

Palestinian Tragedy through the Eyes of the Artist

by Evrim Altug

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Particularly in these tragic and horrific times in Gaza, how does your artwork *38 days of re-collection* become redefined?

Palestine has become a ruin and I am not referring only to the situation on the ground. The fragments of paint in *38 days of re-collection* were collected from the walls of Old City homes in Jerusalem. These homes are painted every summer, yet every autumn the paint peels off and gets thrown away, but residue of the old paint remains on the walls, and ultimately gets painted over. Over the years, thin layers of paint accumulate, and multi-colored layers overlap one another. Time is embedded within them, and in these layers a visual palimpsest awaits to be discovered. Once decoded one discovers bits of history, especially because the work looks like a visual puzzle, and the story emerges of a dispersed fragmented nation, lost in what seems to be an eternal exile.

These fragments and the images on them are suspended in air when exhibited, but images change form with the passing of time and history has taught us that nothing remains the same. I wonder when the pull of light and gravity will transform the work again. Given that change is the only constant in life, one wonders how the lack of a resolution in the political situation between Israelis and Palestinians has stagnated for so long.

I guess in such works context becomes content. We only need imagination to find who we are and what we are searching for. In many ways, a state of surrender has invaded the consciousness of Palestinians in the never ending Israeli occupation, with the exception of the people in the Gaza Strip. It is the role of the individual to stand up and free him or herself from the new form of colonization that most people are unaware of, the colonization of the imagination. Palestinians do not need the UN, the EU, or any other country in the world, and especially not Israel, to tell them that they are free. We are all born free. Every Palestinian should wake up today and say - I am a free person. Freedom is not something that is granted, freedom is something felt. There can be no set date for the independence of Palestine. That independence day is today. Everyone should declare it.

The pieces in *38 days of re-collection* look like fragments that were once part of a giant structure. They also look like maps, fragments of micro-landscapes like in an atlas, reminding us of the main form of the struggle that has lasted decades. How do you describe these structures, which look like the contemporary relics of a humanity with a broken heart?

In *38 days of re-collection*, I continue to deal with fragmentation and fragility, concepts that characterize some of my previous artworks. This work was created in two parts. First I rented a Palestinian home in Jerusalem that has been occupied by Israelis since 1948. During my 38 days living there, I became an obsessed visual investigator, trying to decode the mystery of the house, its original owners, and what happened to its space through the layers of time. I photographed almost every detail. Then I went to the Old City of Jerusalem and collected the peeling fragments of paint from the walls of where I was born, where I grew up, and other places. The act of peeling was an act of revealing.

I then printed the images I took in the occupied house onto the colorful fragments. The result has multiple connotations, one of which maybe how you refer to them being relics of humanity. In one respect they do feel as if they take us back in time, almost to cave art, almost to the beginning when human beings became

aware or developed the consciousness of their surroundings. In my work I engage in an archeology of the future, which is not necessarily based on finding physical objects, but is rather based on understanding images and their formation. This has been the human quest since the beginning of time. And yet what characterizes the world today is a lack of consciousness. We lost the ability to connect ourselves to our surroundings because we consume the world mostly from a safe distance, through its image. This has led us to incessantly question what is real and what is not. One thing is for sure, human suffering is real, unlike the illusions I create. My illusions are only meant to act as imagined bridges, map-like structures that connect us to our past with an eye to the future.

There have been demonstrations against the Israeli government around the globe, as well as demonstrations by Orthodox Jewish people. Do you have any comment?

In my opinion, Jews living in Israel are hostage to the Israeli system, where they are systematically brain-washed through their education and media. I have started to believe that Israelis, and in particular Jewish Israelis, need to go through a systematic psychological treatment to make them conscious that they are not living alone in the world. Israel should be subject to international law and should put its religious quest aside. The conflict has nothing to do with religion, and this is the trap that Israel wants everyone to fall into. I personally have no issue with any Jew in the world. I do have issues with Israeli policies that cement the occupation of Palestine on a daily basis through the construction of settlements, the Separation Wall, and endless other invisible structures.

Reconciliation can only start with a real apology, a sincere one, by the Israeli government officials and citizens for what they have done to the Palestinians and to the land of Palestine. The only way forward is through the recognition of the suffering of the Other. It needs to be a genuine apology. Israel has been on the wrong track for decades. Israel has tried wars again and again with the Palestinians, but has Israel ever tried peace?

Some sources have said the both Israeli and Hamas officials are responsible for today's situation at Gaza. Do you agree?

Of course I don't agree. What most people do not understand is that the core issues do not concern Hamas or the current Israeli policies. Instead one needs to face the core issues that involve what happened to the Jews during World War II and the settlement of the land of Palestine, the Occupation. The occupation must end, and this is why we are not reaching a resolution.

But instead the general public and Israel (because it has the upper hand) are dealing simply with the side effects and cosmetics of the conflict. They try to cover up wounds rather than heal wounds. In 2008, I made a project called *Settlement - Six Israelis & One Palestinian* where six Israelis were photographed stripped down to their underwear, as well as myself. I created an installation of life-sized photographs, where the six Israelis stand on one side of the room, confronting the one Palestinian hanging on the other side. This work is intended to highlight the need to go back to the essence, the core, in resolving this conflict.

What is your main ethical goal as an artist? How do you struggle aesthetically to achieve those goals? And how do Western and Eastern public audiences and intellectuals respond to your pieces like *Settlement - Six Israelis & One Palestinian*?

My aesthetic struggle is to create art with no connection to history, but instead, art that looks into the future. I have no ethical goal as an artist per say, because I do not believe that artists should have goals or destinations. Once an artists thinks he/she has reached their destination, they should retire and spare the world from unnecessary visuals.

As for *Settlement - Six Israelis & One Palestinian*, the project was meant to make people think, rather than react with emotions. There is nothing wrong with emotions in a work of art, but in this project in particular, I

scraped away at the nostalgic layers to reveal some of the core issues pertaining to this never ending conflict. Again, one cannot divorce the context of this work from its original reading. To be honest with you, this work has mainly been reviewed by magazines from our region. Perhaps this is because many writers in the 'West' might be afraid to tackle anything that has stripped Jews in it in a deep way. The intention of this project was not to expose anyone, but rather to create a new mental space to kick start a process of self-interrogation and introspection.

The installation of *Settlement - Six Israelis & One Palestinian* create an unresolved tension visually, especially because of the uneven number, that questions survival tactics between Palestinians and Israelis. The writer Tami Freiman, who is the daughter of Holocaust survivors, writes how Israel's anxiety was transformed into an ideological instrument justifying the oppression of others. How the nation has the Holocaust breathing down on its neck, in constant fear that it might happen again. Thus, victory for Israel against Arabs was always crucial. In everyday use 'paranoia' means a feeling of persecution that is unjustified in reality. Israel is a very strong state, yet it lives in fear. Does this one Palestinian pose a threat? Any solution between Israelis and Palestinians should also involve a psychological solution. Both nations require mental healing. Hence, I wanted to tackle this paranoia artistically, only to discover during the making of the project how multilayered and complex it has become.

By creating opposition and visual imbalance in this work many questions and reactions are inevitably triggered. The viewer who stands in the middle of the installation cannot see both sides at once. The viewer is confronted with a critical choice.

Do you have any criticism of Turkey's position in the Middle East ?

All countries have interests, and I have dropped my case with most. But what every country has is its citizens. I do believe in a universal truth when it comes to human freedom and dignity. There is no other way to look at what's happening in Israel and Palestine. It is obvious even to the most naive of eyes.

Having said that, don't you think the time has come where the international leaders should wake up from their drunken state of power to realize that their decisions, or lack of decisions, have become nightmares for the majority of people on earth? In my utopia, the world should be borderless, nationless, with one central world governance that maintains equal rights and services for every citizen. We would all become citizens of planet earth.

I'm sure you are aware of The Palestinian Museum or the Arab Image Foundation. What is your opinion of these efforts?

The Arab Image Foundation is on the right track in looking at the Middle East through its image. The only issue is that we must remember to keep the image and the so-called "real world" separate. Instead we need to study the image's ingredients and visual components from within. This will allow us to develop another language separate from the linear spoken and written language towards a decoding of visual grammar. Most people do not know how to perceive the language of images. As Walter Benjamin implied, the illiterate of the future will be those who are unable to read images.

Our region has been unable to understand the power of images and their ability to communicate globally, since the invention of the photographic image to the present day. But this language is the language of the world. In my opinion, the only way to survive is to understand image formation. And today I find myself going on an odyssey trying to find the origin of the image.

But let's return to the Now. We notice all the time that there are two wars happening, a physical one where people die, and a virtual one, one of images, where people get lost. The Israeli system knows perfectly well how to create bruised images, manufactured and constructed in closed rooms in service of their ideology.

As for the Palestinian Museum, I doubt if it is collecting art with Palestine and its cultural heritage in mind. I don't believe they see the bigger picture, their vision is limited.

You have said previously in a video documentary that Jerusalem is in exile, not you. Do you have any idea of a clear solution that could help bring freedom to this situation?

In 2006 I made a call to Palestinians around the world, asking them to submit mental images of Jerusalem as they see it, in all its nuances. The *Jerusalem in Exile* project revealed how we live in the image of our own cities, and how the original places disappear. This realization made me lose my sense of gravity and center point. I started living in no man's land and became a stranger to myself. The only way out was through the imagination. I needed to create a virtual place, remain in transition, and become a citizen of the world. To achieve that I needed to come to terms with my exile, and not deny it.

I came to terms with my exile after a process of self interrogation and introspection. As Vilém Flusser, Czech-born philosopher, writes, "Émigré become free, not when they deny their lost homeland, but when they come to terms with it". I did not want my DNA to change, I would always come from Jerusalem, but what could change was consciousness and perception. This did not imply surrender to circumstance, but rather the need to confront the many layers of my alienation. I stitched my wounds with barbed wire until I could not see it anymore. It became invisible—an organic extension of myself. I had been freed. In *Metamorphosis*, a project I worked on in 2012, I focused on this conflict between form and function, visual and perception, stagnation and transcendence. In it, concrete fragments of the Separation Wall appeared to liquify and dissolve. This new structure transforms the indissoluble into the penetrable.

By examining exile from different angles and perspectives, I have been able to dig deeper into the relationship between images and the reality they create. Decoding fixed systems, that are constantly at work to entrap people in bordered spaces, has led me to see the bigger picture. Looking back at my work, I see that I have been unfolding a visual palimpsest that explores the multiple layers of my past, and the influence perception has on 'reality'. Like a visual investigator, I look at images directly, observe their characteristics, the connections between them, and their origin. By positioning images, as if in a puzzle, I reveal new realities with infinite possibilities. This transition of thought triggered me to break down personal barriers—leading me to real liberation.