

Jumana Emil Abboud, Rappunzelina, 11.6.98 - 23.7.98
Exhibition site: <http://www.hagar-gallery.com/jumana0.html>
<http://www.hagar-gallery.com/palestin/ex06.htm#rapunzelina>

Jumana Emil Abboud. Rappunzelina.
The Right to Return

Text by Tal Ben Zvi

The installation "Rappunzelina" by the artist Jumana Emil Abboud is a room decorated in pink, walls closing in a symbolic space which is a fantasy, fragments of memories, a lost homeland, a childhood landscape. In this space, Jumana Emil Abboud describes a process of apprenticeship, acquaintance and recognition of an old-new Palestinian culture. From the distance of many years in a foreign land, she attempts to bridge between her childhood memories and what exists today. It is an attempt to be re-assimilated-rooted in a foreign geographical-cultural space.

She makes a move that is inverse to the familiar and common Palestinian move - who remembers in glorification the homeland left behind. She returns to note every detail in the places from which she was uprooted.

The surface is beautiful, radiating, a beautiful Shefaram. The surface invites us to enter: colorful, arabesques, embroidered clothes, Eastern food, Arabic calligraphy, folktales, ornamentation, simplicity, naivete. She follows the traces of a woman who moves on the surface and studies her: What does she eat? What does she wear? What does she see? What does she talk? What is her language? Her home, her intimate space. She attempts to get closer, to find the traces of her breathing on the surface.

Jumana says: "There is no difficulty in falling in love with being an Arab woman, becoming attached to the elements of being an Arab woman. Everything was so beautiful to my eyes, so delicate, romantic, who would think that such a delicate, romantic thing can hurt you?"

She is occupied in research, as in an archeological dig she first maps the surface, what can be seen to the eye, what can be saved. She classifies, spreading her findings on pink sheets of paper, as on shelves in an archive. Sheets of paper that are an index of visual values: ancient olive trees, ripe cherries, photographs from a refugee camp in Jericco, a house in Ramalla, an olive-harvest in Shefaram, a homeland landscape, a romantic wedding, Holy Maria, ornamentation, lace, arabesques, clothes, traditional embroidery, folktales, photograph albums and texts in Arabic.

The described space appears at first glance to be natural, beautiful. A space about which we do not ask questions, a space we can accept with simplicity and naivete. It can serve to socialize, to internalize you into it, to be internalized in you. It has no visibility. It lacks a beginning, a middle and an end. It does not mediate. Like an arrangement of simple things. Childhood. She enjoys the ability to be a little woman, a child, unaware..

At the center of the works of art there is the image of Rappunzel, a homage to Rappunzel¹, the heroine of a western fairytale. Through her psychological interpretation of the fairytale, she attempts to allow a variety of possibilities of Palestinian-feminine identity to exist. Her identification of herself with a western figure enables her to point at the complexity constructing her identity, and to focus or viewpoint.

In the space she describes, Rappunzel is not one figure, she recurs time and again in the works of art, placed in a variety of situations, landscapes and places. Sometimes the figure of Rappunzel is combined with the figure of a girl from a guidebook for Palestinian girls: "Why it

is important to grow a long braid." In this book, through guided imagination, girls receive an explanation that a long braid is most functional: you can jump with it, dance with it and even fish with it. The Palestinian model of beauty and the western model of beauty are equally manifested in the long braid of a woman growing her braid since childhood.

Rapunzel's intermediate stages on her way to freedom are the stages in which her women are located. Freedom is the central parameter in her discourse of feminine identity. It is her litmus paper. Through it she examined the described figure's closeness to freedom, or to the intermediate stages on the way to freedom.

Jumana creates a retroactive, fictive socialization process, which includes several viewpoints of her "Other" culture. She stages a process in which the heroine imagines for a moment that she experiences the things that are happening to her as a blank slate, for the very first time. It is a fictive process since any attempt to deconstruct the past already includes the viewpoint of the present. Retroactively, she established the self and constructs her identity in various strata of time and place. She appropriates, deconstructs, rewrites, creates a personal memory, a childhood landscape, a homeland landscape, the history of a figure, of a subject that is present-non-present in the space she describes.

Through graphic interpretation she describes an imaginary landscape, a symbolic space, and returns to it the immediacy of the everyday experience of reality.

In several of her works of art there are pages torn out of books in Arabic. The written text is only an object, it is the surface, the given thing that is only a word. The text has no meaning, a random page that is only a part of the story. The processing of the surface is the intimate language, the feminine voice, that holds the text but cannot overcome it.

Jumana refuses to translate the texts. She works on them: spreads watermelon seeds on them, folds them, marks sections in them. She tries to create a set of signs in which the graphic work empties the linguistic meaning of its importance. The set of signs works as a code that gives the text, the watermelon seeds, the sketch and the pink paper an equal status. For the Arab viewer, fragments of the text are legible, as a result of folding or concealment, they are deflected from their linguistic meaning.

Jumana says: "The text has no meaning, even for the Arab viewer who can read Arabic, it is a random page that is only a part of the story, a page ripped out of an unfamiliar book that not everyone can identify, these are not familiar books at the center of the Arab culture. Comprehension of the written words does not necessarily make the work of art more accessible. The text functions as a code, as a personal thing. The gap between "speaking" a language and the possibility to "speak" the language is the gap that exists between the ability to read the text and the ability to comprehend it.

"My mother tongue is Arabic, but I write my poetry in English. For a long time, I walked through my home in Shefaram without speaking, dumb. The house was always full of people, I can speak Arabic, I understand Arabic after all, but for what? I still cannot find my language, I speak English and Arabic and now Hebrew, too. In what language can I speak the things I believe in, my intimate truth, without fearing that I will not be understood, without thinking all the time – Does the other person understand me?"

The works of art hold fragments of a Palestinian identity, associations of a national identity, code words that code a whole cultural space: olive trees, watermelon seeds, cherries.

A photograph taken in Shefaram: The aunt is sitting at the height of the olive-harvest season, on the floor, sitting on a black tarpaulin on which olives are spread. She selects them with strict care, hard but liberating work. It appears as though she is sitting in a blue-green sea, fragrant and wonderful. Nature. She symbolizes the freedom of the other woman, the traditional woman, the village woman who finds and takes her freedom within the family, the tradition, within the existing difficulties, the hard work, the framework.

Pink A4 sheet of paper: On one side there is a page from a book in Arabic. Again the text is not translated, it has no meaning. On the text, watermelon seeds are arranged in the shape of an Arabesque, a pattern ornamenting Palestinian dresses. The seeds are a sign of renewal, beginning life anew. On the other side there is a photograph of the parents' wedding in Shefaram. A blurry, out-of-focus photograph, from the family album: a wedding, a new direction in life, romance, love, a blurry, illusionary reality. Above the photograph, several hands form shadows on the wall. A child's game. A shadow in the shape of a dog. Guard dogs. They supervise the social structure that includes the traditional family.

An A4 sheet of paper, half white and half pink: On one side, Rappunzel is hung from her hair, a long braid ending in a heart-shaped loop. The heart looks like a balloon blowing in the wind, Rappunzel's body hangs loosely, almost lifelessly. On the other side of the paper there are four red blood prints in the shape of a flower. There is a price to pay for freedom, love, sexuality. The traditional social justice contends that what is taken has to be paid for.

An additional group of canvases. On each canvas there is a painted woman, dressed in traditional clothes. These women feel satisfied in their loneliness. In their small space there is a certain freedom, freedom within the legitimate framework of tradition. One figure is painted blurred, she bows her head and only her hand appears clearly.

"My ability to cut myself off from the world of reality was no new thing. In my childhood, I would sit under the tree in the yard, focusing my eyes on my left thumb without blinking. I would focus my look deeply until I would achieve the feeling of my thumb and then the hand itself becoming foreign and lacking all meaning, an object unrelated to me. Then I would become foreign to myself, and I would silently ask myself time and again: "Who am I? Who am I?" And I would repeat my name in my mind several times, but my name sounded foreign and meaningless.

Here my affinity to my name, to myself, to everything around me was cut off, and I would sink into a very strange state of non-substance and intangibility.

When I would raise my eyes above my thumb and look around, I would return to myself and to external world, and I would be happy that I have the ability to step out of myself in this mysterious way and then to return to myself.

("Mountainous Way – Autography", Padua Tukan, Mifras Books, 1993.)

Pink A4 sheet of paper: This is a tripling work of art. Three souls. Three fragments of personality. On one side of the pink paper there is a transparent piece of paper on which Rappunzel's figure is sketched, the first figure. She sits cutting her hair with a knife. In her experience of the world she is a virgin – she does not know it. The hair as an image of the soul, the way to her sensuality, to sexuality. The way others can find her, reach her, take her, take her freedom, but she remains imprisoned. The cutting of the hair is ambivalent, it symbolizes both her liberation from the load of the weight on her head and a self-inflicted injury – even if it is carried out from a stance of power and control.

Through the transparent piece of paper we can see a landscape, green trees, nature. The forest begins on the other side of the paper. In the center of the page there is a halved picture. In the top part, the second figure appears: a black rabbit, it is the shade, the fear, the death, the unknown. It looks towards the cutting Rappunzel, approving of her actions. The third figure is a white rabbit, symbolizing Rappunzel herself. The delicate, passive side of her, which holds the potential of breath. Its body is divided into two: the top half of his body and his one eye looking. His bottom half is eye-less, blind. In the center, between the two parts of the white rabbit, in the place of the heart, there is a sketch of a chrysalis. The chrysalis is the butterfly in potential. It holds all the knowledge, the tools and the possibilities of freedom.

Jumana creates an alternative fairytale. Rappunzel cuts off her hair with her own hands. The representative of fear and the unknown approves of her actions, while the potential of freedom that is within her is exposed.

¹ "Rappunzel" is a fairytale about a young woman who is held captive by a witch. She is isolated from the rest of the world, imprisoned at the top of a high tower without any stairs. The only way to reach her room is by climbing her long hair. Rappunzel passes her days in isolated tranquility: she fills her time with singing, and is satisfied with that. Only the appearance of a young man cuts off this tranquility, and Rappunzel starts aspiring for freedom. In the beginning, his arrival frightens her – she has never seen a man before. In the course of time, they become lovers – her long hair is the means through which he climbs up into her room.

When the witch learns of the forbidden trysts, she cuts Rappunzel's hair off and sends her to a distant island. After falling from the tower window, her lover becomes blind. After many years of searching, he finds Rappunzel, her tears bring back his eyesight, and they marry and live happily ever after.

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1991 Studied at the Ontario College of Art' Toronto. 1996 B.F.A., Department of Fine Art, Bezalel Academy of Arts& Design, Jerusalem.

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1999 "Seven Days", Herzliya Museum of Art, Herzliya

1999 "Look Mama Look", Art Focus 3, Jerusalem

1999 "Palestinian Artists Today", Drammens Museum, Norway

1999 "Gateway", Natuonal Gallery of Fine Arts, Amman, Jordan

1999 "Mediterranean Biennale for Young Artists", Rome, Italy

1998 "Palestin(a) – Woman's Art from Palestine", Ami Steinitz – Contemporary Art, Tel Aviv, AL-i Palstinian Art Cnter, East Jerusalem

1998 "rapunzelina" Heinrich Boll Foundation, Tel Aviv*

1997 Beit HaGefen, Haifa*

1996 Art Focus, Jerusalem*

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