

LANDSCAPE, LANGUAGE AND LIGHT: A DIALOGUE

Gannit Ankori and Samir Srouji

When we decided to write a joint essay reflecting on Shimon Attie's *Facts on the Ground*, we did not know that we would actually be 'on the ground' - that is in Israel/Palestine - while writing this text. During our initial conversations about the project, in Boston over a glass of white wine, we focused on Attie's work from our professional perspectives, as an artist/architect (Samir) and an art historian (Gannit). We had much to say about the poetics and politics of landscape and language. We noted the alliterations and paradoxes that activated the words. We recognized the architecture of occupation all too well. We were also very familiar with the pain and the beauty of the land; for both of us, a personally charged, complicated, and beleaguered native land.

It is summer and we are both 'back home' in the cities where we were born, Nazareth and Jerusalem respectively. Somehow, the cleavages between the landscape and the language seem to have grown deeper. As always, we are engaged in thinking about art, and in an ongoing dialogue.

SAMIR: I seem to gravitate to the same two works in Attie's collection after multiple viewings: LAND LORD and PART OF THE PLAN.

In LAND LORD the presence of the settlement in a looming arch - ominous and mysterious - is reinforced by the threatening quality of light in the sky. The light box text "LORD" pushes this notion towards 'heavenly powers' and a moment of impending catastrophe. I recognize the architectural forms and the suburban planning clues of a Jewish settlement in the West Bank instantly. I do not recognize the specific place, but Attie captures the quintessential image of a settlement with precision:

overpowering atop the hill, violently scarring the landscape, and devoid of aesthetics.

The mixture of a moonscape-like stone field and strewn debris that appears in the foreground of the photograph requires further scrutiny to decipher. In my view, it is here that the power and the punctum of the image resides. The word "LAND" steers the reading towards a Palestinian landscape, the edge of a village or a field.

The choice of words in this work: Land, Lord and Landlord, opens up multiple options for interpretation, setting up an inextricable relationship between geography, occupation, power, divinity, religion, and the economics of real estate.

GANNIT: The word "LORD" does conjure up both the religious fervor and the sense of ownership and entitlement that underpin the Religious Zionist settler movement. And, of course, "LAND" points to one of the major sources of contention in the region. But Attie's work seems to undermine the belief that there is anything divine in this landscape. In fact, most of the photographs are crowded with manmade structures and detritus. However, in spite of the multiple traces of human activities and presence – the landscapes are strangely depopulated. (Even the figurative sculptures in the photograph DOUBLE MEANING are dark, cutout silhouettes.) The native languages are absent too. Instead of Arabic or Hebrew, a 'foreign tongue' invades the sites. This creates a sense of alienation. The glaring absences and eerie emptiness of Attie's landscapes invite us to contemplate the human lives that have been overtaken by the conflict-ridden realities that rule this contested land.

I think about the individual victims – unseen, unnamed. This weekend, in the summer of 2015, as we look together at the

photographs, I feel compelled to remember the name of an 18-month-old toddler, Ali Dawabsheh, killed by Jewish settlers who set his family home on fire in the West Bank village of Duma. I want to remember his father, Saad and his mother, Riham, who died of their wounds a few weeks later. And I want to pray for his 4-year-old brother, Ahmad, the sole survivor from the Dawabsheh family, who was seriously wounded in the vicious fire and is still fighting for his life in the hospital.

Their names stand in for a painfully long list of names that came before and will tragically come after – I think of them when I look at the fissured landscapes that Attie captures and stamps with his poetry.

SAMIR: While traveling in Palestine/Israel this summer, I was impressed by the road construction ongoing everywhere. The infrastructure seems to be in constant flux. Familiar intersections are reconfigured, so that I was constantly taking wrong turns and even got lost on my way from Haifa to Nazareth, a trip I have made a thousand times in the past. I could not help but feel that this was part of A plan.

The work PART OF THE PLAN resonates with this notion that roads, bridges and tunnels are meant to facilitate movement and commerce for some, but to dislocate, encircle and disenfranchise others. The image is composed of three horizontal layers: the foreground displays the edge of a road with encroaching tree lines on the side. The middle ground shows rolling hills that are crisscrossed by roads, paths and bridges, reaching to a horizon that seems endless. The third section is a calm sky.

The soft serenity of the scene is disturbed by the oversized text lit upon a black box: "PART OF THE PLAN." Slicing through the image at an angle, shedding light on the edge of the road

the end of a peace rally, Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin was assassinated in this square. The site has since become a lieu de memoire, a space loaded with traumatic memories of violence, but also a place where the contemporary rifts and fissures that plague Israeli society are on display.

The text "unlike euphoria" may allude to the euphoria associated with Israel's 1967 military victory, but also to the hindsight understanding of the devastating consequences of the Six Day War, particularly the ongoing Israeli occupation of the West Bank.

Beyond the words, the name of the square, and the burden of memories associated with the site, there is something mesmerizing about the photograph. The streetlights emit star like illuminations against the background of a dark blue sky. In the foreground, the reflections of various sources of light in the greenish water of the pool, form amorphous and suggestive shapes of great beauty.

SAMIR: In Attie's series, his text light boxes attempt to shed some light on the layered realities, the incomprehensible violence, and on harsh facts on the ground.

The text is bright but the light the boxes emit fades instantly, illuminating very little and leaving us thinking.