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# SHIMON ATTIE *Facts on the Ground*

by Yasaman Alipour

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A lot could be said of those two words, appearance and reality! [. . .] I thought I could hear echoes of it in the phraseologies and absurdly sweeping slogans attributed to the sort of figures that haunt the imagination of nations in revolt.

Jean Genet, *Prisoner of Love*

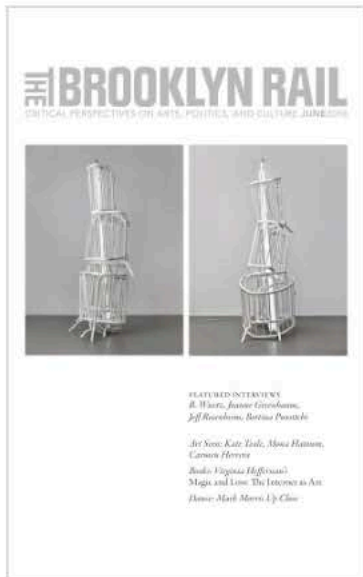
After twenty years of meditating on social psyches, Shimon Attie has brought the Israel/Palestine conflict to Jack Shainman Gallery. Celebrated for his experimental approach, which blurs the line between installation and photography, Attie has spent his career moving from one city to the next to explore the trauma and history of the marginalized and to reflect on social memory and the construction of identity. Seductive, daring, and clever, *Facts on the Ground* dives into the inherently charged and polarized politics of its subject matter.

In twelve large photographs with pastel-like colors, Attie focuses on an enchanted desert, voided of all humans, in order to transcend both sides of the tension and override normalized images of conflict. He interrupts the landscapes by creating his own installations with short poetic statements. Clinical titles briefly contextualize the horrific history of images that are rich in their vagueness. Attie achieves something profound: he presents a unique opportunity to contemplate Israel/Palestine without the distraction that is simultaneously a manifestation of



Shimon Attie, *ALL OF ONE'S FEARS*, Two on-location light boxes, sited between Synagogue and ruins of former Mosque attacked by rioting Israelis during second Intifada, Cvar Shalem neighborhood, Tel Aviv, 2014. Digital c-print. 40 x 60 inches. ©Shimon Attie. Courtesy the artist and Jack Shainman Gallery.

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the limitations of visual or written language and the possibilities of their alliance.

*A PROBLEM IN LOGIC, Two on location custom made light boxes, Israel-Palestine Separation Wall, Abu Dis, Palestinian City, West Bank (2014)*

visualizes the separation that has continuously defined the upheaval. Under a pinkish sky—dusk or perhaps dawn—a barren hill is segregated by a long sweeping concrete wall. On the side and beyond the border, the continuing hill is filled with repeating cube-like buildings. Emerging from the horizon is a curving road that runs across the wall but appears to be stopped by it. Attie’s intervening words challenge the familiar image; next to the gray wall—filled with English statements in support of the resistance—two light-boxes are placed: “A PROBLEM” and “IN LOGIC.” The short sentence creates a moment of silence that invites us to revisit the image, and even its subject.

Attie repeats this approach throughout the project. The simple and poetic illustrations of the ongoing tragedy; the protest embedded in the short, haiku-like statements; and the burden of the provided information come together to create puzzles that refuse to be solved. Most significantly, what allows this multi-layered experience is Attie’s mastery as an image maker—his attention to detail.

*ALL OF ONE’S FEARS, Two on-location light boxes, sited between Synagogue and ruins of former Mosque attacked by rioting Israelis during second Intifada, Cvar Shalem neighborhood, Tel Aviv (2014)* is an intentionally simplistic analogy of the crisis. The mosque stands on one corner, the humble synagogue—a small house with windows illuminating a Star of David—on the other. Between them, a silhouetted palm tree symbolizes Middle East’s Eden. Across the



Shimon Attie, *LAND LORD, Two on-location light boxes, looking onto the Israeli settlement Har Homa from the Palestinian Village Umm Tuba, annexed by Israel in 1967, 2014. Digital c-print. 49 1/8 × 73 1/8 × 2 1/8 inches. ©Shimon Attie. Courtesy the artist and Jack Shainman Gallery.*

darkening sky of the two cities, electricity wires run, crossing each other and connecting the two opposing poles. The pebbles on the ground are illuminated with two light boxes: “ALL OF,” “ONE’S FEARS.” Their separation makes the words stand out: “All,” “One,” “Fears,” each so core to the situation.

Effective as it is, Attie’s obscurity only protects him to an extent. In recent years, generalizations and simplifications have become common refuge in discussions of the ongoing disputes. Attie takes a different path. A closer look into the

exhibition as a whole unfolds deeper complexities; the recurring themes of identity and conflict can circle back to the artist himself: Attie is a Jewish American who has chosen, for the most part, to stand in Palestine and look into Israel—and specifically at its fraught settlements.

At points, Attie succeeds in creating a single image that contains the different layers simultaneously. In *LAND LORD, Two on-location light boxes, looking onto the Israeli settlement Har Homa from the Palestinian Village Umm Tuba, annexed by Israel in 1967*, (2014), Attie stands in the Palestinian village of Umm Tuba looking into the Israeli settlement of Har Homa. The foreground focuses on small details: dirt, rubbish, destruction. The image gradually goes out of focus in perspectival depth: roads lead the eyes to a hilltop covered by the identical high-rises of Har Homa. The two loaded words, “Land” and “Lord” are placed on the far sides on the empty ground, balancing the image and creating an invisible entry to the emerging army of buildings. The title continues to describe Umm Tuba, “annexed by Israel in 1967.” The blurred lights of the distant roads and homes turn into lit candles. An unknown tragedy is mourned.

Like two mirrors, Attie faces his abstracted information and his seductive photography towards one another, in endlessly repeating mutual reference. Still the obscurity of his poetics doesn't make him immune to partiality. The intended audience and the delivered message are, however obliquely, discernable in Attie's smart and conscious choices: his wording, his decisions as image-maker, his controversial subjects, and even his use of the English language. Rather than a universal truth, *Facts on the Ground* is a gate, holding within it a road carved by the artist. It is entirely up to the viewer to decide how far they will go.

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