Kubrick's film *Space Odyssey* in the context of the Middle East and question of Palestinian identity and citizenship, exploring its significance and potentiality in the extra-territorial.

The twenty six artists in the exhibition explore the multi-variant spaces of Jerusalem and beyond, probing the paradoxes and layered history of the place, as well as positioning themselves in various locations to interrogate the manifestation the politics of the city, while at the same time exploring its potential as a space of imagining.

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4 Susan Stewart. *On Longing: Narratives of the Miniature, the Gigantic, the Souvenir and the Collection*. Duke University Press, 1998 p.60-61.

5 Ibid: p.61



Rafat Assad, *Journey*
Two channel video installation on a loop 24.00mins, 2009

Anna Boggon, *Too Many Steps in the Wrong Direction*, 2009
Video stop frame animation, 04:00 min, video still. Courtesy of the artist

Sarah Beddington, *Elegy to Mamilla*, 2009
High-Definition video, single-channel with sound, 18:25 min, video still
Courtesy of the artist