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Disclosure and Seclusion, Declaration
and Disguise

When Ahlam Shibli left me copies of the two series of photographs, *Arab al-Sbaih* and *The Valley*, that she had exhibited at Darat al Funun, Amman, in 2010, under the title 'Why did you leave the forest empty?!', I began turning the pictures over in my hands like someone looking for something without knowing exactly what. I flipped through the photos of *The Valley* first, hoping to find the beginning of a thread to start writing. Then I put them aside, took up the pictures of the other series and did the same, over and over, but I didn't come across what I was looking for. What was I looking for? For some important event that these pictures captured, at least some of them? Or for an exceptional moment seized by them?

Indeed, the huge volume of visual output that the media generate via their crews deployed all over the world, and especially in Palestine, has bestowed a certain ease on our sensitivities and abilities to contemplate images. It has imbued us with a visual appetite pressing us to consume the image in real time, since we have got so used to the idea that the image depicts an event or an exceptional moment — which makes it easier for our eyes to take in the image immediately and without trouble.

The photographs of Ahlam Shibli in contrast don't seem to yield much. They don't offer the gluttonous viewer any free services. Instead, they force him or her to take another look at his or her manner of viewing. They force the spectator to dive into a deliberate experience of contemplation and searching, which could lead to the opening of a dialogue with, or perhaps an interrogation of, the artist in order to discover the various details and contexts of the images. Maybe because of that Ahlam Shibli found herself forced to integrate an explanatory note next to the exhibited photographs — documents and testimonies of the history that the places and its inhabitants preserve. Her pictures do not yield to the influence and pressure of real time at all. It is as if they lacked internal configurations, or confirmations by the artist that would give the viewer a hint at her underlying intentions.

These pictures stand apart from the visual output about Palestine, by Palestinians and others. They possess a character of neutrality and aesthetic lightness on the one hand, and of the normalcy of the moment and its non-exceptionality on the other. Apparently Shibli took her pictures in a moment that held no special significance, a non-specific moment sliced out of the monotonous march of time

that extends forward and backward with the same rhythm. What is shocking about the pictures in these two series is that which appears mundane, while hiding history in its folds.

Every time I went back to contemplate *The Valley*, especially the pictures of the village whose houses stretch along the foot of the mountain, I felt a kind of alienation, as if these pictures pushed me out, keeping me, the observer, far away, confined to a place resembling the threshold before a closed door that would never open. I am the stranger. It is as if Shibli only leaves a space big enough for the viewer to stand at the threshold of her world, unable to enter. As if that world was not welcoming the traveller, but rather concealed its details from him or her, and revealed only what he or she could manage to see from his or her far corner: the roof of a house rising above the roofs of other houses, all similar in their design, their bricks, their satellite dishes, or wide streets and tidy sidewalks on which road signs of all kinds are distributed, as well as containers, advertising posters and commercial logos.

Everything suggests the presence of an internal organization that makes this village part of the output of laws and an authority regulating the lives of its inhabitants, and makes it at the same time part of the output of the market. Yet none of this elucidates our knowledge of the inner lives of the inhabitants of these houses, whose features resist our gaze and make them almost indistinguishable. The world itself, as the pictures present it or as the photographer presents it, appears strange and inscrutable.

The paradox here is that the world of this village, with all its secrets, is most certainly a world known perfectly to the artist, for it is in fact her own world, where she was born and raised, and she has not broken her bond with it even after eventually settling down in Haifa. But she chose to present her world in this way — closed in on itself, and closed off to the viewer —, as if she were taking a neutral, or problematic stance of non-belonging.

However, the alienation that informs the pictures of the houses in *The Valley* disappears when Shibli displaces the lens to photograph the landscape surrounding the houses: the valley, the forest and the woodlands. These pictures transport us to the Palestinian landscape as we know it — even if a Jewish settlement appears in it, even though it is an unstable scene. Its precariousness is not due to its nature, but

rather to the hegemony and violence exercised on it, and the forceful actions of the state and its judicial and executive apparatuses. There is more than one picture showing the village as a busy worksite, where bulldozers are digging and biting into the side of the mountain, perhaps to plough a new road leading to a dead end, or to add another house at the expense of the woodlands.

What price is one prepared to pay in return for a house in a place where one has lost a battle?

When I started flipping through the pictures of the other series, Arab al-Sbaih, I was met by a more familiar world, closer to my personal memory, my own visual dictionary. This is a world of people and details, signs and names that are easy to recognize. It isn't hard for anyone from this part of the world to know that these are pictures from places where Palestinians live. And they aren't just Palestinians. They profess their national identity ostentatiously, to the extent that, while the photographer does not indicate explicitly that the pictures are of the refugee camps in Irbid or al-Baq'a, the photos themselves state that fact. First of all, they are filled with numerous nationalist signs and symbols, and names of Palestinian cities. Faces and features are both familiar and intimate — they carry in their eyes a single collective experience. Secondly, the photos show the neglected streets and sidewalks, the poor, dilapidated houses, the communal walls with all kinds of visual interventions — writing, drawing, propaganda —, all of which relay to us a place that seems outside all regulation and must be a Palestinian refugee camp.

Ahlam Shibli's lens is what allows us to close in on the details of this world, the camp, and slip through doors where people with features like ours live, who place on the walls of their homes and their shops those nationalist icons we know so well, pictures of Arafat, Saddam and Yahya Ayyash, the Dome of the Rock and so on. And this is the same lens that withheld from us the world of the village Arab al-Shibli. In other words, the eye that allows us to see the intimate details and features of one of the two worlds is the same eye that conceals from us the details of the other. Shibli even allows us, with calculated intent, to read a language we know well; we can read its words scattered on the walls and on the many tombstones in the Cemetery of

Martyrs in the images of *Arab al-Sbaih*. On the contrary, in the other series she makes the other language appear — if it appears at all — incidental, and in a panoramic context in which no central point or subject presents itself, to such an extent that, for the viewer to catch linguistic signs at all, effort and careful examination are required. Written words such as the name on a house or shop are tiny details in a wide open setting amidst a sea of more numerous and multi-faceted signifiers. Thus language appears secondary.

Indeed, the appearance of language, central in *Arab al-Sbaih* and marginal in *The Valley*, pushes the recipient of the two settings towards a deeper engagement, even entanglement, with the different worlds of images; it infuses the process of viewing with a new orientation. Images are no longer a purely visual medium: itself a visual medium but more generally a medium and vehicle of knowledge, language imbues them, becoming one of their fundamental elements.

As a result of his or her engagement and entanglement, the recipient will attempt to dismantle the codes operating within the language he or she knows, thereby conjuring ideas and repercussions and summoning various historical events and places in addition to awakening existential questions as like as not. Or the viewer will stop short, unable to understand the signifiers of the foreign language, which represents a complete world of signification closed to him or her, goading him or her to search in the image for another key to that closed world. In a Hebrew-dominated context, for instance, a sign bearing the name *The Shibli Bakery* in Arabic renders the feeling of exclusion incomplete for the Arab speaking viewer even if he has no knowledge of Hebrew [p. 51 bottom].

Indeed, the appearance of language in the two different series pushes the viewer into becoming an actor within the image, and compels him or her to try to understand more about the motivations of the artist and the historical context of the photographs, to situate the photographer and the instant she took the pictures in a more specific chronological and geographical context. For language itself becomes clear evidence of the presence of the photographer, in that moment and at that place. It signifies that the photographer herself was at that time in the position of the viewer in relation to that same language.

Photography, as Ahlam Shibli presents it, simultaneously conceals and reveals. Through concealing, or marginalizing, she presents the identity of a given place in a way that seems equivocal; through revealing and focusing on many details, she allows the other identity to present itself with clarity and force. Conveying two contradictory meanings, the Arabic verb *asarra* could perhaps represent an approximation to the verb *to photograph* as practiced by Ahlam Shibli: *asarra* means both to keep a secret and to confide it to someone.

The appearance of language in the two series is analogous to the appearance of people. The instances in which inhabitants appear in *Arab al-Sbaih* seem intentional, essential and central, whereas their appearance in *The Valley* seems incidental and marginal, conveying no significance for the content of the image other than the fact that — contrary to what many signs in the picture would suggest — the inhabitants of this place are Arab. No one would miss the nationality of the woman in the picture on page 38 [top]. This village that seems foreign in terms of its architecture, the names of its shops and other cultural signs — in one of the pictures, even an Israeli flag is visible, raised on a windless day on a balcony [p. 51 bottom] — is Arab. But then again, which identity do the inhabitants of this village hold now?

We know that the signs contained in the houses of Arab al-Sbaih in Amman, Irbid and the Irbid Refugee Camp, and in the houses of refugees in camps like al-Baqa'a and others, could never appear in the houses of people from Arab al-Sbaih who remained in the village Arab al-Shibli in the Lower Galilee. After 1948 the latter renamed their village to escape the retaliation of the new authorities for the resistance that those who had left the village had mounted against the Haganah. How could a poster of Arafat or Ayyash, or any martyr, big or small, appear on the walls of a house where the owner has written his name in Hebrew above the entrance? A hero there, a terrorist here. These signs would be attacked with ferocity by the authorities, because they would be thought to represent a denial of the existence of the new state, its narrative, its history and its values, and furthermore a threat to its security and stability. To display such signs would risk punishment by the state.

Neither place matches its hypothetical identity. That is, to be a refugee in another country is to keep the identity of your original

homeland inside yourself, with you and around you, without actually enjoying the homeland itself. But to be in your homeland makes it imperative that you work to destroy its meaning and its components, that you hide your true identity and declare another one, even when you build yourself a house there. The question of identity, both of the place and its inhabitants, is therefore the essence of the two series.

The historical narrative in *The Valley* is contained in the complete change, the restructuring and reforming that the place has undergone to serve the official narrative of the new state, more than in its inhabitants, because they themselves are subject to the manipulation of the state, its laws and its bargains. Thus their staying there, their houses and what they were able to preserve from their village could be seen as either a gain won through bargaining, promises and shrewdness, or as a compensation for a painful surrender and defeat. In *Arab al-Sbaih*, differently, the inhabitants carry their narrative and the narrative of the place inside themselves and on their faces, in their houses, their bedrooms and living rooms, on the walls of their streets and on their tombstones. They inherit it and pass it along, reproduce it again and again, and persevere in furnishing their new space with it, so that it stays warm and the new space remains in the service of the old.

Thus declaring one's identity defies time's erasure of the claim to that so-near-yet-so-far homeland; to stay in what once was his or her recognized homeland on the other hand forces the inhabitant to hide his or her original identity and build a new one. And one cannot capture an identity without bringing the lens of the camera to the small details which together build a complete homeland in memory and dreams; whereas the process of suppressing one's identity, or putting it to sleep, makes the camera open its lens wide to take panoramic shots, eliding the details of the inhabitants' spirits and dreams.

A struggle between amnesia and remembrance is associated with two contrasting places and two different times: a past that doesn't want to learn to forget and whose current guardians maintain, nourish and reproduce it in their camps; and a present that declares its forgetting, or wrestles with memory and suppresses it, if unable to dismember it.

Who are the original people of Arab al-Sbaih? They are the owners of Wadi al-Midy, which crosses the village lands in the Lower

Galilee to meet the Jordan River near Beisan. It used to be planted with orchards with springs and water and then became a dumping ground for sewage from the adjacent settlements with the founding of the State of Israel. And those who stayed after al-Nakba have inhabited Mount Tabor, or al-Tuur as the people of Arab al-Shibli call it, since they renounced the old name of their village, Arab al-Sbaih, and adopted a new name guaranteeing their safe entry into a different historical trajectory.

An exodus took place when the sheikh of Arab al-Sbaih set out with his people on a long journey from Palestine through Lebanon and then Syria before leading them to where they are now, refugees in Irbid and the neighbouring camp in Jordan. They left because they had no option to stay, after they realized that they would be targeted because they had defended their lands, their forest, their valley, their mountain. But the question is, why did those leave and these stay? And why did these build their houses at the foot of the mountain while the forest and the valley remained empty?

Today's refugees are indeed yesterday's rebels, and the inhabitants of the camp are the rightful owners of the valley and the forest that the state seized on the grounds that they were the property of absentees. The valley and the forest can be seen as a place of contemplation for these two different Arabs, one looking at it from his house and seeing the present and the past together, and the other looking out from his memory, where he sees only the presence of the past.

The valley and the forest are a theatre of heroism and disappointment; they are the place of the hero and the anti-hero. The valley and the forest stand in front of the mountain. The valley and the forest are alone in reality and in memory, while the mountain consumes its own body, nibbling on itself. These houses take nibbles out of their homeland, whereas the camp and the refugees have never stopped working towards recreating the homeland in its entirety. The homeland appears whole in the picture of the sheikh of Arab al-Sbaih brimming with manhood and grandeur, which is supported by a sculpture of the Dome of the Rock in the family parlour in Irbid, while his son, who is the new sheikh, sits smiling next to the drawing [p. 67]. And it must be the grandson there, opening the window and pulling aside the curtains to let the sunlight enter the bedroom of the deceased

sheikh, onto his clean, made bed [p. 71]. A room no one occupied after him; it remained a stage for the past and the production of memory. This room is in fact the valley and the forest together.

The valley is a two-sided mirror into which the people from Arab al-Shibli look to see themselves from the mountain, for it reflects the woodlands wounded by the strange houses; and it allows the people from Arab al-Sbaih to see themselves there far away, still carrying that same place with them, that faraway homeland still being regenerated in them and their stories, even in their women's waiting at the doors of the UNWRA offices, even on their gravestones.

Two images arrested me more than the others. They belong to different series, each summoning a contradictory question and invoking a time before al-Nakba, and before the founding of the State of Israel. The first image is a photograph of a photograph in a silver frame, or perhaps brass, standing on a table in one of the homes of Arab al-Sbaih, in Irbid [p. 65]. It shows that competitor from Arab al-Sbaih wearing a white jersey and shorts, pure joy flushing his face as he receives a prize from the hands of an elegant British official. Other British officials appear in the picture, wearing their hats with elegance and dignity amidst a crowd, in the background of the picture a piece of the Palestinian landscape, a horizon nestling one single, lovely house. The second image is a photograph of a place demarcated by a rope tied taut around three thin poles, to mark the spot in the eastern valley that once harboured a reconciliation meeting between the people from Arab al-Sbaih and the Jews from what was then known as the Mas'ha settlement (later Kfar Tavor), after one of their men killed a man from Arab al-Sbaih who had tried to steal a handful of their grapes [p. 37 bottom].

Who framed and kept that photograph in the picture with such care, over so many years permeated with long wars, and carried it along on the arduous journey of a refugee from the Lower Galilee to the Irbid Refugee Camp, on a trail crossing Lebanon and along the border of Syria through the Rumman Valley — a path the artist tried to trace with her camera and a powerful sense of place? It is such a long and unforgiving journey to hold onto a picture of a sports hero from the time of the British Mandate, such a faraway history for that picture to remain framed with such precision and care, to remain still a source of pride after all these decades.

And finally, why do the people from Arab al-Shibli still preserve that demarcated spot, why all that interest, or perhaps collusion, in keeping it present on the scene and in their lives, thus keeping the promise of that reconciliation agreement alive after all that has happened?

Ahlam Shibli

Go there, Eat the mountain, Write the past

The Valley
Arab al-Sbaih
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Essays by Mahmoud Abu Hashhash,
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The Khalid Shoman Foundation
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