Intergenerational Dialogue and Late Style in the Palestinian Diaspora: Nour Bishouty's ***Nothing is lost except nothing at all except what is not had*** at Gallery 44

By Tammer El-Sheikh

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It had been several years since Edward Said's untimely death from Leukemia, and his recently acquired papers were being indexed by staff and graduate students at Columbia University. They felt lucky to be tasked with the organization of an already meticulously sorted treasure-trove of letters, lecture notes, photographs and ephemera from the professional life of this key 20th century thinker, writer and Palestinian activist. One of the librarians remarked that it was as though Said knew in 1969, the start date of the collection and a decade before the publication of his best-known book *Orientalism*, that a record of his work would be important for posterity. Indeed, in the introduction to that book he writes: "In many ways my study of Orientalism has been an attempt to inventory the traces upon me… of the culture whose domination has been so powerful a

factor in the life of all Orientals."[1] With pencil and notebook in hand I went searching for those traces and more in 26 milk crates packed with carefully ordered pages.

Said died in 2003, one year before the Palestinian artist Ghassan Bishouty. His daughter Nour Bishouty set out to catalogue Ghassan's work after his death, to secure for it a place in her own artistic lineage and in the understudied art history of the Modern Middle East. A first "inventory" of her father's life and work is given, both lovingly and dispassionately, in her artist's book *1-130: Selected Works, Ghassan Bishouty b. 1941 Safad, Palestine – d. 2004 Amman, Jordan* (2020). She too begins with a pencil. An opening note reads: "Just before my fourth birthday my father gave me my first 2 mm Staedtler with an HB lead, and a large sheet of coated card stock."[2] In the pages that follow, a father-daughter dialogue unfolds in faded family photographs, news clippings, personal musings and excerpted motifs from Ghassan's paintings set against monochromatic backgrounds. On the cover's interior flaps these displaced motifs are returned to their sources in a tight grid of images, with titles and catalogue numbers from 001 – 130. Here too, the inventory reflects an 'Oriental' subject-formation. Partly veiled dancing girls and musicians, couples in ornamented tents arranged around *shisha* pipes, Mediterranean sunsets and labyrinthine Arab town scenes abound in the works. Also included are vaguely Hellenic or classicizing portrait busts and elegant glazed ceramics – indexes of Ghassan's engagement with Roman, Byzantine and Islamic art histories of the region. Said's characteristic ambivalence is paralleled in Ghassan's career too, in the painter's simultaneous embrace and refusal of Orientalist style.

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[1] Edward Said, *Orientalism*. (New York: Vintage Books, 1979/1994) Pg. 25.

[2] Nour Bishouty, *1-130: Selected Works, Ghassan Bishouty b. 1941 Safad, Palestine – d. 2004 Amman, Jordan* (Toronto: Art Metropole, 2020). Pg. 1. For a review of the book see Daniella Sanader, "Nour Bishouty's *1-130: Selected Works, Ghassan Bishouty b. 1941 Safad, Palestine – d. 2004 Amman, Jordan*," *The Brooklyn Rail* (Sept. 2021). I gratefully acknowledge Sanader's major contribution in this review to my thoughts on Bishouty's way of working with her father's memory..

"Nothing is lost except nothing at all except what is not had" continues the conversation through Ghassan's painting *Al-Wadi (The Valley)* (c. 1981) – 041 in Bishouty's book. Drawn out from the grid of *1-130*'s interior cover, and set up as a centre of gravity for the exhibition, the image is a point of origin for a series of works that seem to both emanate from it and converge upon it. A conventional Orientalist landscape in many respects, the work shows a Bedouin settlement in the Jordanian desert, complete with small groups of veiled women and children, men engaged in conversation and herders tending to their animals. Its technique is conventional as well. The scene carries a degree of naturalism – given Ghassan's use of atmospheric perspective in the middle and background and imprecisely foreshortened animal and human figures in the foreground – but on the whole the work is nostalgic and picturesque. Bishouty's re-presentation of it is almost surgical. Shadows of a grid printed on glass are cast across the image insisting on its two dimensionality, plotting lively compositional elements in abstract Cartesian terms. Amid the lines of the grid are coded shapes – dots, squares, rectangles and medallions – indicating the relative positions in the painting of people and beasts, tents and trees. At the top of the grid, we see the most complex of these shapes, a silhouetted plan for an 8th-century Umayyad castle, casting a shadow in the sky over its painted correlate on the horizon.

Two views are collapsed in the work then, one head-on which we identify with Ghassan in a waking Orientalist dream, and one from above which we identify with Bishouty herself, preparing the contents of that dream for some kind of analysis or, more to the point, for reuse.

Bishouty's mapping is the first step in a process by which the image's flora and fauna, its people and its dwellings will be extracted and re-deployed across the exhibition space in new skins. But before wandering into this afterlife of the picture, she presents us with its sources: clippings from Ghassan's notebooks tacked on a nearby wall. They too seem like itinerant or mobile motifs. Hanging in an undulating line, like notes in

sheet music, we see magazine and newspaper images of desert quadrupeds, clusters of palm trees and smaller sturdy shrubs, and a number of illustrations from a study of the Umayyad castle *Qusayr Amra*, its architecture and frescos. As if to reign in the fictional impulse behind her father's use of these sources, Bishouty punctuates the line of papers with labels on which we read the Latin and Arabic names for the plants. But the fiction is irresistible. Ghassan's painted animals take on the dignity of a three-quarter photo-portrait of a camel, and the concealed interior of the castle in *Al-Wadi* is given to view in the fresco images of labouring artisans and entertainers, of the constellations and zodiac, and the faces of royals in whose honour such a world of pleasure, toil and mystery was recorded. What at first seems like a quaint Orientalist landscape is opened out onto a web of scientific, archeological and historical materials that locate it precisely.

In 1948 when Ghassan was a toddler his family left Palestine and settled in Jounieh, Lebanon. A few years into the Lebanese Civil War, and after a targeted assault that left Ghassan injured, the family fled to Amman. *Al-Wadi* was made shortly after, in Amman, around 1981. Bishouty invites us to search for this survival story in what the painting does not show: a massive influx of Palestinians to Lebanon and Jordan in the wake of the *Nakba* of 1948; demographic shifts wrought by exile and rural migration that would result in a population explosion in Amman from 30,000 in 1948 to 250,000 in 1960; the enduring power of the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan through the assassination of King Abdullah I in 1951 and a Civil War that erupted in "Black September" of 1970 between the Palestinian Liberation Organization and the Jordanian army; the twilight of Nasserism and a Pan-Arabist dream after the defeat of Egypt, Syria and Jordan in the War of 1967; dramatic economic shifts, inspired in part by the modernizing vision of that same Pan-Arabism, from a predominant use of rural areas for livestock and settled agriculture to the mining of phosphates and the extraction of oil – changes that would ultimately increase the region's economic dependence on foreign aid and the West. Were those kings' portraits at *Qusayr Amra* pre-figurations of the Hashemite kings for

Ghassan? Did he think of the early cinema-era belly dance of Tahiya Carioca, or the Pan-Arabist icon Umm Kulthum when he saw the fresco drawings of entertainers? Are the breezy palm trees and the electric-blue Bedouin textiles from a technicolour or TV memory?

Al-Wadi is an idyllic picture of a countryside in Jordan that no longer exists. The painting might be read in strictly economic terms as a part of a tourist art industry. Bishouty protects it from that fate, but in the exhibition, she points to even more threatening manifestations of economic Orientalism. In a suite of ink-jet photographic prints she represents the manual and domestic labour of Bedouins in Jordanian tourist pamphlets. In the cropped, overlayed and framed found images, weathered hands, weary eyes and dusty feet are shown in a desert habitat visible only at the edges of the pictures. As indexes of a contemporary reality of rural Jordanians, displaced in villages that are marketed as tourist destinations, the works deliver the exhibition's most explicit social criticism. There are several such villages in sites of great archeological and historical significance like Petra and Wadi Rum in the South, and Umm Qays in the North.[3] Bishouty's archeological impulse here leads us to insights about the precariousness of that very science in the area, and of the politics that impinge upon it.

If Bishouty's work turns away from such thorny cultural politics elsewhere in the exhibition, it doesn't seem like an evasion of the artist's responsibility to narrate a modern history of Jordan so much as an opportunity to draw that history into a diasporic present, and project it imaginatively into the future. Her exquisite watercolour paintings of the flora in *Al-Wadi* might be taken as technical botanical illustrations were it not for their partial invention by Bishouty, their drifting arrangement and little moments of rebellion wherein their fine structures breach a thin decorative frame. If these images are timid trespassers, Bishouty's stretched and bent sculptures of animals like the ones pictured in *Al-Wadi* explode the painting's space-time. The models for the sculptures,

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[3] See, for example, Laurie A. Brand, "Resettling, Reconstructing and Restor(y)ing: Archeology and Tourism in Umm Qays," *MERIP* 216 (Fall, 2000)

scanned and rendered in 3D, then machined in cherry wood blocks, are in fact from Ghassan's collection of toys and not the painting itself. Bishouty's sense of play in the works, and the liberty she takes in experimenting with them honours her father's eccentricity as a collector. But as she notes, the sculptures are conceptually linked with the painting too, given that their shapes suggest a disappearance in, or emergence from, a mathematical vanishing point.[4]

For Bishouty, the "somewhat Orientalist" style of *Al-Wadi* might also be taken, against such classifications, as a demonstration piece for Ghassan's skill as a painter.[5] It is a work of art first, that aims, however awkwardly, at stylistic unity. Bishouty's work, by contrast, is stylistically diverse. Her conceptualist and photo-conceptualist tendencies give us documents, grids and found images, and her approach to installation hovers between an austere minimalism and the display tactics of natural history museums. Ever more eclecticism is apparent in the watercolours and the warped sculptures – works that are as distinct from the rest of the exhibition as they are from each other. How does this constitute a style?

Said's notion of a "late style" might help mediate between the disparate parts of the exhibition. In his posthumously released collection of essays on figures as diverse as the German novelist Thomas Mann, the Greek poet Constantine Cavafy and the French writer and activist Jean Genet, as well as composers like Beethoven and Glenn Gould, and crucially the philosopher Theodor Adorno, Said tracks the development of a late style in literature and music that runs "against the grain" of the very category of style.[6] These figures, for Said, move over the course of their careers toward less rather than more stylistic unity and coherence in their work to explore the themes of exile, fragmentation, discontinuity and irresolution. In their mature work, they confront their mortality and grapple with the prospect of an end of their lives and careers by willfully

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[4] Interview with Nour Bishouty and the author. Feb. 2022.

[5] Interview with Nour Bishouty and the author. Feb. 2022. Nour Bishouty, "Nothing is lost except nothing at all except what is not had" (Gallery 44; SAVAC, 2022)

[6] Edward Said, *On Late Style: Music and Literature Against the Grain* (New York: Vintage Books, 2006)

displacing themselves – Mann in a fallen Platonic Republic of Venice, Cavafy in a "de-Hellenized" Alexandria, Genet in Palestine after the *Nakba* and Algeria on the eve of independence, Beethoven at a distance from his traditional bourgeois patrons and Gould in the studio away from any audience at all. Adorno for his part, Said's paragon of late style, turns the exilic condition of a persecuted Jew in Nazi Germany into an opportunity for critical reflection on the dangers of the culture industry. Adorno's account of two key features of late style serves as a formula for Said, appearing in the first essay and in the very last line of the book:

> Objective is the fractured landscape, subjective the light in which - alone - it glows into life. He (the artist) does not bring about their harmonious synthesis. As the power of dissociation, he tears them apart in time, in order, perhaps, to preserve them for the eternal. In the history of art late works are the catastrophes.[7]

To be sure, such double-vision – both objective and subjective – works against the prospect of resolution in the late style of an artist or thinker. But this for Said is more of a strength than a limit: a sign of hard-earned openness and breadth of vision.

The stakes of late style, like so many others, exceed the parameters of debates in aesthetics. Adorno's "fractured landscape", and the taste for fragmentation, discontinuity and irresolution in the works of the composers and writers in Said's book are also at issue in Bishouty's exhibition. And such characteristics reveal a politics too, arguably a Palestinian politics. As Michael Wood notes in his introduction to Said's collection of essays, the refusal to cohere around a single theme or motif in late style is in step with a view of the world, and of social and political relations, that sustains the value of difference and disagreement. It is for Wood a style associated with "a devotion to the truth of unreconciled relations."[8] The other key terms for late style Said insists upon –

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[7] Ibid. Pg. 160. (Originally in Theodor Adorno's *Essays on Music*. Ed. Richard Leppert (Berkeley, Los Angeles and London: University of California Press, 2002) Pg. 567.

[8] Michael Wood, "Introduction" in Edward Said, *On Late Style: Music and Literature Against the Grain* (New York: Vintage Books, 2006) Pg. xvii.

catastrophe, negation, episodism and anachronism – appear as well in his writing on Arabic literature after the *Nakba*.[9] Indeed the very term *Nakba* is usually translated as "catastrophe".

I take liberties here with the category. After all, Ghassan's style is not late in Said's sense. *Al-Wadi* was a mid-career work, but his late work as well doesn't exhibit the qualities Said and Adorno enumerate. Bishouty's work, however, does exhibit these qualities, in the Gallery 44 exhibition and in her book project *1-130*, even though both appear at the beginning of her career. Perhaps she, like Said in his lifelong commitment to a critical ambivalence, is always "late". But how to read her works in relation – from father to daughter, from Palestine, Jounieh and Amman to Toronto? This is imperative for a view of a style that thematizes relation and insists on its irreducibility. There is no easy agreement between Ghassan's painting, held in a pre-operative limbo under that gridded glass, and what we see elsewhere in the exhibition. But perhaps in this succession, from one generation to the next, we have an example of a late style that emerges with the young, on the shoulders of the dead, so late it is posthumous, in fact, but freer in its versatility as a result of having begun anew. Perhaps that fractured landscape of *Al-Wadi*, concealed somewhat by Ghassan in the illusionism of the work, is exposed and unflinchingly scrutinized by his daughter. To return to Adorno's formulation, and Arabize it a little, that fractured landscape, having been observed, measured and studied might be "brought to light (*nour*)" at Gallery 44, in the subjective vision of an artist ready to move beyond its vanishing point.

After visiting Gallery 44 and speaking with Bishouty about her work, I was reminded of a misfiled letter in Said's collected papers, one that he wrote to his daughter at a difficult time in her life. The details are hazy. It was not professional correspondence and so I passed over it and neglected to record it. Misfiled, lost, and incompletely remembered, the letter has haunted me over the years and never more than it does now. What I do

[9] Edward Said, "Arabic Prose and Prose Fiction After 1948," in *Reflections on Exile and Other Essays* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2000) Pgs. 41 – 60.

remember clearly is that it was an affirming letter, a message delivered with tenderness but intended firmly, to help Said's daughter Najla through a weighty moment. I remember the sign-off too, and I think of it now in relation to the intergenerational dialogue staged in Bishouty's exhibition. I imagine Ghassan speaking through the gallery walls in Said's last line to Najla: "You are my eyes."

SAVAC

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Nour Bishouty
Nothing is lost except nothing at all except what is not had

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