

Master of Fine Art Thesis

The Tyrants Fear of Songs

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عَلَى هَذِهِ الْأَرْضِ مَا يَسْتَحِقُّ الْحَيَاةُ:
تَرْدُّدُ إِبْرِيلَ
رَائِحَةُ الْخُبْزِ فِي الْفَجْرِ
آرَاءُ امْرَأَةٍ فِي الرِّجَالِ
كِتَابَاتُ أُسْخِيلْيُوسِ
أَوَّلُ الْحُبِّ
عَشَبٌ عَلَى حَجَرٍ
أُمّهَاتٌ تَقِفْنَ عَلَى خَبِطِ نَائِ
وَخَوْفُ الْغُرَاةِ مِنَ الذِّكْرِيَّاتِ

عَلَى هَذِهِ الْأَرْضِ مَا يَسْتَحِقُّ الْحَيَاةُ:
نِهَآيَةُ أَيْلُولَ
سَيِّدَةٌ تَتْرُكُ الْأَرْبَعِينَ بِكَامِلِ مَشْمِشِهَا
سَاعَةُ الشَّمْسِ فِي السَّجَنِ
غَيْمٌ يُقْلَدُ سِرِّيًّا مِنَ الْكَائِنَاتِ
هُتَافَاتُ شَعْبٍ لِمَنْ يَصْعَدُونَ إِلَى حَتْفِهِمْ بِأَسْمِينِ
وَحَوْفُ الطُّغَاةِ مِنَ الْأَغْنِيَّاتِ

عَلَى هَذِهِ الْأَرْضِ مَا يَسْتَحِقُّ الْحَيَاةُ:
عَلَى هَذِهِ الْأَرْضِ سَيِّدَةُ الْأَرْضِ
أُمُّ الْبِدَايَاتِ أُمُّ النِّهَآيَاتِ
كَأَنَّتِ تُسَمَّى فِلِسْطِينَ
صَارَتْ تُسَمَّى فِلِسْطِينَ
سَيِّدَتِي: أَسْتَحِقُّ، لِأَنَّكَ سَيِّدَتِي، أَسْتَحِقُّ الْحَيَاةُ

We have on this land that which makes life
worth living
The aroma of bread at dawn
A woman's opinion of men
The works of Aeschylus
The beginnings of love
Grass on a stone
Mothers who live on a flute's sigh
And the invaders fear of memories

We have on this land that which makes life
worth living
The waning days of dawn
A woman leaving forty in full blossom
The hour of sunlight in prison
A cloud resembling a pack of creatures
The applause of a people for those who
face their end with a smile
And the tyrants fear of songs

We have on this land that which makes life
worth living
On this earth, the lady of earth
The mother of all beginnings
The mother of all endings
She was called Palestine
She came to be called Palestine
O lady, because you are my lady
I am worthy of life

- Mahmoud Darwish

The Role of Empathy

Empathy in political art is often about raising an awareness to an oppression or plight, but can sometimes be more specific, because it can implicate the viewer or at least raise questions on how they may be a part of the problem or how they may feel if faced with the same strife. Empathy can be boiled down to the idea “how would I feel if I was in that position?”

I wanted to start by showing one of my first pieces. This was a stethoscope I made from glass in memorial of my father. I was reminiscing about him one day and I thought about the stethoscope that accompanied him in his white coat. He owned that stethoscope for years before I was even born, and those thoughts turned to how it lost him too. I thought about how if I miss him this much, how must it feel? So, I pinched the tube on its behalf, retiring it in mourning forever.



I began to use empathy as a starting point for some of my work seeing how it could be a useful tool to challenge a social status quo whereby we can trivialize the challenges of others. In the *Outsiders* exhibition, I used my own empathy to address a plight seldom spoken of: the plight of innocent victims of war. Namely, the civilian casualties of the US-led invasion of Iraq. My contention was that they existed as a statistic – half a million innocent casualties – but that we should be seeing them as individual people with their own lives, ambitions, and loved ones. Using myself as the personification of that experience, I used my empathy to seed empathy in the viewer. My struggle became emblematic of the Arab struggle and in that moment compassion strips away surface treatment and exposes the human beneath.

Through everyday objects and actions, a kinship can be formed with the viewer; however, with the added elements of strain and sadness, I hope empathy is evoked, and the action becomes theoretical, which in turn invites thought and introspection. A beard being shaved is a normal, reversible action, but coupled with sustained eye contact and a solemn demeanor an element of loss is conveyed and the idea that the conversation is about more than just a beard starts to become apparent.

Another tool I use to stir empathy is performance, for performance allows for a human element different than that experienced through the figure to exist in the work. Though it is difficult and risks coming off as contrived, I find there is a power to performance done right.

While I mainly talk about trials and tribulations in the Middle East, I have recently begun to ponder my scope and I am in the process of trying to broaden my work to encompass any who fits the capacity of the piece. In trying to evoke empathy I must also look inwards and

within myself express it. I have to include all who experience the plight I shed light on. Any less and I'm a hypocrite and part of the problem.

The importance of stressing empathy as a strategy for my work is rooted in politics, where it is difficult to stand up for an oppression that doesn't affect us directly. Sometimes we are consumed with our own lives and challenges that instead of sympathizing we make it a competition of who has it worse. I aim to challenge that directly by also making work about other peoples' suffering. For example, when the physical toll of the performance at the *Outsiders* exhibition started to mount was the moment I knew that I was at the very least being honest. I didn't stop when it got tough, because it was important to me that others knew. My devotion to the task became the entry point for the viewer.



The question, however, becomes what is the next step after empathy? Activism, in one form or another. This doesn't have to be full blown picketing and protesting but can start small in the form of respectful conversation with those who hold adversarial positions. Upon experiencing an emotional connection to a cause, one should educate oneself, use multiple sources to generate an opinion, then spread that knowledge. This is the root of activism, a campaign for social change. The very least one can do, however, is participate in the legislative process to greatest extent one can: This can be voting, volunteering for campaigns, or supporting candidates who represent what one wants for society.

Visual Analysis of the Outsiders Exhibition

Through my works shown at the *Outsiders* exhibition in Hornell, I explored the themes of Arab identity and an Arab loss. I addressed issues surrounding negative Middle Eastern stereotypes and the detriments they have had on the West's ability to empathize with the Arab plight. I further drew attention to the notion that beyond Arab features there lies a human from a region rife with pain, loss, and instability. The notion of loss lies not only in the loss of innocent lives, but also in the freedom to be a Muslim Arab without conjuring notions of terrorism, barbarianism, or backwardness.

My installation, titled *Arab Loss*, consisted of three interconnected pieces. To view one of my three pieces in a vacuum without its siblings would be to only see a third of the story. While each piece functions as a unit it is together that the deeper narrative unfolds. Curated to be viewed in a specific order, each piece builds on the one prior, expanding and enriching it

with the intention of deepening the viewers empathic response before obliging a second encounter upon exiting the space. The first, *Without It, I'm still an Arab*, consisted of a short video of me gazing directly into the camera. The second, *15 years; Half a Million Lives*, consisted of 15 tassels comprised of half a million threads, and was coupled with a live performance of me making a sixteenth tassel. The third, a second video piece titled *The Price of Prayer*, is coupled with a sculptural element, an artifact from the video performance.

I will give a visual analysis of each piece individually coupled with viewer interaction. I will then address the installation as a whole and how I think the viewer encounter may have changed in a short amount of time. My intention is to bring to the foreground the aforementioned depth that is borne of seeing the pieces together that seeing them individually does not afford. I also wish to show that each piece can viewed independently from a phenomenological standpoint and still hold water.

In the video projection *Without It, I'm Still an Arab*, the viewer is met with an olive-skinned man wearing black. In a dim empty room of white walls, he occupies the frame from the shoulders up gazing directly at the viewer. A mechanical click is heard, and the hum of a machine rings out. With gaze affixed he proceeds to remove a part of himself. With only his other hand for guidance he navigates his contours to remove the shade of his face. The loss is not physically painful, and the change is not permanent, but the pain is not physical, and the damage is done. Pulling his skin taught with a hand and the tilt of the head, the man maintains his stare. With eyes fixed the task nears completion; with probing touch he feels for spots of protest, returning his attention to them. Satisfied with the feel the mechanical click is heard again and the drone ceases. Hands smooth and comfort, while wiping away any residues; the

man feels his face, re-centers himself and with a quirk of lips leaves something said but unsaid:

“Are you happy now?” The scene fades out to black then back in at the beginning.



Click. Repeat.

I envision the viewers initial encounter with the piece to be a question: “What is he about to shave?” Since this question is answered so quickly they are left either just watching thoughtlessly – an unlikely option – or pondering why it was the beard. A commentary on manhood may be their first hypothesis, and the baggage that comes with having a beard. At this point I imagine the fixed gaze would pique interest as the discomfort of maintaining direct eye contact with someone mounts. Not many conclusions can be gleaned from this video, but one walks away with questions and maybe a sense of resigned loss. To the left of the wall where the video is shown is a short narrow hallway that leads to a bright room with tassels suspended from a ceiling. They entice you in.

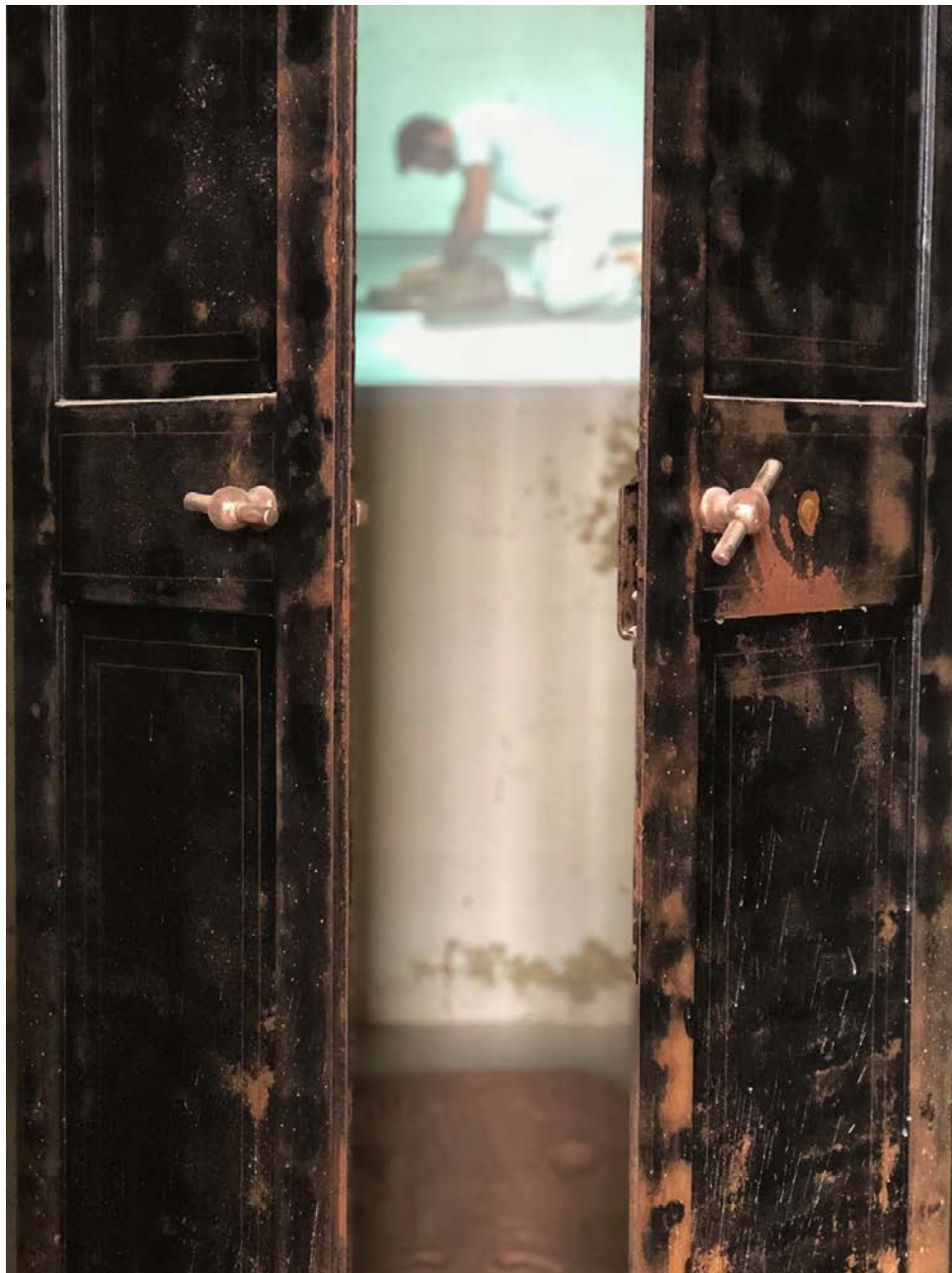
15 Years; Half a Million Lives starts with 15 tassels of mixed black and white thread - all cut to uniform length - hung from white rebar suspended from fishing line; they bisect the plain white room with gray concrete floors. Though its physical bisection splits the room down its longest midline, the bisection I speak of is one of above and below. An invisible horizontal plane separates the suspended tassels from a pile of cut threads heaped in a line on the ground mirroring the tassels above. The source of this plane is a foot-wide table of humble construction with an overhang to one side. At this ledge sits an olive-skinned man in all black; he is wrapping thread around the table in a hand-width band. As though unaware of the viewer he is relentless. He is methodical. Over. Under. Over. Under. Above. Below. Ad nauseum he winds three spools of thread around the source of the invisible plane. With gaze averted, the man surveys none by his task. The task is arduous and is taking a physical toll on him. Joints pop and muscles protest as he takes a moment to wriggle out a knot in his shoulders before returning to his charge. There is a quiet reverie to the room, a sacred silence. On a plaque off to

one side is the title of the piece, but underneath itched into the plaque but not legible except from up close are the words “each thread represents a civilian casualty in Iraq since the US-led invasion in 2003.”



Being drawn into what seems like a barren room by the hanging tassels, the viewer may have been a little startled to see me sitting there performing. Though some might whisper, most found the taste of silence more palatable in this room. The meditative, monotonous task had the feel of ritual, so the sense of intrusion brought hushed tones if not complete silence. The strong plane of the bottom of the tassels draws you in, and the inherent line of both the tassels and the cutoff heap lead to me. Everything in the room brings you back to my task, and the time spent making the tassels starts to become apparent. The hypothetical number of half a million is made tangible by a litter of threads cut short. The viewer is then informed that each thread is an innocent life, and the monotonous action suddenly bears weight. Each over and under is one life. Each thread above, means one below. The invisible plane established at the table becomes a surrogate for the ground, and anything below is beneath the land. Through the silence punctuated by whispers, the sounds of a man exerting himself in short breaths can be heard. The line of the tassels also leads away from the performance to vault with thick doors left ajar. Inside, a video is seen of the same olive-skinned man entering the frame burdened with a boulder of clay. Smack! Deforming under its own weight, the clay hits the ground; slow deep breaths, and the man centers himself for the task ahead. Onto hands and knees the white-clad man with bare feet begins to lean into the clay, pressing and compressing it outwards and away from himself. With cardiac rhythm he urges the clay to spread. With each strained exertion the force of the task is emphasized. He does not stray too far from his starting position; tethered to the task he flattens, kneads, and extends the clay from its central peak. Pulling and pushing the clay with arms and body. The objective is revealed; an inch-thick mat of clay in an approximate rectangle extends lengthwise away from the laborer. One deep breath,

and he is back on his feet with his toes at the mat's edge. A tentative step forward onto the mat skin to skin, and second to bring both feet in side by side. The man's face is no longer visible, but he raises his hands to begin praying, and the video fades to black. Bathed in the light of the projected video, the mat lays in the center of the vault with an impression of prostration, but a figure unseen.



The vault was a curious space that was reminiscent of a cell. With chipped paint and a smell of time, the sense of neglect heightens the prison feel. There is, however, no lock and no guard; the doors are ajar and there is no one inside. I hoped this would evoke in the viewer a sense of non-corporeal imprisonment, a place where the simple and effortless action of laying down a mat become this intense exertion. While no one is barred entry, the door is a threshold the viewer does not wish to cross. The voyeuristic nature of viewing the piece through the space between doors makes entering an intrusion.

At this point the viewer would have seen all three pieces, and though each one has its own narrative, walking back out of the installation casts them in different lights. The black and white tassels represent not just lives, but the innocent Arab lives lost usually not thought of when thinking of the Middle East. The color choice then becomes intentional - representing the Arabian keffiyeh – instead an arbitrary decision or a commentary on good and evil. The clay mat names me a Muslim, a fact difficult to be proud of in this day and age, and the shaving of my beard becomes a stripping away of identity to become more palatable and less threatening. With the stripping away of these parts of myself I have exposed the human underneath and the losses I and my kind have sustained. In showing the human underneath I hope to humanize others who exist as just desert dwellers or mere statistics.

On Politics and the Political

To examine how my art is political, I will first explore what political art is. In Mieke Bal's *Of What One Cannot Speak: Doris Salcedo's Political Art*, Bal explores not only the difference between politics and the political – two critical terms when examining political art – but also the antagonistic yet symbiotic relationship between them. Bal quotes Chantal Mouffe who defines the terms as follows: “By the ‘political’ I mean the dimension of antagonism which I take to be constitutive of human societies, while by ‘politics’ I mean the set of practices and institutions through which an order is created, organizing human coexistence in the context of conflictuality provided by the political.”^{Ball 10} However, the relationship between the two is complex, for while it appears an antagonistic arrangement, both are vital to society. Where politics aims to settle conflict within society, the political (where said conflict occurs) has a secondary purpose of keeping politics in check. Thus, politics is bookended by the political; politics is bookended by conflict.

Thus, conflict is a core tenet of our social environment, and the mechanisms we've established to navigate them – laws – are the foundations of politics. There are, however, unjust laws and practices – laws and practices that result in oppression – and it is the role of the political to challenge those instances. My work over the past few years has been directed at strife, loss, and displacement at the hands of oppressive legislation. The distinction here is that each can happen due to circumstance, which is a shame, but when it is due to the intentional acts of another or an institution, then it is an injustice. In response to oppression and tyranny, I aim to exercise my artistic freedom of speech and shed light on those injustices.

Conflict, however, is not always malicious; In fact, the social reality of conflict is partly comprised of misunderstandings. This is the essence of the term *mésentente* as outline by Jacques Rancière minus the element of just plain not getting along. While conflict can divide into “us” versus “them” groups, this doesn’t remedy conflict; it turns adversaries into enemies, abandoning the sportsmanship of benign conflict. Thus, conversation is a vital part of conflict resolution, and empathy is a useful tool in helping each see the others side. Art is one form that conversation can take, and it is one of the ways I like to exercise political imagination to envision a better social condition.

It is with a seed of empathy that I begin most of my works. In order to evoke empathy, I think that I must experience it within myself as due diligence to the conversation. With humble beginnings, I aim to be more honest in my approach and to make a conscious effort not to propagate propaganda or partake in its creation. This is the essence of why my work is political art: I refuse to stoop to the levels of propaganda, for propaganda is the appropriation of art by politics with the intention to mislead or misinform. It is the antithesis of political art. So, while politics should be aimed to reconcile conflict rooted in misunderstanding, it is a tragic irony when it disseminates misinformation which creates or furthers conflict.

To truly start with empathy, the work I make is about a strife and struggle I have not experienced directly. By acknowledging that the position of those who have is one I would not want for myself, I cannot accept it for them. With that intention I begin to consider my material choice and attempt to represent that person with an iconographic element. For the civilian casualties in Iraq, for example, I chose thread. Each thread represented a life lost – a thread cut short – with a second consideration layered in: The threads would be grouped into 15 tassels

with each representing a year since the invasion of Iraq. Though the tassel would seem simply an intuitive choice as to how to present a large number of threads, there was more intention to the decision. Many keffiyeh from the Middle East have two opposing edges lined with tassels, which led me to reflect on the idea that though the keffiyeh is a politically charged object that has been used in propaganda to be synonymous with terrorism, the tassel remains an innocuous – even domestic – motif. In an attempt at de-appropriation, I used the least offensive part of the keffiyeh to represent the oppressed and hopefully strip away any surface treatment and expose the human beneath.

Another way in which *15 years; Half a Million Lives* was political was in how I created a political space of violence, but one that was set after the violence occurred. Each tassel was trimmed to the same sharp horizontal plane, and the trimmings were left below the suspended tassels in a mound like a mass-grave with the violence done to the tassels representative of the violence done in Iraq. In an effort to remain as impartial as possible, which is actually quite difficult when you're being critical, I used the lowest estimate for the number of civilian casualties in Iraq, for I didn't want to be accused of sensationalizing, a tactic more suited for propaganda.

The performative aspect of the piece is anchored in the political as well. It was my form of protest, but instead of picketing or demonstrating, I devoted myself to a sorrowful task of both mourning and honoring the dead. Though I was the performer, I see the main element as the thread extending the singularity of my task to a generality of the lives that have been lost. The sympathy the viewer may have felt in seeing me struggle to make the final tassel as my muscles started to cramp and the cold set deeper and deeper could develop into empathy for

those missing but represented. Though it is space of violence, there is a silent reverie akin to the calm after a storm that I hoped was conducive to introspection.

More recently I presented work about Palestine and the displacement experienced by refugees in the Six Day War of 1967. Entire villages were lost and thousands of acres of olive trees with either burned, uprooted, or destroyed. I made twenty-four clay bricks of similar size by hand and carved the names of the lost villages on thirteen of them. The bricks were then formed into a wall built over an olive-green vintage suitcase containing a family photo album, deeds to land, legal contracts, a passport and a birth certificate. This piece was inherently political in that it directly addressed an issue of politics and its role in tyrannical displacement as well as an ongoing conflict that has resulted in a war; however, the piece lacked some of the oomph that made the Post Office exhibition successful, but this may have been more an issue of scale than of content.



One of the stronger parts of the aforementioned piece wasn't shown to the viewer, for it was the contents of the suitcase: The items you take with if you can only take one bag and you don't know if and when you're coming back. I took that idea and began to dissect each item, settling on the passport as a surrogate for the figure in the context of displacement, because the passport is an item that can choose sides in a conflict for us. The question then became: "How, then, could I represent Palestinian refugees with a passport?" And then I realized that I was contributing to the problem. Seeing how Doris Salcedo handled the victims of violence and displacement wherein she represented them as missing figures regardless of race, gender, or creed, I realized that though it can be my intention to represent the Palestinian refugee, but there are non-Palestinians experiencing the same strife under similar conditions elsewhere. If I can't have empathy for them then I'm practicing hypocritical art, so I loosened the specificity of the piece to leave room for other who have had their identities redacted in violence in places other than Palestine.

This new thought developed into *The Invaders Fear of Memories*, and though it is rather simple in its presentation it is exhaustive in its detail. The white paper from which the passport templates are cut is of higher quality and has an acerbic smell that persists faintly where it has been burned. Cut on a laser-cutter the areas where any personal and identifying information would be has been removed, there are charred edges leaving traces of the violence of their deletion. The result is a blank political document with no allegiance and no identity. Stained with olive oil, some of the documents have a gradient of discoloration that gives the feel of age, which is corroborated by a layer of rust on the paper-clips affixing them rank and file to the wall. While not all of the paper clips are rusted, and not all of the documents are discolored,

this was done in an attempt to show a progression and foreshorten time to represent an issue that is pervasive and old.

My work since coming to graduate school has been wholly political. Unhappy with the state of social affairs both at home and abroad, I wanted to make work that directly addressed the oppressions that can stem from politics, especially those that arise from the use of propaganda – political art's antithesis. Knowing that in order to be sincere my work has to be different than propaganda, I reject the tactics used by propaganda and instead aim to engage the viewer through understanding and empathy.

The Tyrants Fear of Songs

Approaching my thesis show as a display of all that I have learned, I revisited all three pieces I made in my final year as well as the beard video from my first year. I took what I had internalized from my reviews and attempted to put it into practice.

Entering the Fosdick Nelson Gallery, the viewer is greeted by *The Invaders Fear of Memories*; in its most recent iteration, the piece embraces the memorial and instead of being nailed to the wall, is given a plaque of blonde plywood. The commemoration is given a platform, a bulletin board of lost identities.



Exploring further into the space gold glistens in the distance, but there is more yet to see on the way. The wall that was a maquette of the villages lost in the Six Day War has grown into *The Lost Villages of Palestine* and consists around 170 bricks mourning all the Palestinian villages that have been razed, settle upon, or “depopulated” since Arab-Israeli War of 1948. The bricks - smooth with the traces of the makers hand - form two sections of a wall with three suitcases buried under their weight. Though the wall commands space, it is no barrier to the viewer, for while it resembles a wall, it is in reality a cenotaph that prevents no access.



Passing the threshold of the bricks, another dimension of the wall reveals itself: Every brick has the name of a different lost Palestinian village carved into its back. I spent time reading about each individual village before inscribing their names into the bricks using an old

Arabic script. The more I read, and the further I progressed into my task the more I began to hate the word “depopulated”. It is the most innocuous, seemingly harmless way to say forcibly expelled from their homes by an invading army.



Once within the confines of the wall, I attempt to engage more of the viewers senses. Though some may not recognize it, Arabian agarwood soaked in fragrant oils was burned to leave a trace of another place. A couple of sound elements begin to be heard, the first from a video playing on the far right wall. This version of the video, however, differs from its predecessor in that though the destination is the same, the journey is different. I didn't use my left hand to pull tight my skin and guide the trimmer. I tried not to lift or turn my chin to make

more easily passable the planes of my skin. I didn't want to make it any easier to remove my beard. I methodically work from the right side of my face to the left with an awkwardness and stiffness not typical of a normal shave. This was not the normal shaving of a beard: My heart wasn't in it.



Beyond the mechanical sound of the trimmer, faint music can be heard finally drawing you into the gold. *All I have left* looms in the far left corner of the installation. Based on the layout of the Palestinian flag, the piece exists somewhere between flag and shelter. Sewn from different Keffiyeh from different regions in the Middle East, there is an underlying accusation against the rest of the Arab world that stood aside while Palestine was taken. Supported and

tethered by materials of construction and destruction respectively, the tent embodies the nature of the Palestinian condition: Making the best of the little that is left in exile. The shelter has in its shade an emergency blanket of gold with a song taking the place of the figure who once occupied it. The song is the tyrants fear, for it represents the memory of their oppression. The memory of their ill-gotten gains. Long after the body is gone, the song rings out in defiance of the fading of memory.



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