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A place is where your memories are: An interview with artist Rafat Asad

May 28, 2016 at 4:36 pm | Published in: Interviews, Middle East, Palestine, Videos & Photo Stories

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"White Phosphorus". Acrylic on Canvas - 200 X 100 cm, 2009. [Rafat Asad]

Naima Morelli

May 28, 2016 at 4:36 pm

According to Rafat Asad, as a Palestinian artist, you can't avoid being political. "Every moment you live in this place is political," he tells me. "If you want to go to a restaurant, travel to another city, whatever you do under the occupation is an act of resistance. The issue of Palestine is not the focus of my work, but it is part of my life. It informs everything I do."

Art is, inevitably, influenced by the environment in which it is created. As such, artists living in conditions which are beyond the norm or are just plain absurd will produce work that makes us question our most basic assumptions. What, for instance, is a place?

Eltifaf – Bypass, Asad's latest show at Gallery One in Ramallah, is a perfect example. While

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not overtly political, the exhibition can be read as both militant and existential. It features a series of paintings depicting artificial barriers and signs on the road from Ramallah to Nablus, the signs juxtaposed in stark contrast with the landscape. This route is familiar to Rafat, yet although he has driven through the beautiful scenery frequently, he has never had the chance to enjoy it, being forever focused on getting to his destination as quickly and safely as possible.

“Eltifaf in Arabic means bypass. We use the term to refer to the alternative routes we have to take if there is a checkpoint in your way,” he explains. “We started to use the term more frequently after the Second Intifada, in relation to the Israeli forces which secured the roads. If the Israelis feel there is even the slightest danger, they close the street to Palestinians, so we have to find another way to get through, and it is never a short cut. If it normally takes one hour to go from Ramallah to Nablus, with the alternative route it can take up to four hours, sometimes even a full day.”

Rafat Asad is a cheerful man with dishevelled, curly hair and a friendly, gap-toothed smile. He was born in Nablus into a family of three brothers and five sisters. As a young boy, he looked up to his older brother, who was versed in art, music and literature. The teenage Rafat

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would peer into his brother's room, his curiosity aroused by the strange music and smell of oil paint.

"My brother was reading, painting and drawing, and music was on all the time. I liked this creative environment a lot and started to imitate him. We began sharing the room and I used to mess around with his stuff while he was away."

His dream became reality when he finally attended the Fine Art School at Al-Najah University in Nablus, where he met other artists and like-minded people. After graduation, he went on a road trip around Palestine with his friends. "We were eager to discover the country, discover the people." The trip left a long-lasting impression on him.

After a short stint as a teacher, he moved to Ramallah and its livelier art scene. It was there that, following a few collective shows, he held his first solo exhibition. The subject was one that stuck: the notion of the landscape.

His early investigations of landscape were very different from Eltifaf – Bypass. Narrative, his first series, was in fact abstract and highly personal, drawing on memories and sensations from the countryside in which he grew up as a kid. The exhibition was a success, and he was invited for a three-month artistic

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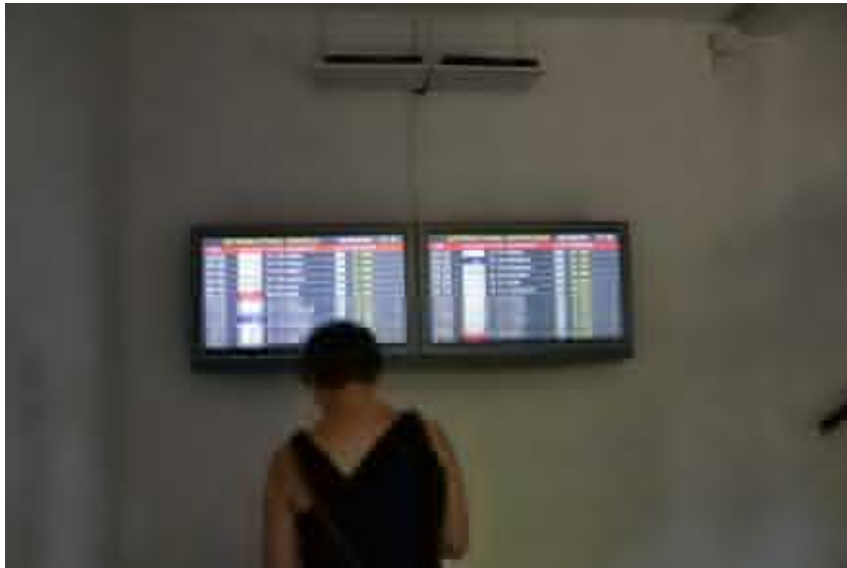
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residency at Delfina Studios in London. "I had never been outside Palestine before, and it was a bit of a culture shock for me. Everything was so dramatically different. It was the first time I'd ever used a map. To find my way in Palestine, I'd just ask people; in London, I had to use a map, otherwise I'd have got lost."

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The residency ended up inspiring paintings in which maps are the point of departure for abstraction. The works seem to suggest that in London places are mostly defined by cartographic evidence, whereas in Palestine a place is something people hold in their memory, to which they can direct you easily.

Yet Rafat Asad's investigation of the sense of place was just beginning. After a creative pause (during which he was busy setting up an art space called Al-Mahatta with a group of friends), he returned to the idea of the landscape with the series Marj Ibn Amer.

Although figurative, these paintings didn't belong to the en plein air tradition, but were in fact a mental representation. "Marj Ibn Amer was for me a romantic way of imagining this place I had never been to. I used this place as a symbol for an idealised Palestinian landscape." In this idealised version of his homeland, there is no trace of human intervention. Despite not being spelled out, the reasons for treating the subject in this particular way once again arose from the political context. "My father once lived in this place, so I've heard a lot of stories about it. But today I'm denied the right to go there. So the romantic idea of looking for Marj

Ibn Amer also came from the occupation.”

Imagination is often a way for artists to compensate for something that is missing. Trying to mend an absence is a driving force in Rafat Asad’s art. This can be found not only in his painting sequences, but also in his installation and video work. One of the most iconic works in this sense is certainly the video installation called Journey. This shows an airport timetable with Jerusalem as a destination among others. The flight for Jerusalem, however, is constantly delayed. Although in a physical sense Jerusalem is very close to the Ramallah-based artist, if he really wanted to reach it, the city is actually much farther away than, say, Nairobi or Vienna.

“One time, waiting for my connecting flight in Istanbul airport, I was imagining: ‘What if we had an airport in Palestine?’ And actually we had one once; it was called Kalandia International Airport. I live right next to it today. It would be so much easier to travel, instead of going through Jordan and the border, and passing through the three security checks. Most importantly, having an airport is also one of the marks of having a state.”

Rafat has recently returned to his house in Ramallah after visiting Europe. “As a Palestinian artist, when you go abroad you are always expected to speak for your people, to

be responsible for your homeland. You have to be aware of a lot of things. If I were a French artist, I would be able to not care about politics if I didn't like it. But as a Palestinian I can't do that. It's part of my life and I just can't ignore it."

In France, he visited a few friends, some of whom are Palestinian. One evening after dinner, he found himself discussing the idea of homeland: "I told my friend, 'When I'm sitting here with you, Paris is my homeland related to you, because you live here. Ramallah is my homeland because my friends and family are there. Nablus is also my homeland because my parents and sisters live there. For me the idea of homeland is related to the people that live in a place. You might live all your life in a beautiful garden, but if your people are not there, you will end up not feeling attached to the place.'"

This, he adds, is also why he believes that Palestine is his home and the land belongs to the Palestinians. "Because my father, my grandfather, my great-grandfather and so on once lived here, they have all their memories here. A place is not a table or a chair. If you live all your life in a place, then it is yours. A place exists in relation to human beings."