A Room Full of Pigeons and Three Spectators

Dina Nazmi Khorchid
To Nazmi Khorchid, my father

Thank you for being a pulse that is always and forever present
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A thesis presented in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree Master of Fine Arts in Textiles in the Department of Textiles of the Rhode Island School of Design, Providence, Rhode Island, United States of America

by Dina Nazmi Khorchid 2023

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Abstract

A Room Full of Pigeons and Three Spectators

My work explores themes of identity politics, domesticity, land and memory access - in relation to my own lived experiences as a Palestinian refugee, a daughter of a missing war casualty and an artist.

In this thesis book, I present a cumulation of thoughts, emotions and findings, along with a selection of works from the last two years.

During my time at the Rhode Island School of Design, messenger pigeons took over my studio, channeling physical and mental realms of grief and remembrance. By looking closely at the bird’s aesthetics and behaviorisms in my first semester, their resting deceased bodies in the second and third, I developed a better understanding of my relationship to mark-making, displacement and trauma. In my final thesis and closing of a life chapter, these birds and all the meaning they carry, land and disappear into a deep dark immersive environment; a water body that drowns yet grounds me firmly in my continual search of inaccessible connections.
Textiles have the ability to travel, transform, and unfold histories of culture, material, and craft. The labor in creating fabric engages the physicality of the maker very closely with the materials and tools that birth a tactile print or structured fiber. My work constructs narratives of place and connections to lost bodies. Through mark-making, photo-documentation and material studies, I delve into the broader contexts of identity politics, migration, and psychoanalysis, in an attempt to reclaim and unravel a family history of displacement, loss and trauma.
Cultures of displacement undeniably experience generational trauma. I am just now understanding the lineage of losses Palestinians everywhere live with due to political greed, unrest and people in places of power, near before far, taking advantage of our reality for their own gains.

As an artist from the Arab world, I find myself relating most to modern and contemporary artists who have experienced the long-lasting effects of war and exile. These experiences come in the form of their own journeys, or ones that have been passed down to them by their families. Stateless identification documents, lost loved ones, and the existentialism of belonging to a land - a home, are all shared themes. In *The Refugee and a Different Vision of Security and Being Together* by Ruth Erickson and Eva Respini’s *When Home Won’t Let You Stay: Migration Through Contemporary Art*, the authors speak of shared existence, the different perceptions, impacts and psychology of movement narratives. For a migrant or a refugee fleeing a condition of uncertain stability to a condition of uncertain hope, the risks are never assured, on both ends of a border. Travel, in this instance, is an uncomfortable state. It is one that could be physically draining, long, dangerous, packed with a lot of fear - of rejection and discrimination - paired with hopefulness towards an unknown but perhaps safer future. The vehicle in motion is associated with a directionality and policed activity, denying access between two points. It is a very different experience than travel for tourists, who also move and embrace risks, rely on the hospitality of others, and imagine a condition in which identity is lifted from its familiar assurances. The migrant is often received with fear - of change, or of a threat to security and unity. In a way, they provide the same anxiety that civil war and anarchy have long provoked, despite humans being more connected than ever.

As a third-generation Palestinian refugee, I am not allowed access to my homeland. It is an imagined holy place with lush landscapes and old stones in my mind and the minds of the many Palestinians in diaspora. That is far from the harsh reality of a place that continues to be occupied and destroyed. This loss of identity has a marked impact on Palestinian refugees in their countries of temporary, yet permanent residence. They live in a generational nomadic state, in search of acceptance, stability, and opportunities. And in many cases, they must also contend with the disappearance and death of loved ones, due to political unrest and injustice.

One such case is the abduction and disappearance of Nazmi Khorchid, my father, in 1991 during the Gulf War in Kuwait, where we were living at the time. His fate, thirty-two years later, remains a mystery. Unable to find answers, I create and make work in search of him, and in search of a land, a home, and spaces of comfort.
Introduction

I inherited from Nazmi Khorchid, who disappeared during the Gulf War a travel document in place of a passport, some personality traits as described by others who knew him, and a letter noting that I was drawing a bird at 3 years old. This letter became a cornerstone in my journey into art making and the creation of a metaphor - a pigeon - that appears and disappears throughout my work. It is in a constant state of searching, circling and landing. The pigeon, this messenger bird, has become my connection to past and present, to my younger self, my artist self and to him, my father.

In his writing to his family, he describes what my siblings and I are up to, in a way that feels pertinent to our adult characters or paths - or so, I like to interpret it. Translated from Arabic, he says:

“Dina (3 years old) is growing up and becoming more mature every day, she has the tongue and intellect of an adult. Just yesterday, she was drawing a pigeon (or a dove) followed by other drawings for the family.”

Touched by his words and the only tangible memory I can lay my hands on, this pigeon that is in a constant state of searching, circling and landing, has become my connection to past and present, to my younger self, my artist self and to him.

During my time as an MFA candidate at the Rhode Island School of Design, I have reopened this road to questioning, healing and connecting, to both my father and my identity as a Palestinian refugee. It is hard to separate the two or disconnect other unfortunate traumatic events that have found their way into my orbit. I cannot claim that the inquiry is in direct visual activism of unpacking the formation of Israel on indigenous historic Palestinian land or a search into the Gulf War’s agenda and those who disappeared or those whose families were left in the dark, bodies unfound and unburied. In my opinion, this is a massive undertaking that cannot fit - sanely - within the bounds of a thesis book. It is heavy, it is crippling. I admire you if you can speak of all of it, comfortably.
Thoroughly studying the aesthetics, behaviorisms and maneuverability of this bird. Mark-making and repeat patterns become obsessive, like recurring thoughts of loss and reimagined memories.
2021, medium: Charcoal and archival photos, digitally printed on paper, silk, cotton sateen, chiffon and linen, size varies.
A dove dies in a Beirut garden
Sunday morning 13\textsuperscript{th} May 2007
As the dove dies, its grey-tan
stalk of tail moves
beats one-two,
then one-two,
one-two
breast to earth
head nods one-two,
with the tail,
eyes open blind
beak closed, wings closed
lax around body,
two beats, one-two
then not

– Michael Dennison
I Put a Screen Between Us to Face Loss Less Profoundly, 1

2022. medium: hand-pulled silkscreen monoprints on linen, 6.5 x 6.5ft
A year and many pigeon studies later, I’m back to the drawing board, literally. Once again, I pulled out that photograph of the dead pigeon at my doorstep. I decided that it’s time I summon the courage to stare at it for hours. Four, to be precise. Still looking at the image on my phone screen, I let the wooden drawing board rest on my knees and the wall in front of my chair in my studio. Paper, charcoal, eraser and pencil out. Then music. The song that came up on my shuffled playlist is “Lagi” by Aziza Brahim. Lagi, the Arabic word for refugee felt quite fitting.

My desire to connect to my father’s memory of me and in turn my memory of him, through drawing this bird, connected me to a lineage of losses.

Shortly after, I read “Making Memory Matter, Strategies of Remembrance in Contemporary Art” - a chapter within Lisa Saltzman’s *Negative Images* (Chicago & London, The University of Chicago Press, 2006). It presents examples of works by different artists and speculated on the anonymity of subject portrayal through mark-making, in the form of silhouettes – the negative, the missing, the hidden, the blacked-out – in relation to identification and encounters with memories of the past and what remains. The reading of artworks utilizing the negative space as a mark of absence is questioned as narratives of racism, exile and traumatic national histories are highlighted. In artist William Kentridge’s work for example, charcoal drawings are a process of marking, reworking and erasure. The medium and technique alone, regardless of form or representation are a part of the artist’s larger conceptual narrative of racism and displacement. Figural forms without the figure, memorials without monumentality are interesting avenues for further research.
I put a screen between us to face loss less profoundly.
I put a screen between us to face loss less profoundly.
2022. medium: hand-pulled silkscreen monoprints on cotton. 6.5 x 6.5 ft.
I Put a Screen Between Us to Face Loss Less Profundly, 2
Resting Pigeons on Collapsed Tiles
Resting Pigeons on Collapsed Tiles
On Ancestry: “With intimate care peoples all over the world have preserved the cherished relics of their ancestors – bits of native soil, ritual objects or personal belongings, bones of the dead that they washed, rocked, sang to, prayed to or blessed. In part, these relics serve to mitigate the pain of separation between living descendants and their revered departed. In another sense, they represent the luminous and powerful essence of the departed.”

2022, medium: charcoal, graphite and guache, woven with mohair, boucle, rayon, bambu and polyester on a jacquard loom, 4 x 4ft
A Flower for a Martyr and a Scroll

2023, medium: Porcelain, thread and dad’s handwriting, size varies
A Room Full of Pigeons and Three Spectators

A Flower for a Martyr and a Scroll
2023, medium: Porcelain, thread, photograph and charcoal on sublimation dye printed and steamed organza, size varies
Land, Untitled
You may put out the light in my eyes
You may deprive me of my mother’s kisses.
You may curse my father, my people.
You may distort my history.
You may deprive my children of a smile
And of life’s necessities.
You may fool my friends with a borrowed face.
You may build walls of hatred around me.
You may glue my eyes to humiliations,
O enemy of the sun,
But
I shall not compromise
And to the last pulse in my veins
I shall resist.
O enemy of the sun
The decorations are raised at the port.

The ejaculations fill the air,
A glow in the hearts,
And in the horizon
A sail is seen
Challenging the wind
And the depths.
It is Ulysses
Returning home
From the sea of loss
-
It is the return of the sun,
Of my exiled ones
And for her sake, and his
I swear
I shall not compromise
And to the last pulse in my veins
I shall resist.
Resist and resist.

– Samih Al Qasim
Land, Untitled, 1

2023, photograph and charcoal printed on fabric and paper, shot over and over again - on sublimation dye printed and steamed linen
2023, photograph and charcoal, pigment on fabric and paper, shot over and over again - woven with cotton on a jacquard loom


Saloni Matter, *The Migrant’s Time, Rethinking Art History and Diaspora*, (Williamstown, Massachusetts, Sterling and Francine Clark Art Institute, 2011)

Thank you.