

Space and the Other

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The ‘object quality of the problem’ is, as well, its ‘subject quality’. At first glance, the characterization of the so-called ‘Palestine/Israel space’ as being ‘contested’ insinuates some sort of symmetry. Conversely, the ambition to offer ‘a sculptural reading’ via film, video and photographs of a spatial problem vexed by what Eyal Weizman coined ‘the politics of verticality’ is a challenging proposal¹. The viewer here is invited to contemplate the subject of contestation and recognize that ‘the fact that the space of Palestine/Israel is so contested means that it is regulated not only horizontally but also vertically’².

On further consideration, however, one realizes that the term ‘contested space’ conveniently overlooks the heart and soul of ‘the problem’ -- which is materialized in life as the historical struggle between the colonizer and the colonized. When the introduction in the exhibition’s catalogue delineates ‘the problem’ at hand as being “the problem of Palestine”³, it implicitly restricts our focus to the present political state as it has developed following the Oslo Accords. What is missing is a whole history that since the late 19th century has been shaped by European Zionist settlers -- who had already begun to establish colonies in Palestine with the support of imperial powers -- and by the mounting resistance they faced from the country’s native Arab population. As you know, proceeding from a similar assumption of Palestine as

¹ See Penelope Curtis, *The Object Quality of the Problem*, exhibition catalogue, Henry Moore Institute, Leeds 2008, p.41-44. Eyal Weizman’s term ‘the politics of verticality’ has been first articulated in Rafi Segal & Eyal Weizman, *A Civilian Occupation: The Politics of Israeli Architecture*, Babel, Tel Aviv & Verso, London-New York, 2003. It was further elaborated in his *Hollow Land: Israel’s Architecture of Occupation*, Verso, London-New York, 2007.

² *ibid.*, p.3

³ *ibid.*

‘contested space’ (an abstraction beset by conflicting claims) in 1917 the mandated ‘space’ called Palestine was promised away to be ‘a national home for the Jewish people’. The man making the promise was the British Empire’s foreign secretary of the period Lord Arthur James Balfour who in his Declaration reduced the country’s indigenous people to being Palestine’s ‘non-Jewish communities’⁴.

Of course the word ‘space’ in the context of this exhibition, which has the reading of Weizman’s conclusions at its foundation, refers to a specific geographical region that is mainly the West Bank, which has been lying under a brutal military occupation since 1967. The abstract and seemingly neutral term ‘contested space’ is the artistic or academic version of the somewhat rougher expression, ‘disputed territories’, which is used by the Israeli authorities when referring to all Palestinian territories that fell under their military occupation and to additional territories when and as they too fall under military and settler occupation. This so-called space is not fixed or static, but is subject to an ongoing historic dynamic. The ‘space’ is more properly historicized as personal and civic property which one side takes and accumulates, and which the other is dispossessed of. Words such as ‘contention’ or ‘dispute’ do not accurately describe or weigh the substantive, historical relationship between Israel and the Palestinians.

Moreover, the term ‘contested space’ not only flies in the face of the historical background of the country as a living whole, it also overlooks the cultural ramifications of the significance of words associated with ‘space’ such as the word for ‘place’ in both Arab and Israeli culture.

⁴ See ‘Balfour Declaration’ in Philip Mattar (ed.) *Encyclopedia of the Palestinians*, Facts on File, Inc., New York, 2005 (2nd edition) p.94.

In Arabic *makaan*, meaning ‘place’, derives from the trilateral root *makana* and *makkana* meaning ‘to be fixed’, ‘stable’, and ‘firmly established’. By defining the parameters of space *makaan* is associated with the word *kawn* meaning ‘universe’⁵. Thus, the Arabic word connotes the fixity of place in the universe which in turn is understood to encompass the vast multitudes of places.

In Hebrew, on the other hand, the word for ‘place’ does not simply specify a locality. In its noun form *makom*, simply means ‘space’ or ‘area to be filled or occupied’. By preceding it with the article *ha*, the word *ha-makom* literally means ‘the place’. Coming from the trilateral root *k-w-m*, a word such as *kiyyum* could mean ‘existence’ as well as a ‘settled area’. Most importantly, unlike the Arabic word *makaan* that has no metaphysical connotations whatsoever, *HaMakom* also refers to God⁶. Believed to be omnipresent, “God is [thus] not only THE place, but place itself”⁷.

The overlapping meaning simultaneously embodying a physical and a metaphysical reference in the Hebrew word for ‘place’ seems to translate in a nutshell the embryonic components of the national myth perpetuated by secular and religious Zionists alike. Aided by imperial powers, Zionists thus succeeded in establishing their colonies in Palestine. As soon as Jewish settlers were entrenched in one place they moved on to expand their exclusive domain in what was claimed by religious Zionists to be God’s territory that had been promised to them.

⁵ See *al-Munjid fi al-Lugha* (21st edition) Dar al- Mashriq, Beirut,1973, p.771.

⁶ Abraham Even Shoshan (ed.) *Ha-milon he-Hadash*, vol. 4, (Jerusalem: Kiryat Sefer, 1976), pp. 1497-98. Thanks to Susan L.Einbinder for the translations from Hebrew.

⁷ Sidra DeKoven Ezrahi, ‘Our Homeland, The Text...Our text The Homeland: Exile and Homecoming in the Modern Jewish Imagination’ *Michigan Quarterly Review*, Vol.xxxi, no.4, Fall 1992, p.471.

Today, perhaps the most glaring illustration of Zionist expansionist policies in Palestine is the fact that sixty years after its establishment, the Jewish state has yet to declare what its borders are. Theoretically, its ‘space’ is coterminous with the ‘space’ occupied by an omnipresent God, which is to say, a space with neither actual nor theoretical limit. Basing its claim on religious myths that propagate the chosen ‘self’ versus the demonized ‘other’, the militarized state of Israel has never ceased creating or extending new frontiers and new settlements. Meanwhile, the world goes on watching how Israeli settlements expand or proliferate, continuing to be illegally constructed on usurped Palestinian lands on the West Bank—the very lands referred to at our event as ‘contested space’. Here, armed Israeli settlers are encouraged by their state to contest this space—often consciously modeling their relationship to the native Palestinian ‘others’ on that of the Biblical Israelites who held to a negative view of native gentiles as ‘others’

How did Palestine become Israel? Palestine has never been about ‘contested space’ in the way relatively blank territories in the Arctic region, especially ocean beds, may today be ‘contested’ by industrial nations. Those territories have never been personal or civic properties. To speak about space anywhere in Palestine or Israel, one cannot merely focus on the subject as if it were divorced from the history of colonization afflicting the country—a history entailing the deliberate and systematic expulsion and dispossession of its people from their ancestral places of birth, the destruction of their villages, the appropriation of their properties, their lands and their sources of living. Palestinian resistance to this ongoing injustice is part of a struggle that has been going on for over a century. This is not a reality that may be defined geographically or topographically, and discussed as an issue of ‘contested space’.

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Pursuant to the challenging proposal offering a ‘sculptural reading’ of film, video and photographs on the basis of what Eyal Weizman called ‘the politics of verticality’, I shall now consider a few examples of two-dimensional art to illustrate how the history of colonizing Palestine has been regulated by rules adhering to that same perspective. To do so, I shall limit the discussion to the experience of ‘place’ as it is interpreted by the colonizing settler and will conclude by contrasting the works of two artists, an Israeli and a Palestinian, who viewed ‘the place’ from different perspectives, that of the outsider whose art calls for the appropriation of ‘the place’ and that of the insider whose art is the product of a native witness of dispossession.

For lack of a better term, to describe two-dimensional works of art depicting the specifications of a place, I shall use the more common term ‘landscape’. By casting a

general look at landscapes painted by members of the earliest generation of European Jewish settlers in Palestine, the viewer notes how the colonizing settler painters shared the same perspective of the architects that prefigured what Eyal Weizman coined ‘the politics of verticality’.

Israeli architect Sharon Rotbard writes that ‘the wall and the tower’ have been the two key components in building settlements throughout the history of the Jewish colonization of Palestine. Named in Hebrew, *Homa Umigdal*, ‘the wall and the tower’ gained a mythical national status as their structure represented, ‘the fundamental paradigm of all Jewish architecture in Israel’ an architecture that Rotbard describes as ‘an industry for the fabrication of political realities’. The Israeli architect goes on to explain that the pre-state strategy of the paramilitary wall and tower ‘served in fact to perpetuate the ghetto mentality and the impulse of enclosure’. Jewish settlers ‘made use of the double function of fortification and observation ...that dominated their surroundings by the power of vision.’ As these settlements spread out, ‘every outpost had eye contact with another, enabling the towers to transmit messages by Morse code using flashlights at night and mirrors during the day.’⁸

When the West Bank and the Gaza Strip fell under Israeli military occupation in 1967 walls and towers were built overnight to monitor movement on all major roads in the region. With God’s territories laid out before Israeli eyes, the pre-state towers were now exchanged for mountaintops; from those heights overlooking whole regions in the West Bank, fortified settlements were hastily built to establish facts on the ground.

⁸ , Sharon Rotbard, ‘Wall and Tower, (Homa Umigdal): The Mold of Israeli Architecture’ in , *A Civilian Occupation: The Politics of Israeli Architecture*, pp.39-56. .

The pre-state eye contact originally maintained between settlements across a horizontal space, now took on a three-dimensional volume wherein elevated roads connecting Israeli settlements have been raised on extended bridges that circumvent Palestinian routes and lands, or slipping into tunnels beneath them.

As for the landscapes created by Jewish settler artists during the pre-state years, which prefigured what Weizman termed the ‘politics of verticality’, they mainly depicted the place from two distinctly different points of view each of which reflects a different angle of ‘the wall and [the] tower’ sense of perspective. In other words, the illusion of space employed to exemplify Zionist ideals is seldom employed in depicting the place of the native other, namely the Palestinian Arab.

In paintings promoting the so-called ‘reclamation of the desert’, the tilling of the land and the rewards of manual labor, the spatial experience of the place is expressed either from the perspective of one close to the ground and looking up as it were to emphasize the link with heaven or from a straight forward frontal vista which usually minimized the space left for the sky.

For example, the perspective of a scene viewed from the ground up is evident in the Austrian-born Ephraim Moshe Lilien’s representing *A Jewish Plowman*. (The Israel Museum, Jerusalem) . In this 1907 lithograph, we see what looks like a desert scene in which a man in biblical garb is plowing the soil with the aid of a camel, the emblematic animal associated with the desert. From the angle close to the ground, a cactus plant, which was to assume symbolic status in Israeli and Palestinian national

lore, frames the corner in the foreground. The morning sky above dominates the entire place.

The 1924 painting by the German-born Aryeh Lubin, on the other hand, is an example that employs a frontal perspective that overlooks a panoramic landscape. Entitled *View of Ramat Gan Hills*, (Tel Aviv Museum, Tel Aviv) distance is represented on three successive planes, which seems to reveal the process by which the so-called desert is made to bloom. The viewer's closest terrain filling up the major part of the painting shows the cultivated rolling hills; in the middle distance, we see the dwellings of the settlement nestling amidst a dense orchard; in the far distance, we see the rugged and barren hills that are lined up as it were to be appropriated and turned green at a later stage.

As for paintings representing the place of the native other, they have mostly been painted from the high viewpoint that hovers above the site. The consistency in choosing such a high viewpoint that overlooks the place from a dominating position as if the other's place is being observed from the height of a settlement's tower, has been known since the 17th century as '*perspective cavalière*' -- a theoretical perspective that was originally developed to serve military purposes. By employing the high viewpoint of a '*perspective cavalière*' the Jewish settler artist did not seek to give the tangible illusion of the other's place; like the military cartographer whose high viewpoint sought to provide information beyond enemy lines, the European settler artist sought through their landscapes to convey information regarding the exotic foreignness of the place from their vantage position. The presence of the native

other in some of these paintings was often the main instrument by which artists relayed their individual observation.

The subject of how the *'perspective cavalière'* has been maintained by the pioneers of Israeli art deserves an independent study. In this limited time and space, I shall suffice by showing you slides of a few paintings created during the 1920s and early 1930s.

These paintings include 'Landscape' (1924) by the Russian-born Shmuel Ovadiahu (The Bialik House, Tel Aviv); 'Road to Nazareth' (1925) by the Rumanian-born Reuven Ruben (Mrs.Esther Rubin Collection, Tel Aviv); 'Jerusalem, Jaffa Gate' (ca.1925) by the Russian-born Yoseph Zaritzky (Shaya Yariv Collection, Tel Aviv); 'Orchard in Jaffa' (1926) by the Russian-born Nahum Gutman (Israel Museum, Jerusalem); 'Lifta Landscape' (1927) by the Palestinian-born Sionah Tagger (Tel Aviv Museum, Tel Aviv); 'Ein Karem Landscape' (1928) by the Russian-born Israel Paldi (Tel Aviv Museum, Tel Aviv); 'Figure in Landscape' (1920s) by the Russian-born Pinhas Litvinovsky (Joseph Hackmey Collection, Tel Aviv); 'Safad Landscape' (ca.1930) by the Hungarian-born Mordechai Levanon, (Joseph Hackmey Collection, Tel Aviv); 'Déjeuner sur l'herbe' (1931) by the Palestinian-born Moshe Castel (Israel Museum, Jerusalem).

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To demonstrate how a native Arab artist painted the place Palestinians call home, I shall now focus on the works of a rural artist from the post-1948 period. Unlike the pioneers of Israeli art whose art methods and visual devices had been inherited from a long pictorial tradition that evolved in Europe, pioneers of Palestinian art had the Byzantine and the Islamic visual traditions for their pictorial roots⁹. Neither of these

⁹ For a general background on the roots of Palestinian art see my entry in *Encyclopedia of the Palestinians* edited by Philip Mattar, Facts on File Inc., New York, 2nd edition 2005, pp.81-90. For a

traditions complied with the rules of spatial perspective whereby ‘the visible world is arranged for the spectator as the universe was once thought to be arranged for God.’¹⁰

As for the monochromatic engravings and etchings by Walid Abu Shaqra who grew up in Israel, they may be best viewed in contrast to the monochromatic pencil and chalk drawings by the Jewish settler artist Anna Ticho who repeatedly focused in her work on representing ‘the place’ of the native other.

Like those of other Jewish settler artists, Ticho’s drawings of the native’s place, have all been realized from the high viewpoint of the *‘perspective cavalière’*. Executed during the British Mandate, a period known among Palestinians for its affluence and prosperity, the Czechoslovakian-born artist never ceased to portray these places Palestinians called home as ruins and abandoned dwellings.

Taking only four of her pencil and brown chalk drawings that depict specific Palestinian sites such as ‘Jerusalem City Wall’ (c.1933) ‘The Old City’ (c. 1934) ‘Bethany’ (1935) and ‘Jericho’ (1940) (Ticho House Collection, Jerusalem) one can see that the settler artist could only view ‘the place’ from the dominating position of a *‘perspective cavalière’*. With the exception of her ‘Bethany’ in which we see a diminutive, static and lifeless figure in the foreground as a device to highlight the monumentality of the ruined village, the living place of Palestinian Arabs appears devoid of all signs of life. Here, the mythical ‘impressions’ the viewer receives are those of an ancient place crying out to be ‘redeemed’, which is to say appropriated.

Like Palestinian landscapes by other Jewish settler artists who preceded her, Ticho’s

more elaborate discussion on the transition from religious to secular art, see my forthcoming book *Palestinian Art: 1850-2005* (Saqi Books, London, Feb. 2009).

¹⁰ John Berger, *Ways of Seeing*, (British Broadcasting Corporation & Penguin Books), London, 1972) p.16.

drawings confirm the validity of the slogan, 'a land without a people for a people without a land'.

In contrast, Abu Shakra's etchings are not the outsider's interpretation of a place but rather the insider's *intuitive* reading of its intimate specificities recognized by their place-names. 'Hakoorat el-Loz' (c.1979), 'View from al-Batten' (1980), 'An Olive Tree in Ein-Jarrar' (1980) 'Mintarat al-Batten' (1981) are all place-names recognized only by the native. In this place, each tree, each stone, each wild plant, has traditionally been endowed with a collective feeling that urban people may reserve for human friends. Thus Abu Shakra's references to seemingly obscure place-names, always appearing in his titles, that are nowhere to be found on Israeli maps, are not unlike the villager's manner in introducing the outsider to close friends. Emanating from the realm of illiterate shepherds, the artist does not intend his place-name to provide the ethnographer's catalogue with facts any more than he seeks by his figurative style to impress the art connoisseur.

Traditional in his figurative rendering of his subject, Abu Shakra reflects the intense experience of a native's memory. While his work continues to be haunted by the absence of its natives, at every turn we sense a hint of a human presence. Through such intimations Abu Shakra articulates his people's metaphors.

Here in black and white the roots of an ancient olive tree delve deeply into the dark soil; there, a long-trodden path leads uphill to where the cool breeze of a summer afternoon blows; a clearing at midday popping up with rocks is the focus of a series of prints; we also see a freshly ploughed field as it looks in the moonlight. Stubborn

walls of ancient stones hanging raggedly together cross the background of one print and in the foreground of another bushes, thorns, and wild flowers continue to grow in the cracks of scattered stones belonging to villages that have been destroyed.

Despite their masterly rendering in a conventional method of visual representation, Abu Shakra's landscapes accord equal importance to all the scenery's elements. Foreground and background seem interchangeable. Every detail is known and individual. Giving an Arabic place-name to a print portraying a certain group of trees, a clearing, or a heap of stones and thistle echoes the villager's intimate relationship with the simple elements that constitute the homeland.

Always printed in black, an Abu Shakra landscape, carrying an obscure place-name only a native villager could recognize, seems to act as an extension of a secret script. Perhaps that is why it is not so strange that some of his prints do not exceed the size of an identity card. Through such an intimate image, the land's traces could be carried in a pocket, just as pilgrims carry amulets and personal icons.

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In conclusion, I hope this general discussion may have cast some light on what has been referred to in context of this event as 'contested space'. By sharing with you a few thoughts on what I believe to be the 'subject quality' of the problem, I hope I have contributed to a better appreciation of what has been called its 'object quality'. Bringing up some examples of two-dimensional art was meant to recall how the sister art of architecture allows a fuller 'sculptural reading' of the art proposed in the current show.

By recognizing the affiliation between 'space' and 'place' in Israeli and Palestinian art and culture, one may see how the geographic space inspiring the Jewish settler artists has been the same that inspired the Palestinian native artists. The difference in the works of each national group, however, is not only a difference in the tradition of visual expression, but it is a difference in outlook between the possessor and the dispossessed. They could not have seen the place from the same point of view. On one side, there are those who continue to observe the ever-changing borders of the place from the heights of fortified walls and towers; on the other, there are those undefeated who are holding on by their teeth to the last bits of their ancestral land.

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