

Hazem Harb

By Jareh Das



have a good dream, 2012, digital photo mounted on aluminium frame, light box & neon, 200x150x30 - Courtesy of the artist and Etemad gallery.

Having spent his childhood and teenage years growing up in the contested grounds of Gaza, Palestinian artist Hazem Harb's artistic output serves as an apolitical, first hand account of this on-going conflict. Harb's occupation with the conflict is not aimed at representing or depicting 'the spoils of war', he is more concerned with the human suffering which in turn affects the psyche of the people who live in these areas.

In 1933 Albert Einstein famously wrote to Sigmund Freud posing the question: "Is war inevitable?" (or more precisely "Is there any way of delivering mankind from the menace of war?"). Freud's response to Einstein

was published under the title, "Why War?" His answer is consistent with what was known at that time about human motivation and aggression. Harb's oeuvre can be understood as experiential sets of investigations which pose this same question, Why War? He presents through his works the delicate nature of human life consumed by suffering in his abstracted representation of conflict. Through all encompassing film, painting, sculpture and photography – the subject matter often dictates which medium will best serve the purpose in question. Harb's early paintings produced a series of works that focused on the suffering he witnessed in



Remains #11, Remains series, 2012, inkjet printed collage on artist papers, edition of 3, 114x148 - Courtesy of the artist and Etemad gallery.

Rafah in 2004. These paintings consisted mainly of female nudes featuring aspects of amputation. These can be described as the ‘amputated nudes’ series. Although the forms are abstract, they are headless and limbless hues of dark, floating forms on a white background but are of mutilated bodies.

There is a sharp contrast between the delicate curves of the female form and the harsh reality of mutilation, asking the viewer to contemplate the brutality of such an act and consider the indiscriminate nature of war.

Hazem continued to work extensively as an artist in Gaza but moved to Italy and spent his formative years studying in the city. Although he continued to work in themes related to his homeland, the influence of this new context is exemplified in a body of work titled Round-trip. In his Round-trip series 2010, Harb observes a different kind of human suffering when confronted

with migrant populations seeking refuge in Italy. He decided to take part in a popular migratory route from Rome to Barcelona commonly used by North African migrants, documenting the journey taken by many individuals from countries like Libya, Egypt, Morocco, and Malta. Most of the boats are overcrowded and travellers put their lives at risk as they were exposed to dangers at sea or they encountered police meaning imminent deportation if caught.

Through photography, Harb is not aiming to offer a didactic approach; rather he seeks to open a new discourse about the on-going condition in Gaza by offering open ended questions through his works: - “What is it like to live in a land of occupation?” “What is it like to experience this?” “What happens at home during conflict?”



Remains #7, Remains series, 2012, inkjet printed collage on artist papers, edition of 3, 114x148 - Courtesy of the artist and Etemad gallery.

In his most recent photographic body of work, the Remains series 2012, Harb takes a marked departure from previous work and produces monochromatic imagery imbued heavily by the most recent war in Gaza in 2008. This was the first time he had returned to Gaza after an extensive period in Europe.

Harb describes the scene as ‘utter devastation’ with little possibility of having these mass large areas rebuilt due to the sheer scale of destruction caused by his city being under siege.

He was able to navigate the landscape (no comma) and was especially drawn to the destroyed homes and the eerie silence around him.

He wondered about the occupants of these homes, all of their most private space – bedrooms, living space were now made public, not by choice but by the situation. The mattresses and unmade beds, once part of daily

existence, are now abandoned, desolate and eerily silent. Harb appropriates ‘the mattress’ in his multi media ceiling dropped installation “I can imagine you without your home 2012” as a symbol for fleeing in this context, as we are accustomed to seeing people leave in haste with rolled up mattresses. In the photographs from this body of work, it becomes poignant, as these are what were left behind, perhaps with little time to gather one’s belongings prior to fleeing.

Hazem Harb’s practice is one that commands contemplation of human suffering and of expression of personal experiences. He does not sensationalize conflict, nor turn it into a documentary re-telling. He subtly navigates the landscape and captures the overlooked and the forgotten, raising new questions on a conflict that is unending and evolving, a conflict that we don’t know of when or how it will be resolved.



Remains #7, Remains series, 2012, inkjet printed collage on artist papers, edition of 3, 114x148 - Courtesy of the artist and Etemad gallery.

Biography

Born in 1980 in Gaza City, Palestinian artist Hazem Harb currently lives and works in Rome, Italy. In 2004, Harb enrolled at the Academy of Fine Arts in Rome, Italy and graduated from The European Institute of Design in the city in 2009.

Harb's work has been exhibited internationally in group and solo exhibitions in the UK, USA, Italy, Palestine and Jordan. His first solo exhibition in London, *Is this your first time in Gaza?* has the poignant message of highlighting checkpoints and suffering it inflicts on Palestinian travellers. In 2011, Harb was awarded a residency at The Delfina Foundation, which was also supported by A. M. Qattan Foundation. Harb has won numerous awards, including being selected as one of ten artists for A. M. Qattan Foundation Young Artist of the Year 2008.

While using a variety of techniques, Hazem Harb deals with a number of core themes including war, loss, trauma, human vulnerability and global instability. He continues to explore his own brand of multi-media conceptual art using all the tools at his disposal.

About the Writer

Jareh Das is a young curator who currently works on Communications and Artist Liaison in a Dubai gallery. She has worked between London and Middleborough at MIMA (Middlesbrough Institute of Modern Art) and holds an MA in Curating Contemporary Art from London's Royal College of Art. Recently curated exhibitions include: *Ubi sunt*, a group exhibition of UK and international emerging and established artists which created an experiential environment in a disused chapel in South London. She has also worked on curatorial projects at 176 Zabłudowicz Collection, ACME Project Space, London and participated in the Manchester International Festival, 2011. She has written numerous articles in various publications in UK & UAE.

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