

‘Qalandiya International III 2016 : Tilted’

Still/Here. MinRASY PROJECTS, 2016, part of the exhibition /Tilted/, conceived and produced to show as part of Qalandiya International III, themed, *This Sea is Mine*, in the Rammalah Recreational Center from October 5-23, 2016.

These images include the site of my tours in Bneid Al-Gar; the Kuwait Towers appearing in the background and in the foreground is one of the people still here exploring assimilation of identities. I provided the text to go with the three images below.

Images courtesy of MinRASY PROJECTS.





Always a Return

To a certain extent, the view from our windows shapes and dictates our lives, which is why it always comes at a premium. On a windless evening in 2012, I watched from my window as the “Karamat Watan” [Dignity of a Nation] protests unfolded on this same plot of land, causing me to question my previously taken-for-granted sense of security. Although these protesters took to the street in the name of nationhood and civil rights, seeing the empty plots of Bneid al Gar filled with rage and riot-gear led me to examine things we hold as immutable and sacred: identity, belonging and country, and the idea of “watan”, a home to come back to, a familiar view to look out at and say...yes, I have returned.

I feel that like me, to most Arabs it is more about the return than the journey. That yen for finding a place to be whatever languid version of our joint language and heritage we have re-interpreted in our image. The pull of the past is a way to find commonality and develop a shared viewpoint with other Arab time-travellers. Musical actors from the sixties, pan-Arabism and the euphoria of ousting colonialism; the past in its sepia colours and comforting sameness keeps us grounded in a fast paced and culturally anxious modern state. In Kuwait there is an added layer of inescapable sand, filtering like dust into our collective nostalgia. The ever-present mirage of a more innocent and simpler time juxtaposed by the blue domes of Kuwait towers looming, like a promised future that never arrived. So many bemused discussions about that “Golden Age”, the thwarted potential of the post-independence era, like an exit passed on a highway that we long to return to but are unable to drive back.

Having conducted a series of socio-historical tours in this area I came to realise that this is a space for re-invention and for blending in, perhaps more so than other cosmopolitan districts in Kuwait. The urban ambition of high rise luxury apartment buildings, medical centres and hipster eateries rubs shoulders with the squalor of “bachelor housing”, where Kuwait’s migrant poor sleep ten to a room on any given night. A multi-cultural backdrop of mosques and Hussainiyas cajoles residents into embracing this tranquil oasis, where military weapons once sat aimed in all directions during the 1990 siege of the Hilton hotel down the road. Yawning palaces of merchant families spread out facing the seafront, reminding us that the old fort wall of Kuwait weaved through here, protecting the former inhabitants, keeping Kuwaitis within and outsiders without.

Disjointed assimilation is the story of Bneid al Gar, but even more so, the story of Kuwait the country. Life blossoms in this arid space. Life, hope, and options. As an outsider your story superimposes itself on this background because it is so sparse. There is room for you to be. To evolve. To reinvent yourself within the margins and be free of the burden of history. Knowing that what is created will likely be erased soon like the buildings that once stood here, like the American embassy that once existed, so busy and important, on this very plot. The cycle of creation and negation provides release from the heaviness of responsibility, of permanence. And that’s what many of us modern nomads find ourselves doing, trying on our alternative Arab-ness in small portions, the dress of another’s gender, another’s history, another’s folklore, choosing which parts suits us, blend with our contemporary values, and pre-emptively rejecting others, before they get a chance to reject us.

Sometimes we wear the walls that separate us. In Mark 12:38 there is a reference to men in long flowing robes, and a warning to beware of such men's power and falsehood. An ancient symbol of the elite, the long flowing robe is a constant variable for Arab manhood. The length of the garment, its flowing shape and its cut are all symbols of Kuwaiti men's power, so in this way the dishdasha can be seen as armour; nationally symbolic and overtly masculine. Much like the wall surrounding the old city, this particular cut of dishdasha, collarless and cuff-less is the exclusive attire of Kuwaiti settled city-folk, the "hadhar" men who walk the corridors of privilege, or those who want to emulate them. Trying on another's garb, this identity, is it a search for the self, for belonging, for acceptance, or is it a transgression? When we look outside the window and ask: am I this view that always keeps me outside itself? This land of passersby, walkers by, taking root in a dry place with surprising veins of richness. With these free flowing robes tied into the national dialogue, am I more free as a woman, as a would-be Kuwaiti? A unifying label in white, pure and unrestricted...these loose fitting fabrics lull us into conforming.

Enclosed in this search for the ever-evolving, mercurial sense of "me" is a temporal snapshot of the present stage of an expansive refinement. The need to define and defy, to refuse and reshape our identities within and despite the noisy parameters imposed on us by society, nationality, and background is the first step to resolution if you resist being entrapped in just one. In this space, in this placement on the "other" as a question to be asked, instead of a reality to be accepted, the heavy layers of belonging can be challenged but never put to rest. At the end of the day, the decision to be let in, to be granted nationality, and the label "one of us", to be recognised in statehood and dignity, is the prerogative of the men in flowing white robes. For the rest of us, we explore and create and leave footprints in the sands, yearning to return home to our peaceful and loving view, our "watan".

(Alanoud Alsharekh, June 2016)