

“Khilwe” Samira Wahbi Tal Ben Zvi

“Khilwe”, Samira Wahbi’s solo exhibition, is a continuation of this artist’s preoccupation with gender-based reading of public and biographical spaces.¹

The exhibition shows a series of works of art addressing the Khilwe;² a Druze house of prayer that serves as a community religious center and as a place of spiritual and mental communion with God. This series is consisted of black-and-white photographs that Wahbi took of the Khilwe at her birthplace, Dalyat El-Karmel: a large but modest building, its walls bereft of pictures and ornaments, mattresses spread on its floor, and on the outside it is no different from any other public building. Although the Druze religion is a secret religion, Wahbi chooses to turn her glance to the depth of the religious community system and to present the building from the inside, in two ways: empty of people, and populated by a group of studying girls.

In this series, the photography emphasizes the natural light that comes in through the windows and door openings, turning each of these openings into a kind of large light fixture. No additional artificial light can be seen in the photographs, and the dark shades are fragmented by flashes of light that

emphasize the girls’ white headdress, which is seen in the photographs as a kind of aura. Wahbi locates the concept of the spiritual religious aura in the space of contemporary photography and in relation to the concept of “aura” in the history of Western photography. Similarly to the fragmented objects in Eugène Atget’s first photographs, which describe everyday life, Wahbi photographs the details of the mattresses and upholstery, the piled up chairs, the sparkling clean floor, the books and the space of the room as objects with an aura of light spread over them and redefining them. Walter Benjamin describes such everyday details as a search for that which is lost and hidden in the margins, “pictures that suck the aura from reality like water from a sinking ship”.³

The use of light and aura in these works of art unites several representation systems that exist on different, sometimes contradicting strata. Thus, for instance, a formalistic, mainly modernistic art system can emphasize objects as autonomous, with a substance of their own, and emphasize light as a contrast element with a role in defining the space and in creating the fixating image in the photography process. Alongside this system, monotheistic theological systems turn

the use of light into a rationalist, non-mystical discussion. Wahbi observes and seeks for the internal syntax of the sequence of objects that are shown in the photographs, a syntax that is mainly the product of the religious-community activity in the Khilwe, which structures the objects as a platform and as a background for religious spiritual activity.

In various languages, a direct relation exists between enlightenment, religious doctrine and light. Thus, for instance, the word “Orianut” (=literacy) is based on the Aramic word “Oriata”, meaning religious doctrine, and on the adjective “Bar-Orian” – religiously literate. This is also the case for the word “enlightment”, which describes the Enlightenment period in history as a period of light that destroyed the darkness, nullity and illiteracy that preceded it.⁴

Similarly, in the Druze culture, religious learning is described as casting light over the truth and as preferring knowledge and enlightenment over illiteracy and fear. It is this discourse that leads to the space that is described in Wahbi’s photographs, against the background of a series of binary couples: light and darkness, understanding and fear, enlightenment and illiteracy, faith and heresy.



At the center of the series there is a group of girls who are reading religious books. The studying girls are actually at a stage that precedes their entrance into religious Druze society. Their religious studies are a kind of initiation period towards their adulthood and their acceptance into the “Ukal”, the group of believers who devoutly keep the decrees of their religion, thus separating from the other “Johal” (the uninitiated).

According to the Druze faith, entrance into the religion requires the fulfillment of two conditions: the individual has to be an adult, above the age of fifteen, and he has to be free of slavery, in order for the choice to be made of his own free will, without any pressure. Women have the right to pray and even to attain the status of a religious priest, and to work in copying the religious books. Most girls and female teenagers are allowed to study in the Khilwe, but after the age of fifteen

only a young woman who decides to belong to the religious world is allowed to continue with her religious studies. This means that she has to take on customs of chastity in her conduct, dress and speech, and to make many difficult concessions which are the door to a way of life that entails suffering of body and mind.

Samira Wahbi documents young girls, most of whom are known to her – family members, friends and acquaintances. She photographs them in the village in which she herself grew up, as a chronicle of feminine existence. This is no chronicle of dominated margins, but rather a chronicle of substance and centrality. In the pictures, the girls are reading and talking intimately with each other. Some are sitting as a group on mattresses on the floor, while others are standing or sitting by themselves, detached from the group. The white headress emphasizes their free body gestures and the softness that delimits the reading space that appears in the picture, turning the scene into a harmonic, lighted convergence of young girls, facing a moment of important decision in their life.

Unlike the binary nature underlying monotheistic theological systems, the initiation stage that is described in the

photograph is structured as a feminine territory that does not adhere to the binary division of space into feminine and masculine or to conventional religious hierarchies. Wahbi creates a protected space in which the accessibility of the secret religious canonic text is intimate and unmediated, and mainly autonomic and empowering. The girls in the picture are not subject to the authority of adults, men or women; they are dispersed in the space of the building, and their placement does not hint at spatial patterns that can be repeated by strength of actually being marked in space. They are holding the open books close to their body, and their bodily posture is comfortable and enables prolonged reading, so that the reading experience itself does to adhere to regularizations and to a regime of supervision and understanding.

Although this description stands in contradiction with gender-based binary structures of religious community societies, it is compatible with various definitions of Rites of Passage. According to Turner, Rites of Passage are comprised of a three-stage process: detachment from the flow of everyday activities; transition through a liminality condition into the ritual world – a world that is distant from concepts of space

and time and within which the everyday structures of light are developed and challenged at the same time; and reentrance into the everyday world.⁵

One of the key concepts that are related to the second stage, the liminality stage, is the *communitas* – that sense of fraternity that prevails between those who go through the Rite of Passage together.

In relation to the conservative binary systems that take place before and after the initiation stage, Wahbi created a biographical experience as a Rite of Passage. The stay in a kind of lost Eden in which the joy de vivre, fraternity, sense of liberation and power stem from the right to participate in the experience of a religious reading of secret texts – all these are but a stage towards the emergence from the protected Khilwe space into the real existence space outside.

1. See text of the exhibition “There is No Place as Far Away’ in the catalogue: Tal Ben-Zvi, 2003. “Brunette – Sixteen Solo Exhibitions”, Heinrich Boll Foundation Gallery, Babel Publishing, pp. 70-75.
2. Khilwe – 1) Place of solitude; 2) Place of worship; 3) Communion, privacy. Arabic-Hebrew Dictionary, Abraham Shoshany, pg. 367.
3. Walter Benjamin, 2004 (1931). A Short History of Photography, Babel Publishing, pg.36.
4. Tamar El-Or, 1998. Next Passach, Am Oved Publishers, pg.287.
5. Victor Turner, 2004 (1969). The Ritual Process, Structure and Anti-Structure, Resling Publishing., pg.88.