

Jerusalem in the Heart Two Urban Artists in Exile by Kamal Boullata

Kamal Boullata

In September 2002, Ramallah witnessed the inauguration of an art exhibition sponsored by the A.M. Qattan Foundation. It included works by the 10 finalists in the Foundation's second biennial competition for the Young Artist of the Year Award¹. In the following essay, a member of the jury discusses the subject of Jerusalem in the works of two recipients of the Foundation's Special Mention Award.

In the world of the Palestinians, life in the Gaza refugee camps continues to be viewed as the nethermost abyss. After all, it is to that strip of land that Israel has been banishing political activists from the West Bank. In contrast, Palestinians living with their offspring abroad or even those living in their native Jerusalem, appear as if on the opposite side of that abyss. Such suppositions, however, seem to be misleading if one were to consider what the work of two Palestinian artists attached to Jerusalem reveals. The art of Rosalind Nashashibi, who was born abroad to a Jerusalem exile demonstrates a binding engagement with the ancestral place. In contrast, the art of Steve Sabella, who was born in Jerusalem and continues to live there, articulates the trying experience of being an exile at home.

These two artists never met before their work was shown under the auspices of the A.M. Qattan Foundation in Ramallah. The ancestry of both artists, however, is rooted in the city of Jerusalem. The first comes from a notable urban family who has been involved in shaping the modern history of the city. The second, as his Latin name indicates, belongs to a Jerusalem Arab family whose origins extend to the Crusader period.

Rosalind Nashashibi

Born in London to a Palestinian father and an Irish mother, visual artist Rosalind Nashashibi went to Jerusalem in 2002 for a residency at al-Ma'mal Foundation for Contemporary Art. In the city's Arab sector, she lived among relatives where her father grew up and where her old family name continues to be recognized by those in the community, even after the family's dispersal. There, Nashashibi contemplated the creation of a short film that addresses itself to the bridging of time and place. Her 16 mm film, however, was not shot in the city of her paternal ancestors but in a Jerusalem suburb that her grandfather helped found soon after his city of birth was divided in 1948. Carrying the Arabic name of the neighbourhood, Dahiyet al-Bareed [The Post Office District] documents how the place that once represented the fulfillment of a communal dream ended up a no-man's-land. In a review of the Beck's Futures Exhibition at London's Institute of Contemporary Art in which Nashashibi won the First Award, her work was praised as "a lament for an inexplicable, messed-up world that somehow manages to be beautiful both because of and in spite of the things that happen to it."

Installation artwork by Rosalind Nashashibi.

Source: Hope and the Aesthetic Moment, A.M. Qattan Foundation.

It is understandable to see how a place 'others' call home might be defined by an outsider as an "inexplicable messed-up world". Were one to view the film as an insider, however, the change in orientation would certainly provide an entirely different aesthetic experience. At the very least, the place as portrayed in the film would not be seen as being "beautiful both because of and in spite of the things that happen to it".² The neighbourhood of Dahiyet al-Bareed was developed north of Jerusalem a cooperative initiated by Jerusalem's post office employees. All of the residents came from the Old City. Their move outside the city walls was a continuation of urban growth that began during the British Mandate. At that time, all Palestinian residential growth representing upward mobility proceeded to the western hills outside the city walls.³ In 1948, when that region fell under the control of Jewish forces, all those family villas nestled among pine woods were seized and their residents never allowed to return to their homes. Many lived as refugees within the increasingly crowded Old City. As soon as the salvaged half of Jerusalem was revived under Jordanian custody, people living in the Old City aspired to move out to more spacious quarters and more modern facilities.

To its inhabitants, the residential project of the 'District' represented an attempt to rebuild the kind of Jerusalem neighbourhood that was lost in 1948. Built in the same white greyish stones, the comfortable residencies had similar arched windows, balconies and multiple verandas as those of the pre-1948 neighbourhoods. Inside the houses, even the floors were paved with the same tiles decorated with colourful floral patterns produced by the same family manufactory in the Old City.⁴ Similarly, pines and cypresses were slowly becoming a feature of the neighbourhood.

The District's prosperity was brought to an end, however, following the so-called "Six-Day War". Israel annexed Jerusalem's Old City and expanded the city borders to include 70 square kilometres of territory. The District, along with 28 surrounding villages, was included in the annexation. To secure a Jewish majority in the newly-defined city borders, all Palestinian Arabs, be they Christian or Muslim, who for centuries had called Jerusalem their home were - according to Israel's law - no longer considered citizens of the city but permanent residents. Special ID cards were issued to them. These cards were subject to renewal and they could be revoked at any time for multiple reasons. In time, as Israel aimed to have its 'eternal and undivided capital' ethnically cleansed from non-Jews, a mounting number of Palestinians living in the city's suburbs began to lose their ID cards. Simultaneously, a belt of Jewish settlements built on Palestinian lands began to rise around the Old City. It was then that the Jerusalem municipality stopped serving the District. Cut off from the city that for two decades served as its lifeline, the area became engulfed in slow death. Barbed wires and military checkpoints were soon established at its gates.

Lacking the sanitation services and garbage collectors that were once provided by Jerusalem's municipality, the

community acquired its own garbage dump containers to dispense their daily trash. Soon enough, these containers were confiscated by the Israeli authorities. The only remaining way to dispose of garbage was to incinerate it in a public place within the District. The pervading feature of the neighbourhood was soon to become the suffocating odour of smoke that languished in the air. Heaps of garbage were burnt daily in the open, not far from the deteriorating villas that continued to be considered 'home'.

In a detached manner that is free from any sense of nostalgia or rhetoric, Nashashibi's film documents a typical afternoon in this forgotten place. From a distance, we see kids playing football at the day's end. The call to prayer from a mosque in the horizon is hardly audible. Closer by, some street guys hang out. The viewer waits for something to happen. Nothing. The sudden roaring of a truck passing by fades away soon after it is heard. By staring into the void where time barely moves, the unbearable state of waiting for something to happen makes the viewer uneasily aware of the kind of waiting refugees and exiles know so well. The only recurring feature in this suspended world is the burning of a heap of garbage.

Over six long minutes, the length of her film, Nashashibi puts us before a landscape that is undefined by beginning or end. Only after the lights are on may we imagine the anguish of the choking off of an urban community of Palestinians. Nashashibi's testimonial work would have been a nightmare to her grandfather. He could not have imagined how cruelly the daily life of fellow Jerusalemites has once again been severed from their city of birth.

Steve Sabella

Eight years after Israel's annexation of Jerusalem, Steve Sabella was born. Though he continues to live within the Old City, one wonders why none of the photographs he submitted to the Ramallah exhibition portrayed his city of birth. Perhaps an explanation rests on the peculiar relationship that evolved over a century between Sabella's language of expression and the significance of his hometown to the outside world. Photography was only four years old when Jerusalem became one of the first cities outside Europe for Western photographers to rush to capture. Arab photographers born in the city, on the other hand, maintained creative interests elsewhere. Khalil Ra'ad, the earliest native-born professional (his studio was established in 1890), is an illustrious example.⁵ Before him, most Western photographers recording features of his hometown focussed on its biblical sites and its historical and architectural monuments. Native figures appearing in those landscapes usually served as little more than a measure of scale. In contrast, Ra'ad's Jerusalem photographs mainly focussed on the life of people in and outside his city of birth. Unlike the outsiders' images of local people that either sought to stage biblical scenes or document ethnic and folkloric customs, Ra'ad's photographs captured daily life in all its throb and vigour, regardless of ethnic or religious references. They are photographs of common men and women enjoying leisure time or busy at work. We see local inhabitants basking in the sun, craftspeople before their wheels, factory workers lining up Nablus soap bars, villagers pruning their olive trees and farmers cultivating their fields. Today, Ra'ad's devout concentration on his people may be better understood by recalling that his photographs were shot at a time when Reinhold Niebuhr's slogan "land without a people for a people without a land" was a myth gaining currency in a world defined by colonialism.

Since Israel's 1967 annexation of Jerusalem's Old City and its environs, images of every stone and every monument within the city walls has been reduced to a form of cliché to serve nationalist ends. To reassert the Arab character of the city, the vanquished Palestinians adopted the image of Jerusalem's central monument, the Dome of the Rock, as their own icon of the place. The victors, on the other hand, are rewriting the city's history by appropriating and renaming everything else within reach. Their favourite icon representing Jerusalem as Israel's 'eternal capital' is the so-called Tower of David. Built by Suleiman the Magnificent, the 'tower' is nothing but the minaret of a 16th century mosque originally built for the garrison of city guards residing in Jaffa Gate's Citadel.

As a visual artist growing up in Jerusalem, Sabella is intuitively aware of the pitfalls of photographing his city of birth. He has sensed how photography is used by rivalling nationalities and employed to contribute to the myth-making taking place. Suffocated by these images and tired of living with the wound that divides his city of birth, this internal exile goes into the open and beyond the city walls to find freedom between the rocks and the sky.

The Jerusalem German Leprosarium in Talbieh

(Postcard reprinted in D. Kroyanker, *Jerusalem Architecture*, 1994).

Here, from a hilltop, we see a dirt road winding up across a burnt-out field leading into a ridge of rocks that dissolve into the dark; there, from below a tree, we see a ladder leaning against bare branches and pointing straight into the sky. Elsewhere we see a heavy cloud hovering in midair over a rock-ribbed hill; at the end of an arid stretch of land, a mountain of pure limestone perches against the deep blue of the sky. From closer by, we see a mount of bare and craggy rocks aging among wild bushes; above a slope, we see four identical cubical dwellings that dot the horizon sharply splitting sky from earth.

The city considered a bridge between heaven and earth may be absent in Sabella's photographs, but everything in these frames indicates the manner by which this native photographer has rebuilt his own Jerusalem. Not unlike the photographs of Ra'ad, which to an outsider may have resembled those of ethnically-oriented photographers of his time, Sabella's crisp work of sky and rocks resembles work found among professional photographers anywhere else on the globe. And yet, it is in Sabella's conscious avoidance of photographing Jerusalem that the visual artist has managed to recreate the universality of a place with which he identifies. In that respect, his search for his true self may be likened to those monks who, drawn by Jerusalem, came from distant lands only to spend the rest of their lives in bare and desolate landscapes. Only there could Sabella find a Jerusalem where he might breathe fresh air.

Kamal Boullata is a visual artist who was born in Jerusalem. He lives and works in France.

Endnotes

1 See Kamal Boullata, ed., *Hope and the Aesthetic Moment*, Ramallah, A.M. Qattan Foundation, 2003.

2 Adrian Searle, "The Future's Dim", *The Guardian*, April 8, 2003.

3 For a general view of the growth of Jerusalem during the British Mandate period see, "The Growth of the Western Communities:1917-1948" in Salim Tamari, ed., *Jerusalem 1948: The Arab Neighborhoods and their Fate in the War*. (Jerusalem: Institute of Jerusalem Studies & Badil Resource Center, 1999) 32-73.

4 It is interesting to note that after the tile manufactory (locally known as al-ma'mal) of the Qassisiyeh family in the Old City was closed, art curator Jack Persekian transferred the site to the al-Ma'mal Foundation for Contemporary Art. Thanks to this foundation, Nashashibi was able to spend an art residency in Jerusalem.

5 For photographs by Khalil Ra'ad (c.1854-1957) see Walid Khalidi's *After Their Diaspora: A Photographic History of the Palestinians, 1876-1948*. (Washington: Institute for Palestine Studies, 1984). See also Sarah Graham Brown's *Palestinians and their Society 1880-1946*, (London: Quartet Books, 1981). For further information on the pioneering Jerusalem Arab photographer, see Badr al-Hajj "Khalil Raad: Jerusalem Photographer" *Jerusalem Quarterly File*, No.11-12 (Winter-Spring 20001) 34-39. The Jerusalem German Leprosarium in Talbieh (Postcard reprinted in D. Kroyanker, *Jerusalem Architecture*, 1994).

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