

Taysir Batniji, Fathers

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The Fathers pictures are part of a series of photographs and videos taken in Gaza over the past few years (*Untitled / Gaza Walls*, 2001, *Gaza, a Diary*, 2001, *Untitled*, 2001-2005) and fitting into a peculiar documentary project by Taysir Batniji.



This project has nothing to do with a direct depiction of living conditions in the frequently mentioned 'big open-sky prison' where over a million Palestinians have been stacked since 1948. Nor has it to do with the conventions of reportage or with the clichés produced again and again by the media (the violence, the stone-throwing, the burning tyres, the squalor in overpopulated alleys, etc.).



Indeed, to the trite representations of a physical and human space over-specified by the geographical and political situation of the region, Taysir Batniji opposes a fiction which, as underlined by Jacques Rancière, “does not consist in telling imaginary tales” but “in building a novel relation between appearance and reality, between the visible and its significance, the unique and the common”. Instead of a detailed exposé of the objective forces which cause the penning up of the Gazan and generate their exasperation as well as their weariness and despair, he creates a quieter, more subdued interplay of the tensions and oppositions at work under the noise of appearance.



In this way, as if they were as many slides of abstract, colourful paintings, *Untitled / Gaza Walls* (2001) displayed pictures of the walls of Gaza covered with symbols (names, political slogans and posters, photographs of Intifada martyrs). The aesthetics of the pictures and the reference to emblematic forms of pictorial modernity (abstract

art, lacerated posters, graffiti) ‘veiled’ the original meaning of those inscriptions, accessible only to Arabic-speaking viewers. Today, the Fathers series offers an inventory, inevitably incomplete, of the portraits (paintings, chromos or photographs) which can be seen, framed and hung on the walls of cafés, stalls, boutiques, workshops and other living or working spaces in Gaza as well as in all the Middle East. These portraits, often faded and yellowed, sometimes dusty and askew, rarely relate to the present lord and master of the premises, but rather to the founder of the establishment, sometimes long since departed. Thus they are the subject par excellence of a special type of ‘still lives’, since those places are fraught with symbols and traces of human presence(s) and disorder(s) but deprived of their dwellers or patrons; a type of space at the same time full (of goods, objects, memories and signs of life) and empty; places of the present and the past, hovering, as it were, between different times, memories and gazes, or petrified, like ruins just after a disaster no one will ever know anything about.



I feel, indeed, that the power of these pictures resides in what they ‘hold back’ as much as in what they reveal. Or, more precisely, in the modest claim they make that there is an inevitable gap between diverging readings and interpretations, here and elsewhere, in Gaza, Palestine and elsewhere. For the Gazan or the viewer familiar with the region, these ‘pictures of pictures’ refer to a visual culture expert in all sorts of promiscuous juxtapositions (with and all around the portraits of the Fathers are hung, according to the place, portraits of Arab leaders – Arafat, Saddam –, of martyrs – Sheikh Yassin, but also Rachel Corrie –, of Mecca, of the Koran); and though the Gazan may not feel concerned by the aesthetic treatment, it will arrest the foreign

viewer or the reader of the book. This elusive and irreducible gap between different readings of pictures, otherwise totally modern, raises the question of the conflict between historicities, a question which the notion of globalised art would like us to dispense with.

