

Ahlam Shibli, Wadi Saleib in Nine volumes, 15.1.99 - 12.2.99
Exhibition site: <http://www.hagar-gallery.com/ahlam10.html>
<http://www.hagar-gallery.com/palestin/ex04.htm#wadi>

Ahlam Shibli. Wadi Saleib in Nine Volumes

Text By: Tal Ben Zvi

An open suitcase, a manual typing machine with Arabic alphabet, a shopping bag, a writing desk, a child's single shoe, a wall painted light blue, a mirror, a doll, abandoned articles that have been collecting dust for 38 years.

The revolving of an article, the revolving of an article's spirit, which carries the memory of its use, the intimate touch of a human body. Domestic articles that mark the territory of a home, an intimate space full with the presence of human warmth. Ahlam raises the spirits of the past.

Until 22.4.48, the articles were in Palestinian ownership. Placed in Palestinian homes. Rich homes, full of good things. Wadi Saleib as a luxury neighborhood of big stone houses, high windows, high ceilings. On the 22.4.48, the Palestinians were driven away from their homes, the articles were left behind. In light of the stealing and plunder that took place that week, the Arabic property was collected by the "Hagana" in the "Hadar" cinema hall. The articles: furniture, mattresses, kitchen utensils, beds, were sold off for pennies to residents of the neighborhoods and to new immigrants who were intended to live in the houses from which the articles were taken.

For 13 years, new tenants lived in these houses: new immigrants, most of them from North Africa.

The Wadi Saleib riots took place On the 8th of July 1957. Riots that were caused by deprivation and bitterness. The population of the neighborhood was over-crowded, with many of them unemployed or defined as welfare cases. The police shot a resident of the neighborhood who got drunk and behaved riotously. Violent outbursts went beyond the boundaries of the neighborhood and very quickly turned into riots. Windows were shattered, and policemen all over Haifa were attacked. An investigation committee headed by Judge Moshe Etsion recommended to evacuate the neighborhood.

At the end of 1961, Wadi Saleib was cleared, and its residents moved to apartment blocks in Haifa and its surroundings. The houses that were emptied of their lodgers were blocked by the city council, still furnished and fit with utensils.

Why were the articles left in the abandoned houses for the second time? Why didn't the residents of the neighborhood take the furniture, the house utensils with them to their new apartments, since this time – unlike the first time – the articles were not left behind in the course of a deportation?

Ahlam invades close houses, steals in through cracks in the closed wooden windows, locates, maps, documents, photographs, like in the site of an archeological dig, moments before the "rehabilitation" project planned by the city council of Haifa, moments before the bulldozers come and erase the ruins that have become silent witnesses.

Ahlam identifies, characterizes the articles as Palestinian (though she has no proof of this). She returns to them the initial moment, the history of their source. The characterization of the objects stems from the first ownership of the territory, the term "house owner" expands to a territory that is above time, while the history of the object is reduced to the moment of its origin, the Palestinian home, the Palestinian neighborhood. From the viewpoint of the present she appropriates the findings of the area and places them in the center of a story. This is a story that is not linear, chronological, with a beginning, a middle and an end. It is a story that is above time, imaginary and at the same time realistic, used for the constructing process of the Palestinian collective memory.

She creates a visual text that has several base assumptions: there are spirits, they have a power, spirits have a will, they express their will. This is an attempt to construct verbal situations, an attempt to cause the object to speak of the human occurrences in its past. It seems that the article has a will of its own. The spirit of the article guides her in directing the scene. The spirit of the article calls, it brings up from the dead the human presence that reports its absence. Like in a seance, the movement of the article without human touch marks and reports messages from the other world. Thus, the cast-away article marks movement, it marks the human occurrences of its past.

She creates nine books, nine gates into a world that exists in the tension between a visual text based on the findings of the place, and a symbolic associative text driven by spirits of the past. The history of the article, the experience of its abandonment, the loss, the alienation embodied in it serves to create a stratum that is universal, an identification with a place emptied of its humanity.

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