

Oumm-aah أمّاه

Elegy for the beloved Motherland

Eman Haram

January 30 – March 12, 2016

“Every reaching out that remains non-totalizable is a ‘horizontal vertigo’ in which the exploring explored subject can only advance through moments of blindness.”

- Trinh T. Minh-ha

Possible Territories

Using a process of digital layering both in a technical and metaphorical sense, Eman Haram treats the photographic image as a repository for personal, collective and universal consciousness. In this light, Haram’s work becomes homage to a culture, people and land under a decades-long siege. Moreover it is a sweeping tribute to the anguished call of mothers, children and the earth itself. In a spiritual leap, she converts the four walls of a room into a sanctuary.

In 2010, Haram was invited to participate in Aleppo’s International Women’s festival, and to facilitate a photography workshop for a community of women and youth inside Neirab refugee camp. During her visit, the artist met with four generations of people living within the perimeters of the camp, originally constructed as army barracks for the allied forces during WWII. Displaced from their homes in northern districts of Palestine in 1948, the same families have inhabited these purportedly temporary shelters in Aleppo for well over half a century. While gaining permission to visit the Neirab camp was a rare opportunity in itself, the complicity and trust offered up by the camp’s inhabitants—young and old—profoundly influenced Haram’s practice in the years since.¹

Elegy to the Motherland includes a large-format print of an olive tree entitled *Sacred Double*.² The tree’s green and gold-tinged leaves form an amorphous, almost cloud-like mass that exceeds the frame in places. A numbered grid overlays the picture plane suggesting an architectural drawing or a map. This grid focuses attention to the act of parsing out space, reminding the viewer that they are surveying an organic structure through a rectangular frame. The image is printed on thin, Japanese gampi paper that lends to it an ephemeral feeling. The tree sits in isolation, inhabiting the entire frame; as such, it is analogous to the individual portraits flanking other walls of the room, though it serves as more than just a stand-in for a human form. The cultural significance of the olive tree extends throughout and beyond Mediterranean, spanning countless generations. Symbolic interpretations abound, from the proverbial olive branch to the settler strategy of burning orchards by means of exerting territorial control. Though the cultivation of olives is ancient, the tree depicted here is young and vibrant. Haram’s composite digital layering techniques erode the image’s photographic origins, such that the picture reads more as a lithographic rendering or memory than as a snapshot or document. According to Haram, orchards figure prominently within the narratives of the first generation of displaced Palestinians.³ Trees planted and left behind stand as markers on a land that was forcefully evacuated: they are a source of pain through remembrance and objects of hopeful imagining.

Populating the exterior wall of the exhibition is a selection of four works from the series *Brides of Galilee*. Printed on gampi paper, *the Brides*, like the olive tree, inhabit fragile, membrane-like surfaces. Haram’s *Brides* are a poetic take on her encounters with “a generation of women who lost their entire youth and lives languishing inside the boundaries of Neirab”, though much of the photographic source material depicts traditional wedding attire from Bethlehem. Thus these *Brides* speak to a violently fractured past and a hybridity of codes that invoke history while eschewing linear objectivity.

Haram's process of superimposing ancestral and recent photographs with potent, yet open-ended symbols and patterns favours an ever shifting, living vision that resides somewhere between stoic endurance in the face of harsh material realities and the mind's generative power to recreate home as a paradisiacal past/future. The *Brides* series forms a subset of the artist's *Iconographies* project, a vast archive of work that mixes imagery, objects and influences beyond existing borders, as a reminder that cross-cultural exchange precedes and exceeds the current asymmetrical binaries of colonizer and colonized. In all, there are 13 brides in Haram's series, the last of which sits apart from the others. *The 13th Bride* is also in mourning attire.

Facing *The 13th Bride* are 24 small portraits of children. At first glance, these images seem unambiguous in comparison to the collage technique that is characteristic of the other works. However closer reading draws unanswerable questions regarding the context in which these photographs were taken. The artist invites us to view each one individually, leaving to the viewer's imagination what lies outside their closely cropped frames. Visual clues hint that they may have been reprinted from old or damaged originals, though a survey of the room replete with images rendered antique at the hand of the artist would discount that theory.

On the gallery's east wall hangs the large-format print *Last Portrait with Oumm-aah*. Within this portrait are all 13 of the brides from Haram's original series, 12 of them fading behind a grid that mirrors that of the olive tree. In the foreground are the images of a woman and a child. Two doves perch on their shoulders and a very small pomegranate rests improbably on one dove's head. The child wears a keffiyeh around his neck and the woman next to him wears a key, perhaps to her home.⁴ The woman and child in the foreground could be easily be interpreted as mother and son. The print's title indicates that it is a final portrait, but for what, or whom? The Arabic expression أُمًّا (pronounced Oumm-aah) resists precise translation. Literally, it is a call to mother, however its usage can expand to a call to the homeland, and to the earth itself. *Last Portrait with Oumm-aah* suggests multiple meanings and manifold subjectivities that include the mother pictured in the foreground, the many brides vanishing in the background and the earth that they share in this chimeric moment together. *Oumm-aah* echoes, literally and figuratively, throughout the room from face to face.

Eman Haram proposes a constant shifting of localities. Her mix of motifs, patterns and symbols resists anthropological claims to authenticity and refuses the dominant view of other as a fixed identity. The flattened picture-space of her images, coupled with a paradoxical sense of depth through layering,

parallels the collapsing of historical narratives that is central to her project. Individually, these works exude a palpable sense of loss. In dialogue, they step beyond postcolonial longing to a possible territory of redress and reparation. With this elegy to her native Palestine, Eman Haram raises universal questions concerning roots, displacement and dispossession, unsettling cultural assumptions concerning symbols and photographic imagery.

Aaron Pollard

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1. Haram's *Iconographies* project emerged directly from her encounters in Neirab. The *Brides* take inspiration from the women living in Neirab who are primarily from the villages of Al Jish and Tarsheeha in upper Galilee.
 2. Palestinian literature indicates that in rural communities there was a tradition of planting an olive tree as a child's double at birth.
 3. Haram states that orchards even take on a mythical dimension for people besieged within Neirab refugee camp.
 4. In numerous Palestinian literary accounts, wearing a key to one's ancestral home was a common practice among the refugee community living in forced exile, though most often the object is concealed under clothing.

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