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MEMOIR OF THE DISPOSSESSED

BY NOAH SIMBLIST

Dor Guez, *Sabir,* 2011, 17:30 minutes. Installation view at The Rose Art Museum, Brandeis University. Photo: Charles Mayer.

It's a common practice, especially in today's globalized art world, to define artists in terms of their nationality. Trying to avoid such descriptions can be like omitting gendered pronouns. In this sense, a post-national reading of an artist is like a queer reading of an artist. This essay will look at the ways in which Dor Guez queers the borders between normative nationalist and religious positions.[1] This might seem like a biographically reductive gesture, but Guez's work is emphatically about a family's political history that is a rich, layered story, blurring the boundaries between identity positions such as Jewish, Arab, Christian, Israeli and Palestinian.

In a recent exhibition at the The Rose Art Museum at Brandeis University, Guez focused on the Christian Palestinian minority in Israel. He designed the exhibition to resemble the cruciform floor plan of a church. It began with a darkened room, the soft lilt of loud music and a large screen floating in the center. This is half of a two-channel video installation called *Untitled (St George Church)* (2009). As its title suggests, the videos are shot in an Ottoman-era, Byzantine-style church in Lod[2], Israel. The large screen depicts the iconostasis, an icon-covered wall that separates the nave from the altar. It is filled with elaborate gilded ornaments and the solemn golden figures of saints, prophets, apostles and a sadly serene holy family. The smaller monitor presents us with a scene in which the priest gives a sermon in Greek that is translated by a man, who stands next to him into Arabic.

This installation speaks to the long history of Christianity in Palestine, the site of its origin, but it also reveals the precarity of the Arab Christian minority that now has to import priests from elsewhere. This suggests that Palestine is a place that can neither produce nor maintain Christian religious leaders. But the video prompts us to ask why. Is it a Jewish Israeli culture that pushes out difference? Or is it an increasingly Islamicized Palestinian public that has little place for Christian culture?

Guez has also produced a series of large, dark, sublime photographs of ruins[3] that point to the history that led to the destabilization of this ancient Christian community. They seem to have been taken with long exposures, allowing flowers to light up like fireflies. Their main subjects are the empty husks of houses, crumbling and overgrown with wild vegetation, and inhabited by little more than

Dor Guez, *Video stills from (Sa)Mira*, 2009, Video, 13:40 minutes. All images are courtesy of the artist.

stray cats. This is what is left from the Israeli invasion of Al-Lydd in 1948, a town of Christian and Muslim Palestinian Arabs that were herded by the new Israeli military into the Lod Ghetto.

Thus there are multiple levels of difference at play here. Guez sets up a paradigm that could easily fall into a distinct binary of power relations. These destroyed houses do point to a history of Israeli power over a Palestinian population. But in the context of the video of St. George Church, a weakened Christian community also points to its alienation within Palestinian society. If we remember that Lod is within Israel then we realize that its Palestinian population consists of Israeli citizens who enjoy far greater rights than Palestinians in the West Bank, so the stereotypical image of the Palestinian is elided in Guez's images of Al Lydd. Palestinian, in this sense, is a cultural rather than a national identity. Finally, the work acquires an additional dimension when we realize that Dor Guez is also from Lod, is a parishioner in St. George's church, and self-identifies as Palestinian and Israeli.

The tensions inherent in these contradictions are explored in another body of work within Guez's oeuvre, which is more documentary in nature. It includes videos made from interviews that Guez conducted with the Manoyers, the maternal side of his family. What emerges in these works is not only the history of a family that lived through the *Nakba*[4], but also a family that has developed a contemporary identity position that is multifarious and fundamentally fraught with contradiction.

For instance, In *Subaru-Mercedes* (2009), Sami Monayer talks about his hybrid identity of being Israeli-Palestinian-Christian. He went to Jewish schools and even participated in *gadna* (pre-military training). He acknowledges that through music and theater, his language and life is in Hebrew, but he is always aware that his mother tongue is Arabic. "For Jews you are Palestinian, for Palestinians, you are Israeli," he says. In *(Sa)Mira* (2009), Guez's niece describes an incident in the restaurant where she works as a waitress. Some customers complain to her manager about having an Arab as their server, and her manager suggests that she change her name from Samira to the more Jewish-Israeli sounding Sima to hide her identity. Samira, whose accent, dress and colloquialisms are typically Israeli, tells Guez that she settled on the name Mira, but the incident reveals the difficult position that even thoroughly assimilated Palestinians have in Israeli society.
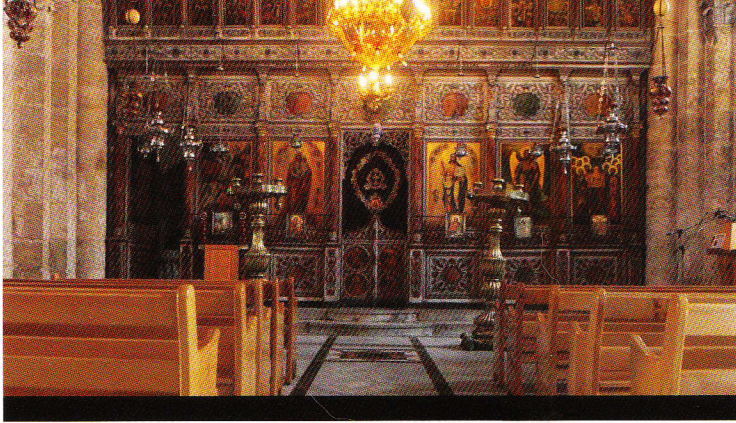
In *Sabir* (2011)—a large projection of a sunset on a narrow strip of beach—Samira's namesake and grandmother provides a voiceover, which narrates her life in pre-1948 Jaffa where the video was shot. She tells us that her family lived "100 steps from the Mediterranean" but during the war in 1948 had to flee to Al Lydd, hiding in the Church of St. George. Her speech drifts back and forth between Hebrew and Arabic, and she speaks with a mesmerizing inflection. As we listen to her reach back through the cobwebs of memory, we see the sun slowly disappear, swallowed by the horizon. The fixed shot of this perpetual downward motion also catches a counterpoint—people playing ball, swimmers, surfers and a dog that meanders in and out of the frame. It is at once lyrical, playful and a site of mournful nostalgia.
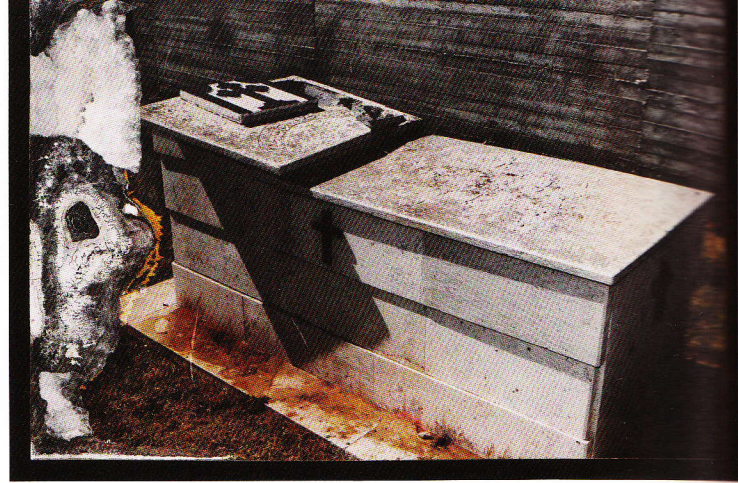
This mix of sunset and politics is reminiscent of *I Only Wish That I Could Weep* (1996-2003) by Walid Raad/The Atlas Group. This artwork purports to be a video document made by a Lebanese intelligence officer who was assigned to monitor a boardwalk by the sea and instead documents the sunset. This shift to look away from the normative target of political inquiry allows us to focus our attention back on politics in a new way. Raad's fictional Atlas Group was organized around the principle of analyzing the archive that told the history of the Lebanon Civil War. This political conflict, which included the participation of Israel and the Palestinian Liberation Organization, involved many different parties. Both during the war and in its aftermath, photographs and texts were used by journalists, politicians, NGOs and historians to advocate for various political ideologies. Raad's Atlas Group focused not so much on the specifics of each image but more so on the aesthetics and politics of the archive. Raad challenges the absolute true value of documents, the archive and authorship in a situation in which sectarian politics make simplistic categorizations of identity absurd. Guez doesn't play as much between fact and fiction in his videos. The tension between the symbolic and the real exists between the documentary qualities of videos like *(Sa)Mira* and the imagistic qualities in *Sabir*. But he does interrogate the materiality of history as a way to similarly explode expectations through what he calls scannograms.[5]

Guez's scannograms, a product of his Palestinian Christian Archive, are large prints that were scanned three times, using different focuses and machines. They produce images that include studio portraits from the 1940s and 1950s, wedding documentation and snapshots of a family playing in fresh snowfall. But they also include creases and tears represented with equal clarity. As a result, they are images of images, revealing the scars of a family's past. Probably most haunting are the pictures of Samira and Jacob Monayer getting married in the first Christian wedding at the Lod Ghetto.

As with the politics of Lebanon, the materiality of political traces in Israel-Palestine explodes any hope of clear binaries. Guez, like Raad, uses documents, and in particular, photographs to show multiple forces in conflict. In Guez's video *40 Days* (2012), which documents the slow passing away of his grandfather Jacob,

Dor Guez, *Video stills from Untitled (St. George Church),* **2009**, two-channel video installation, 6:59 minutes.

40 Days, 'Scanogram', **2012**, series of manipulated ready-mades, 12 archival inkjet prints, 35.4" x 25.5".

سميرة في فستان عرسها، في أول حفل زفاف مسيحي في اللد بعد ١٩٤٨

Scanogram #1, Image 9, Samira in her wedding gown, the first Christian wedding in Lod after 1948, **2010**, manipulated readymade, archival inkjet print, 23 ½" x 29 ½ ".

Dor Guez, *Untitled (St. George Church)*, **2009**, two-channel video installation, 6:59 minutes. Installation view at The Rose Art Museum, Brandeis University. Photo: Charles Mayer.

Jacob's wife Samira shows Guez a group of photographs. They have gotten wet and are stuck together, but as we see her pull them apart it also becomes clear that they were taken to document one of the many times in the past decade during which the Christian cemetery in Lod was vandalized. "Oh, that's my mom's grave, there used to be a cross here," she says, pointing to a broken tomb. This moment reveals the violence against both a grave and a photograph and ultimately against a Christian family and community that is a minority within a minority in Israeli society. We don't know exactly who the culprits are of this desecration, but they could equally be Jewish or Muslim.

40 Days intercuts between Jacob and Samira's home, the hospital where Jacob lies dying and the cemetery where he is ultimately buried. There are only a few snippets of dialogue, and most of the images are quiet and empty of human presence. In this sense, Guez has combined the more imagistic elements of *Untitled (St George Church)* and *Sabir* with the more diaristic and documentary impulses of works like *(Sa)Mira*. Furthermore, this work develops out of those earlier videos by echoing them in terms of form and content. In *40 Days*, we once again see a ceremony in St. George Church, but this time it is a funeral for Jacob. We also see the priest as an outsider when he needs a crumpled piece of notebook paper held in front of his face during the ceremony to remember the names of the local dead.

In all of these works, Guez weaves together the personal and the political, poetry and ideology, into a tapestry made from the practice of everyday life. But his life, the life of his family and community are subject to the broad gestures of national and religious identity in Israel-Palestine—a place where nothing is simple, and the heavy fog of history clouds every shot at a clear picture.

Like queer politics, Guez does not seek to abolish the specifics of identity positions. When Queer Nation or ACT UP emerged in the 1990s in the face of the AIDS crisis, their activists gave voice to identity positions like gay, lesbian or transgender that had until then existed on the margins. They didn't want a society that was post-gender or post-desire. They wanted a society that could acknowledge and embrace multiple identity positions.[6] Similarly, Guez's work proposes an analogous task for nationalism and its relationship to religious culture. He shows us that his own family and community contain complex identities that go far beyond any simplistic binary such as Israeli-Palestinian, Arab-Jew or Muslim-Christian. Guez proposes another political position to start a conversation about the social structure of Israel-Palestine that is based on pluralism,[7] allowing for identity and alterity without assimilation or essentialism. ∎

NOTES
1. To some degree, the use of the theoretical confluence of queer politics and the ongoing problematics embedded in Israel-Palestine mirrors the development of Judith Butler's work. Butler emerged as a scholar of queer performativity but most recently has published and lectured extensively on critiques of Zionism. See *Parting Ways: Jewishness and the Critique of Zionism*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2012. See also Sarah Schulman, *Israel/Palestine and the Queer International*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2012.
2. Al Lydd was the name of this town until 1948, when Israel renamed it Lod.
3. Pictures of ruins are a ubiquitous way to tell the story of the *Nakba* (see note 4), when many Palestinians were forced from their homes by the Israeli military. These ruins have become a symbol of the erasure of Palestinian society in work by artists like Rula Halawani (who photographed the ruins of Lifta, an Arab village on the outskirts of Jerusalem) and the Israeli NGO Zochrot that uses protests, exhibitions and publications to highlight the physical history of Palestinian society within Israel.
4. The "*Nakba*," meaning "catastrophe" in Arabic, is how Palestinians refer to the establishment of the state of Israel in 1948. It references the military occupation of Palestinian lands and people, as well as the beginning of a refugee crisis, but also the split between Palestinians who became citizens of Israel and those who live in the West Bank and Gaza, Jordan, Lebanon, Syria, Egypt and elsewhere.
5. Indeed, Guez's project is more similar to the Arab Image Foundation in Beirut, co-founded by the artist Akram Zaatari.
6. For an excellent discussion of the pluralism behind the term "queer," see http://badatsports.com/2007/episode-91-gregg-bordowitz-and-david-getsy-on-"queer"/
7. Butler infers an ethic of pluralism from Arendt's coverage of the 1963 Eichmann trial in Jerusalem. Arendt accuses Eichmann and the Third Reich of wrongfully believing that they could choose with whom to cohabit. Butler states, "If Arendt was right, then it is not only that we may not choose with whom to cohabit, but that we must actively preserve the unchosen character of inclusive and plural cohabitation." *Parting Ways: Jewishness and the Critique of Zionism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2012) p.151.