

Sarah A. Rogers

Arab al-Sbaih and The Valley
The Past Present

An unoccupied, white plastic chair rests against a cement wall on which the 'Palestinian Buffet' of tea, coffee and cappuccino is advertised in Arabic [p. 86]. Across from that wall stands a coffee kiosk with stacks of small white plastic cups. Photographed during off-hours, the Palestinian Buffet emanates a desolate emptiness. Yet, it is precisely the quiet stillness that allows the text on the wall to whisper the photograph's subject: the insistent and perpetual memory of Palestine among its diaspora.

The photograph of the Palestinian Buffet is part of Ahlam Shibli's photographic series, *Arab al-Sbaih*, that shares the story of the Palestinian refugees, who having been expelled from their village of Arab al-Sbaih in 1948 have lived for three generations in the Irbid Refugee Camp and later also in Irbid City and its outskirts in Jordan. Situating her camera at various angles and distances, Shibli depicts the landscape; a young boy running in the street; individuals in their homes; community cemeteries; schools; and most poignantly, photographs of family photographs. Certain photographs capture only an instant — a young man draws a drape to allow the sunlight to spill across the room, a group of female students walk inside Irbid's Abdallah School for Excellent Students. In juxtaposition, others depict a scene that appears timeless, a mannequin frozen still in a store window or the Cemetery of the Martyrs in Irbid. There are images that stand testimony to a site of historical importance such as the shelter built by the exiled sheikh of Arab al-Sbaih in Irbid for the people of the neighbourhood during the 1967 Israeli-Arab war. Others document the beautifully mundane gestures of daily life — two shabab sit at a Nargila coffee shop decorated with a Palestinian flag. Seen in series, the images visually narrate the story of the Palestinian diaspora that perpetuates itself in the present through daily acts of remembrance.

The photograph of the Palestinian Buffet taken in the al-Baqa'a Refugee Camp near Amman belong to a subset of photographs which depict small-scale commercial establishments named after Palestine or the owner's native town or village. In a second example, for instance, Shibli photographs Markez al-Quds (or, in English, the Jerusalem Centre) in the Irbid Refugee Camp [p. 84]. As in the Palestinian Buffet, Shibli's artistic choices draw the viewer's attention to the use of language as a mnemonic device: photographing the establishment during off-hours; the focused camera angle on the text; the black and white print. In the act of pure poetic contingency, paint peeling off a wall behind the

writing of Markez al-Quds conjures up the contours of the Palestinian map. Through this cluster of photographs of businesses carrying the namesakes of Palestine, Shibli reveals that the acts of both naming and photographing stand testimony to the pervasive presence of the past and its structuring hope for the future. In this way, *Arab al-Sbaih* captures the complexities in which Palestinians of the diaspora simultaneously inhabit different temporal registers. Whereas the establishment of institutions (shops, schools, cemeteries) and the diverse activities of daily life depicted through Shibli's camera indicate a degree of investment and productivity, within the host country, the continued recollection of Palestine gestures towards the past and the expected return to home.

The title of the series *Arab al-Sbaih* refers to the history of the artist's extended family after al-Nakba. Originally from the Palestinian village of Arab al-Sbaih (presently under Israeli rule), the family was geographically separated in 1948 and thus suffered two different fates. Subsequent to the war, a large number of Arab al-Sbaih's residents were expelled by the Jewish fighters and sought refuge in Syria and Jordan while others took shelter at the Mount Tabor Monastery above Arab al-Sbaih. Those in exile retained the original name of Arab al-Sbaih whereas the others who remained in historic Palestine were forced to change the village's name to Arab al-Shibli in order to prevent retaliation repercussions by the Israeli authorities. The effects of remaining on the homeland now under Israeli jurisdiction are the subject of a second series by Ahlam Shibli entitled *The Valley*, a title that refers to the physical landscape that historically protected Arab al-Sbaih during the war. Exhibited together at the artist's first solo show in the Arab region — 'Why did you leave the forest empty?!', held in 2010 at Darat al Funun in Amman, Jordan —, *Arab al-Sbaih* and *The Valley* construct a visually poetic and historically complex account of the divergent effects of the Israeli occupation on the present-day Palestinians living either under Israeli rule or in exile.

In *The Valley*, Ahlam Shibli turns her camera away from the intimacy of the refugee camp, visualized in *Arab al-Sbaih* by the domestic and café interiors, side streets and family photographs. In its place, the artist presents the physical landscape. These photographs (both black and white and colour) are interspersed with depictions of the exterior of houses — often isolated — and the village centre with its signs in Hebrew and Israeli flags. The presence of language here is

employed to assert territorial authority as an abrupt contrast to its use in the Jordanian refugee camps where language serves as a bridge to the past — the homeland. This difference in temporality between the two Palestinian communities is registered through language and underscored by the architectural landscape. For example, Arab al-Shibli people often build their houses distant from their neighbours whereas the refugees tend to cluster closely, reflecting a dependence on community. Moreover, the architecture of Arab al-Shibli has begun to assume Israeli characteristics, acknowledging the daily proximities. In her artist's talk at Darat al Funun, Ahlam Shibli elucidated the primary difference between the Palestinians of Arab al-Sbaih and those of Arab al-Shibli through a paradoxical concept of home: Arab al-Sbaih people lost their houses, yet clench a sense of national belonging to the homeland via the memory of a distant Palestine; Arab al-Shibli people remained on the physical land and are able to build houses, yet in exchange were forced to forsake their national belonging, their name and their home.

Arab al-Sbaih and *The Valley* eloquently attest to Shibli's interest in presenting visually the impact of al-Nakba on the Palestinian people, especially those pushed off the map. The photographs capture and reveal a present condition of history; one that given the particular circumstances of Palestinians involves exposing a state of being that is in the constant turmoil of resisting erasure and suppression. In this way, the role of narrative assumes a charged importance. This is enhanced by the artistic choice to exhibit the photographs in groups. Certainly, when *Arab al-Sbaih* and *The Valley* share an exhibition space they tell of the divergent effects of al-Nakba. In the case of the refugees, the community is structured around the memory and its documents of Palestine and the visual imagery and social details of pre-1948 Palestine. In the village of Arab al-Shibli, the presence of the Israeli occupation structures life — its landscape, architecture and street signs. Significantly, as Shibli's work reveals, those differences are reliant on the very notion of territorial location and the struggle to carve out an existence within the current circumstances. In *The Valley*, Ahlam Shibli conjures up the landscape to whisper the history of al-Nakba and its ubiquitous presence in the present. In *Arab al-Sbaih*, these stories are told through the community and its social practices, particularly that of naming.

Exhibited together at Darat al Funun, *Arab al-Sbaih* and *The Valley* have indeed found a home.

Ahlam Shibli

Go there, Eat the mountain, Write the past

The Valley
Arab al-Sbaih
Goter

Essays by Mahmoud Abu Hashhash,
Ulrich Loock and Sarah A. Rogers

The Khalid Shoman Foundation
darat al funun