

REFLECTIVE CONSCIOUSNESS

An Exhibition of work by

Bashar Hroub
2009-2010

the
mosaic
rooms

Exhibition May 6th till June 3rd, 2010

The Mosaic Rooms, A.M. Qattan Foundation, Tower House
226 Cromwell Road, London SW5 0SW www.mosaicrooms.org



The Mosaic Rooms are an
A.M. Qattan Foundation Project



Reflective Consciousness

It is rare that Palestinian artists from the West Bank and Gaza Strip are able to travel abroad and experience a reality free from military occupation. The work in Bashar Hroub's first UK show was, however, produced while he has been living and studying in the UK, his first experience of working in physical freedom. Paradoxically, creating work outside the strictures of "internal exile", a condition from which anyone living under Israel's occupation regime of arbitrary and stringent restrictions on movement cannot escape, has also enabled Hroub to imaginatively explore the notion of place and landscape almost in abstraction: how does place relate to and affect consciousness, how does it influence identity and how can art universalize the painful relationship between the imagination and the homeland?

The exhibition consists of 14 photographs that deal with these themes, where mirror objects encroach upon the body and the landscape and act as an agent of alienation, cutting through elements that should otherwise be in harmony. Another work, an installation, deals with notions of tension and fragility. An art-book piece entitled *Reading Myself* deals with aspects of narcissism. Finally, two video projections explore the binary nature of relationships.



Artist's Statement

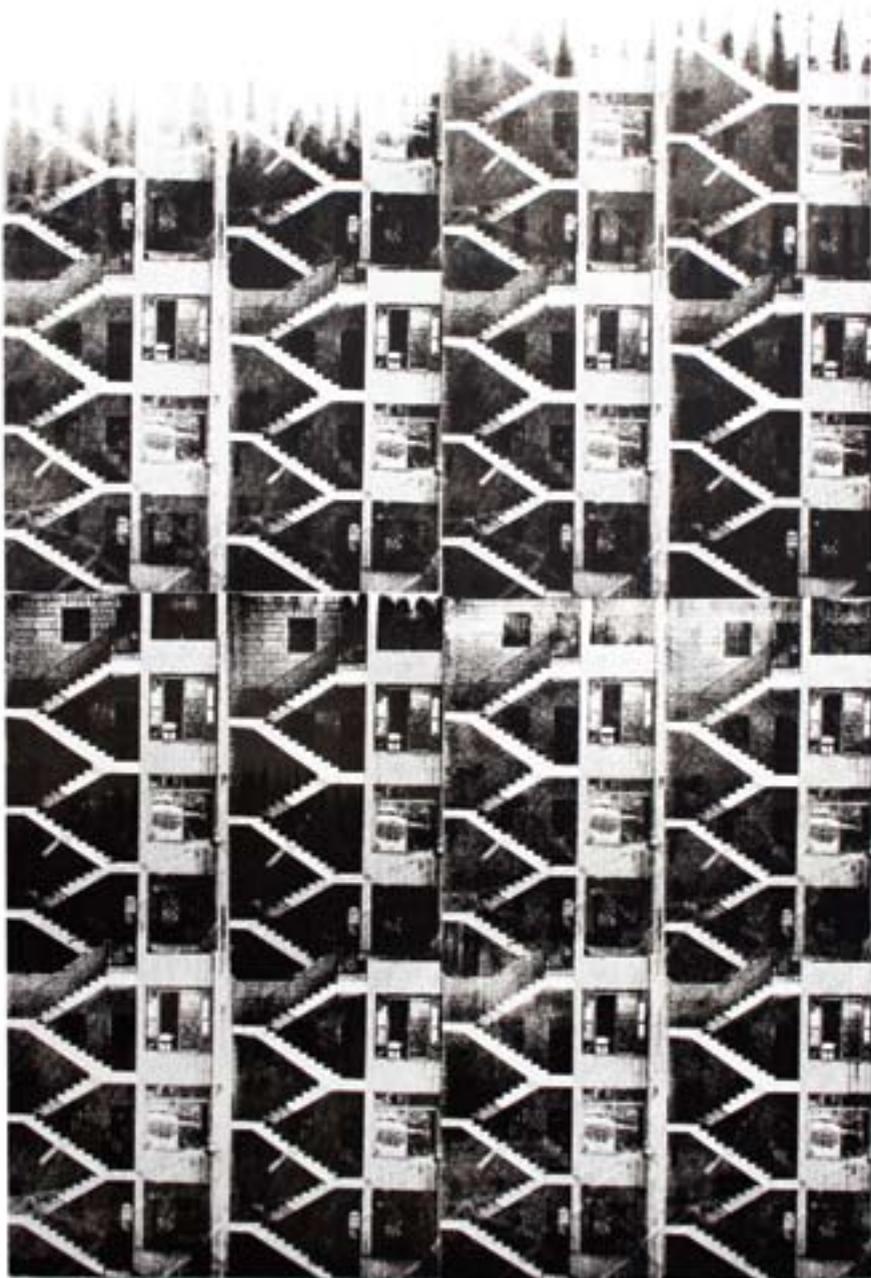
The works in this exhibition focus on the influence of a place on our creativity. My previous works were mostly created in Palestine and were deeply affected by my surroundings. This exhibition is a new artistic experience for me, outside the place I was raised in, made in completely new creative surroundings. I have not experienced physical freedom like this before because I was born under occupation and forced to experience alienation in my homeland.

Through this new experience, I try to carry out my artistic work far away from all the materialistic and visual effects of the homeland I know. I try to view my homeland from a distance and to find a proper place for the self. I study the place's materialistic, psychological, aesthetic and meditational effects. I believe that the human self is an essential part of this holistic system, regardless of its closeness or distance from a place.

In other works, particularly the videos shown here, I try to touch the inner state of the viewer by creating a state of chaos to get his or her psychological and emotional attention. Through this inner confusion, the physical experience forces the viewer to reconsider the self and its relationship with its surroundings. The focus is on the relationship between the self and the dominant system that directs the fate of human beings. The video work expresses psychological confusion in the relationship with a place, especially within the current reality, which I feel is dominated by division and exile, where "progress" seems to mean bloody destruction and enslavement of the human soul.

Bashar Hroub

London, May 2010



Biography

Bashar Hroub was born in Jerusalem in 1978 and grew up in the West Bank village of Kharas, near Hebron. In 2001, he gained a BA in Fine Art from Al-Najah National University in Nablus. Since then he has been living in Ramallah. In 2009, he was awarded a fellowship from the Ford Foundation to pursue an MFA at Winchester School of Art, University of Southampton, UK.

His work uses a variety of media including painting, drawing, photography, installation, video and graffiti, all within a conceptual framework encompassing universal notions of place, human attachment and the relationship to one's environment. His work is particularly focused on the search for the space between the poetical and the political.

Solo exhibitions include *Horizon* at the A.M. Qattan Foundation Ramallah in 2003, *Sharqiat* at the Al-Hallaj Gallery Ramallah and at the Peace Center Bethlehem in 2005, and *Monologue* at the Al-Mahatta Gallery Ramallah which then traveled to Jerusalem, Nablus and Nazareth in 2009.

Hroub participated in several group exhibitions, projects and festivals throughout Palestine and abroad including in the UAE, Lebanon, Morocco, France, Oman, Algeria, Syria, Japan, France, Scotland, Norway, USA, and the UK. He also took part in several workshops including the Triangle Arts International Artists Workshops, Shatana workshop, Jordan with Makan Artists Space, and Braziers in the UK, and was a founder and participant in the first international workshop hosted by Al-Mahatta Gallery Ramallah.

Hroub also organized and coordinated an exhibition for the Abu Jihad Museum, which focused on political prisoners in Palestine. He is a founding member of Al-Mahatta Gallery in Ramallah, which aims to reach a wider audience for contemporary art in the area.



Here and Now series, 2009-2010, digital print, 100x66 cm

Bashar Hroub Makes Observations, by John Gillett

Observation is widely accepted as one of the things that artists do. Observational drawing, for instance, is a standard artist's tool. But an observation, perhaps not simply by a quirk of the English language, is something that you make. Indeed, an effective observation is very often very carefully constructed. An observation is a matter not just of experience, but of selection from it; a selection made sometimes in all neutral innocence, but more often than not to imply or invite an interpretation, to imply or invite response. And so it is with the observations of Bashar Hroub. He notices how something is, and he seeks out an appropriate method to state as much: this works this way: how most tellingly to point it out? This feels like this: how best to communicate it? The chosen method is then implemented with the utmost care, the observation constructed.

This is not a conceptual practice full of ideas about itself; it is fully and firmly rooted in the world around us. And the approach is not tied to a particular medium or technique; there is sculpture here, and photography, and printmaking, and video; whatever is needed. This reflects a pragmatism that makes for simple means and ready understanding.

In the installation called Balance, the main object looks like a hanging torpedo. It looks heavy, a bright red metal cylinder, a found object, in fact, recycled sculpture, adjusted and repainted. Its careful suspension is somehow suggestive of the weaponry you see in movies, being loaded onto planes, into submarines, the white-gloved sterility of businesslike preparation for modern warfare. Heavy, yes; rugged, yes; but also somehow delicate, fraught with thoughts of detonation. On first seeing the whole setup, you mainly notice its improvised nature; there is little of the high-tech military about the wooden frame that two long mirrors are propped on, beneath this trapped and hanging missile. Approach and look down into the mirrors, and the thing reveals its secret: that trace of symmetry you might have noticed multiplies, propagates itself in the mirrors, into the fully rounded rotational variety. You are suddenly at the centre of a hexagonal arrangement of red tubes, a perfectly poised equilibrium that keeps them just millimetres away from the fragility of the glass. Suddenly, the makeshift nature of the frame has significance: it renders the glass so very vulnerable, and conspicuously so; the unsupported mirror-ends ready to shatter catastrophically at the slightest touch, were the metal to swing. And you know, you are certain, that inertia would do it, with the slightest input of energy, and that the catastrophe would be repeated on the return swing of this deadly pendulum.

For a moment, you imagine this fragmentation cascading around the whole hexagonal array, until you realise that the very instant the first mirror breaks, it's all over; everything will be gone. The piece is less about the power of the frightening object than about the fragility of the context, the vital importance of the balance of the title.

So a simple explanation, but there's no way to pin down the effect of the simple fact of it. The mirror really could very easily break; both mirrors could very easily break; it is unlikely that one would go and the other survive. A simple explanation, because it's a simple observation: Bashar sets it up, and there it is; that's how it is. We decide for ourselves whether this is just about a heavy object and delicate glass, or something more human, something more global.

A similarly structural, non-specific observation is conveyed by the video Binary, an endless dance of complex, abstract forms, engaged, we might say, in the conflict of co-existence: contained entities with their own internal turmoil, subject to occasional impact and crisis, in a process ultimately characterised by its resistance to resolution.

Elsewhere, Bashar's work is far more personal, overtly autobiographical. The evanescent child of twin screen-prints is the son who deserves more, is promised more, and in the image at least, is granted more in the light that envelopes him. The photograph burns to white, the old situation consumed to give rise to the new, full of hope.

And staying with the very specific, Bashar describes in Construction a uniquely Palestinian approach to stairwells and staircases in high-rise blocks in territories where space is at a premium. His photograph, a souvenir of the architecture of home, squares off a section of staircase, embedded in the building yet exposed to the outside world. He chooses screen-printing for near-seamless repetition of the image. The sense of the physical printing process, unique to screen-prints, analogous to the very physical building process, suggests the possibility that the repetitions could go on and on. The section of staircase is like the module of Brancusi's Endless Column, with the potential to take us ever upwards, a gesture of expansion, growth, and escape. It seems a simple enough statement, that this could go on forever; but is this the pragmatism of land shortage, or a metaphorical aspiration somehow to go skyward?

Once again, there is an echo in the video works, and it emphasizes the importance of upwards and the sky. It is uncomfortably clichéd to describe something as achingly beautiful, but it is the right phrase for the movie called *Heavenly*, which is full of yearning, yearning for the freedom of the sky. The movie is a forbidden document of the marketplace in the artist's native Hebron on the West Bank, shot from a camcorder inside a jacket, the lens pointing consistently upwards through the improvised mesh roof between the market stalls. The netting provides some protection from objects dropped from the overlooking buildings inhabited by Jewish settlers. The movie journeys through the market, its upward gaze cataloguing the objects trapped on the roof, expressions seemingly of careless disdain. Yet that gaze is truly fixed, one senses, on the endless blue beyond, the reference to heaven in the title only half ironic.

This body of work as a whole is an experiment in displacement, productions devised and completed against the background of personal detachment and self-awareness only achievable when away from home. Inevitably, some of the work, in particular the photographic series *Here and Now*, addresses displacement itself, one's enduring connection with one's place of origin, and the establishment of new connections with new places. The title of the video *No Time No Place*, seems to set up an opposite speculation, about severed connection and personal confusion, from which one glimpses unrecognisable companions on an indeterminate journey.

In *Here and Now*, the artist himself appears in the images, though how we recognise him is hard to say. For in each picture he wears a mirrored helmet, a square, eyeless, wholly reflective head-box. In its featurelessness and brutal geometry the mask is reminiscent of Sidney Nolan's stylized renderings of the Australian outlaw Ned Kelly's improvised face armour. And it imparts to the images something of the same romance of the outsider. Once again, the hard part is pinning down the straightforwardness of the images; their matter-of-fact approach; why they, with their faceless faces, are neither frightening nor sinister.

It works in several ways: the foreigner abroad, his features replaced by the objects of an unfamiliar landscape, traffic lights or public statuary, takes on an aspect which is as much comic as poignant, and this clearly dispels the possibility of fear; but sometimes, particularly where the artist is lying down, in touch with the soil, the identity of this visitor in a foreign land is all but subsumed by the landscape which supplants his head in the optical setup of the shot. Again, it is not as frightening as it might sound, for the metaphor is a gentle one, representing a process of absorption and assimilation rather



than excision and obliteration. But back home, on his native ground, the consumption of self by the landscape gives way to a definition of it, a personal identity suddenly couched wholly in terms of location and familial and cultural roots. I am the sunlit soil of my birthplace; the village of my ancestors; the olive trees that have grown on its land for thousand of years.

One final thought, an observation on these constructed observations: these images are not montages, they are documents of live setups. We may assume that Bashar has an accomplice for each shot, a person who takes the picture but never appears in them. We may imagine being that person, or at least being there, coming face to face with this figure in the landscape, in his ritualistically neutral uniform, barefoot at home, or booted abroad. What then does he look like? What face does he have? Who is he? And the answer must be that he looks like us; he has our face; he is us.

John Gillett
Artist and Curator
Winchester School of Art
April 2010

Bashar Hroub, by Simon Morley

Being a Palestinian artist must be a mixed blessing. On the one hand, you have a readymade subject matter, as well as a public eager to know about it. On the other, it is difficult to escape the reductiveness that this clarity brings with it. Everything you do ends up being a political commentary that risks squeezing out any other intentions you might have.

Bashar Hroub is attempting to find a way beyond this impasse. He aims to universalize his cultural predicament, which is why he roots his work in his own subjectivity rather than in a detached analysis of the cultural conditions in which he finds himself. Furthermore, he is looking for succinct visual metaphors which can carry a depth of meaning.

In the Here and Now striking series of works in the current exhibition, we see him in various places wearing a mirrored cube on his head. While we might want to identify this as a statement about the invisibility of the Palestinians in the current situation, it seems far too limited to stop there, especially as the artist appears to be in England some of the time. The image of a reflective head is much more poignant than a single reading suggests, and all kinds of questions about visibility and invisibility, our relationship to the environment or our cultural context also push themselves forward. Hroub is currently in the UK studying for his MA in Fine Art, for example, so he is experiencing first-hand the sense of displacement that comes from being in a strange place. But of course the cube also speaks of much deeper kinds of mirroring, even of the narcissism that Freud identified as a central aspect of the human psyche. But whose narcissism, exactly? The artist's, or the viewers who prefer to insert their own meanings into the space opened up by the artist? Perhaps it is this ambiguity that makes these works so effective.

Simon Morley

March 2010

Simon Morley is an artist and writer.





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UNIVERSITY OF
Southampton
Winchester School of Art

Supported by A.M. Qattan
Foundation and
Winchester School of Art,
University of Southampton

Exhibition:
May 6th till
June 3rd 2010
Mon - Fri 11 - 6pm,
Sat 11 - 4pm

Here and Now series, 2009-2010, digital print, 80x53 cm

The Mosaic Rooms

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Nearest Underground station: Earl's Court (Earl's Court Road exit)

Buses: 74, 328, C1, C3

Parking: One disabled parking space is available by prior arrangement.
Parking metres are available in Lexham Gardens behind the building.



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