

# FRAMES OF THE VISIBLE

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Among the more than 60,000 images collected and archived by the Iranian-born, Canada and California-based conceptual artist Sanaz Mazinani for her intricate digital collages one finds an outsized number relating to the destabilizing effects, both here, the United States, and elsewhere, the Middle East, enacted by the Bush administration's Global War on Terror. Exhibit A: War Casualty Homecoming Images released, due to a request through the Freedom of Information Act, in 2005.<sup>1</sup> American soldiers stand in file upon a tarmac and salute the passage of a casket, draped in an American flag, borne by four servicemen. We imagine they have either just recently disembarked from the plane that transported them back to the United States from one of the major fronts in the War on Terror. Or perhaps, they remain in an active theater – be

it Iraq or Afghanistan – and march forward to board that plane home. The redactions obscuring soldiers' faces coupled with the caption "No Information Provided" underscores the general ambiguity surrounding these heretofore-secret images. In turn, the camera's circumscribed field of vision – that which its frame frames – recedes into the far recess of the vanishing point, while the foreword movement of our military pallbearers ensures that the image's out-of-field (out-of-frame) appears in our mental apperception of the photograph.

Images of war dead, or rather, the notorious paucity of images of deceased members of the United States Armed Forces, defined, in part, the Pentagon's approach to media management, or, as Judith Butler recently emphasizes, the perspectival frames through which war is made manifest in the mind's



*There is, of course, no visible not held in a look and, as it were, always already framed.*

*- Jean-Louis Comolli*

eye of the civilian population; that is to say, the frames through which we understand the political reality of U.S.-led foreign policy throughout the Near East.<sup>2</sup> Mazinani's Land of the Giants, a series of large-scale digital collages that re-mediate images drawn from the mediascape such as the one described above, functions here as an instance of an artist searching for a practice designed to intervene into these very perspectival frames of vision. Furthermore, though one senses when looking at these collages the urgent

Left: *Land of the Giants #6, 2011*  
Pigment print on Paper, variable dimensions

Right: detail—*Land of the Giants #6, 2011*



need to find ways of representing political realities with and through images, one finds a deep suspicion of photographic representation.

Our image of the troops transporting their deceased compatriot does not figure in Mazinani's collage as such. Rather, when viewers apprehend the collage in its totality, they witness a kaleidoscopic image designed to produce, in part, an optical effect. Close inquiry into the ranges of geometric forms patterned across the collage proves the impossibility of grasping any easily discernable shape. Furthermore, to find the iconography in the actual source image, and thus to tease out some of the original iconographic significance designed in the production of these images by the U.S. military, one must move close to the image and investigate its intricate digital weave. Process of production and process of perception commingle as the work draws us into its tangled twists and turns.

To say that the kind of collage on display in *Land of the Giants* unmoors us from the conventions of perspectival realism would be something of an obvious oversimplification. We might follow the art historian Stephen Melville,

who once argued, "the camera is most simply a machine for producing automatic linear perspective renditions of the world."<sup>9</sup> Of course the camera may do other things, but the orthogonal orientation of the soldiers and tarmac in our source image orders vision and grounds the viewer, unambiguously according a linear, perspectival code. Mazinani's collages in contradistinction function as kaleidoscopic cluster bombs designed to shatter the perspectival frames of visibility that allows for a particular vision of U.S.-led foreign policy to flow through the channels of the media. They do this in two ways.

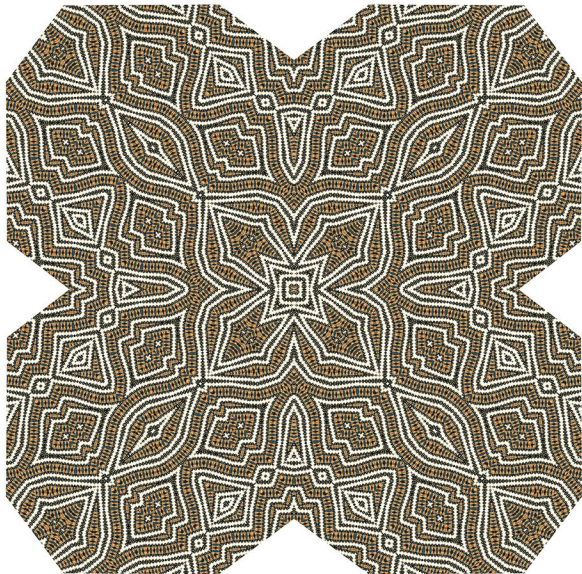
First, they traffic in forms of geometric image-making endemic to the Anatolian peninsula and historic Persia, thereby inscribing a place for the "voice" of the Middle East to "speak back" to the image projected by the U.S.A. One thinks, specifically, of the elaborate threads that inform the production of Persian carpets and Turkish rugs. Simultaneously, we reflect on how those patterns manifest in local, historic architecture. Thus, the transformation of images designed for Americans by Americans are returned to the United States remade through the vision of an artist born in historical adjacency to the Revolution that would place her homeland squarely within the Bush administration's axis of evil.

Second, by sifting through a range of contrasting and opposing images – both official and dissident – Mazinani reveals that such contradictions, in fact, constitute its opposite. In another collage featured in *Land of the Giants*,

the artist morphologically links the disrobing Paris Hilton with an Afghani woman who reveals the explosives strapped to her chest and hidden beneath her kaftan. She further sets a female Palestinian militant against an American pilot inspecting a plane. The morphological match, contrast in scale, and iconographic significance of these carefully chosen images organically synthesize into the total collage, inaugurating, once again, the need to examine these images in time, both up close and afar. Sight ideally leads to insight, the intervention of an image designed to provoke a thought.

The mutual constitution of opposite images made apposite mirrors Mazinani's formal approach to collage. To the extent that she digitally manipulates source images in order to distort their iconographic significance can occur only by virtue of that iconography and the documentary value of photography in general. It thus engages the long-standing debate between art's realism and formalism. This crystallizes in the artist's suspicion of photographic representation, despite her acknowledgement that photography, in fact, produces the "truest" representation of the world. Mazinani, we note in passing, produces exquisite photographs.

The paradoxical power of photographic visibility as well its ideological function, the French semiologist Roland Barthes observed in his well-known essay of 1961, "The Photographic Message," resides in its ability to entangle two seemingly



Right: *Land of the Giants #1*, 2011 (detail)  
Pigment print on Paper, variable dimensions

Left: detail – *Land of the Giants #1*, 2011



constitutive though theoretically exclusive modes of making meaning: denotation and connotation. The denotative arts, which produce brute signification through the transmission of an analogy, rendered knowledge of a code – that which would disentangle the object from its message – unnecessary. The photograph's "analogical plenitude," the camera's "objectivity," and the epistemological authority of indexicality would seem to comfortably situate photographs within the realm of the denotative arts. However, such works simultaneously connote a host of secondary sensations emergent from the particular ideological disposition of a given historical conjuncture. That is to say, photographic treatment – selection, caption, and the process of emission – renders blind belief in its epistemological efficacy instantly problematic. The danger posed by photographic representation, and the paradox to ensue, was not, continued the critic, "the collusion of a denoted message and a connoted message [...] it is that here the connoted [...] message develops on the basis of a message without a code."<sup>4</sup> In other words, culture becomes nature by way of a process that masks the means through which meaning is made. The photographic message appears instantaneous and direct, and yet was always already framed.

In the production of photographic meaning resides a continued struggle, a dialectical interchange between the ability to produce a representation of the world, and the unarticulated codes of construction that inform every step in the very possibility of that representation. "Not a just image,"

quipped Godard, "just an image."

However, there still exists the desire for a just image, an image within the realm of realist aesthetics that will, like the formal operations engendered by Mazinani's collages, also produce sight and insight for the viewer. When we become inundated with images, as Susan Sontag argued long ago, the power of the individual photograph diminishes. She further identified the camera as both "antidote and disease," noting that contemporary American society produces a desire for consumption at the expense of true political alternatives, and famously called for an "ecology of images."<sup>5</sup>

By abdicating the production of new photographs, and producing new images out of the collective intermingling of found photographs, Mazinani's practice may very well be partaking in the kind of ecology called forth by Sontag. However, it overemphasizes Sontag's description of the camera as disease, while underemphasizing its possibilities as antidote. Furthermore, choosing to produce such kaleidoscopic images cuts two ways. On the one hand, it reminds us of the utopian possibilities projected upon that optical toy by a figure such as Baudelaire, for whom, as the art historian Jonathan Crary reminds us, "it figured as a machine for the disintegration of a unitary subjectivity and for the scattering of desire into new shifting, labile arrangements."<sup>6</sup> In contradistinction, notes Crary, Marx and Engels viewed the kaleidoscope not as force for liberation, but as the mystifying mirrored reflection of the same image many times over. It thus provided observers with the illusion of

heterogeneity and difference.<sup>7</sup>

The kaleidoscopic display in *Land of the Giants* emerges as symptomatic of this very predicament. It strives to embrace the kaleidoscope's potential for perceptual liberation while simultaneously using this very feature to mount a critique of the ideology of the frames of visibility that mystify the realities of United States foreign policy. The lesson, however, should not lead to the total abdication of photographic representation. It should teach us how to make new photographs, those that actively engage the politics of illusion and reveal the processes by which visibility is achieved. Showing us something we were previously unable to see and how that previously absent image came into being, such is the site where we engage the politics of photographic representation and find those just images.

- 1 One may view the entire set here: <http://www.gwu.edu/~nsarchiv/NSAEBB/NSAEBB152/>
- 2 Judith Butler, *Frames of War*, when life is grievable? (London: Verso, 2009).
- 3 Stephen Melville, "The Temptation of New Perspectives," October 52 (Spring, 1990): 13-14.
- 4 Roland Barthes, "The Photographic Message," in *Image-Music-Text*, trans. and ed. Stephen Heath (New York: Hill and Wang, 1977), 18-19.
- 5 Susan Sontag, *On Photography* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1973), 178-180.
- 6 Jonathan Crary, *Techniques of the Observer*, on vision and modernity in the nineteenth century (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1991), 115-116.
- 7 Ibid.