IBRAAZ

Platform 007

INTERVIEWS

Technologies of History

Jannane Al-Ani in conversation with Nat Muller

Jannane Al-Ani, *Shadow Sites I* (2010). Digitized super 16 mm film, 14'20".
Image courtesy of the artist.

Nat Muller: The issue of the body runs throughout your work. Whether it is the staged presence (and in some cases gradual disappearance) of the female body in earlier works such as *Veil* (1997) and *Untitled* (2002), or the on-going research project *The Aesthetics of Disappearance: A Land Without People* (2007-ongoing), from which you developed the acclaimed films *Shadow Sites I* (2010) and *Shadow Sites II* (2011). Can you talk about this interest in the body and how the dynamics of bodily absence and presence have developed over time in your practice? More particularly what spurred the decision to excise human presence completely from your work and focus on the body of the landscape instead?

Jananne Al-Ani: As you've noted, I have a longstanding interest in the representation of the body. The earliest works I exhibited were concerned with the way women's bodies have been represented throughout the history of western painting. In advance of the development of photography and film, the shifting ideals of feminine beauty were clearly mapped out in the work of artists. However, the media coverage of the 1991 Gulf War, which focused on aerial and satellite images of a depopulated, barren landscape, had a major impact on my work. What followed was a reassessment on my part of the work of Orientalist painters and the way in which fantasies about the body and the landscape of the Middle East were constructed in their works. I began to see the body itself as a contested territory and during the 90s produced a series of works that attempted to counter the European obsession with uncovering and exposing the bodies of veiled women. More recently, with the *Aesthetics of Disappearance* project, I've attempted to re-occupy that space so, while the presence of the body is implied rather than explicit, the traces of human activity in the landscape are clear to see.

NM: For *Shadow Sites I* and *Shadow Sites II* you extensively researched aerial military surveillance photography, techniques you eventually used to realize the films. The smooth, almost dreamy, aerial reconnaissance views of the 16mm film of *Shadow Sites I* is quite different from the ominous sepia-toned still-image sequence of *Shadow Sites II*. In the first film the focus of the frame continuously shifts, while in the second film, the focus is locked. Can you elaborate on the difference of these two visual sensibilities and how it resonates with military tactics and the politics of viewing from the perspective of the spectator?

JA: After the 1991 Gulf War, which created a radical shift in the history of war reportage, the increased sophistication of drones, either for surveillance or attack, became the new focus in terms of advances in military technology. However, I wanted to go back to the early twentieth century and investigate in more depth the circumstances that first brought the technologies of photography and flight together. So, during the development of the work, I carried out research in a number of institutions, which was really important in informing both the form and content of the work. I visited the photographic archives of the Air and Space Museum in Washington DC where I discovered the unpublished aerial reconnaissance photographs of the Western Front, taken by a unit established by Edward Steichen while working for the Aerial Expeditionary Force during WWI – strikingly beautiful images of landscapes obliterated by shelling and criss-crossed by trenches, but abstracted to such a degree as to have become exquisite and minimal works of art. While in Washington I also had the opportunity to carry out research in the archives of the Freer and Sackler Galleries where I found the extraordinary landscape photographs of the German archaeologist, Ernst Herzfeld. Herzfeld documented the vast and often bleak landscapes in which the sites he was excavating were situated. By pulling back or zooming out in this way, his photographs offer an exceptional contextualizing record of the environment normally absent in more common, object-focused, photographic records of archaeological artefacts and sites.

Shifting my focus to the archives of the Arab Image Foundation in Beirut, I came across publications on the work of early pioneers of aerial photography in the region such as the French archaeologist and Jesuit missionary Antoine

Poidebard who produced the most stunning aerial photographs of Roman sites in Syria in the mid 1930s.

I also discovered the work of art historian Kitty Hauser whose book *Shadow Sites: Photography, Archaeology & the British Landscape 1927–1955* (2007), provided me with an invaluable account of the development of aerial photography, its use in archaeology and its impact on the work of British artists such as Paul Nash and John Piper, who both served as official war artists.

One of the most significant outcomes of this period of research was the revelation that the discipline of aerial archaeology had developed as a direct result of the discovery of previously unknown sites during aerial operations carried out in the course of the first and second world wars. For at certain times of the day, when the sun is low in the sky, the outlines of archaeological features on the ground are thrown into relief. Searching for such 'shadow sites' is one of the simplest methods of identifying archaeological ruins, which remain undetected when seen at ground level. When viewed from above, the landscape itself acts as a photographic plate, where a latent image (the foundations of a Roman fort, for example) is periodically revealed as the sun rises and sets over a site.
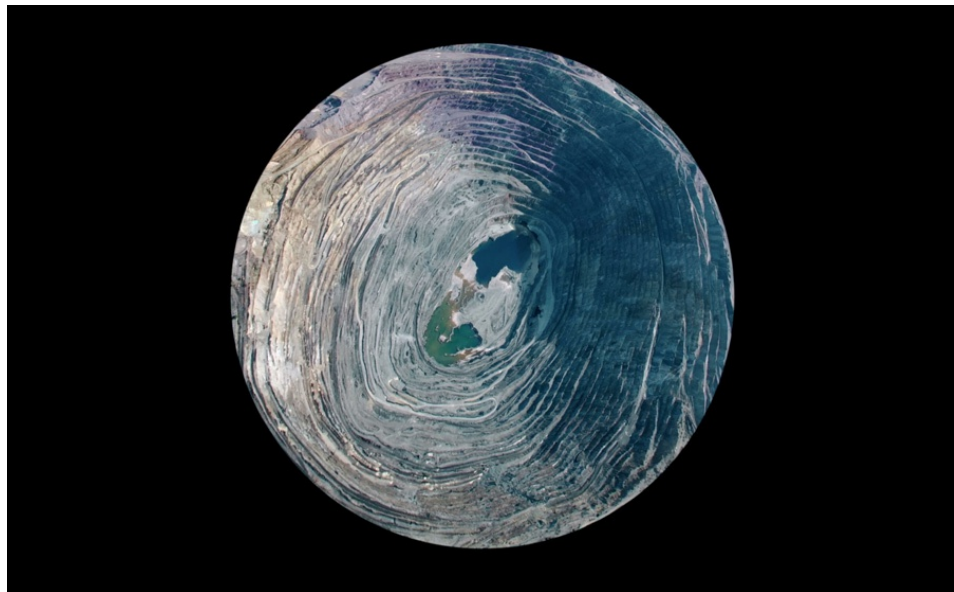
Jannane Al-Ani, *Groundworks II* (2013). 5-channel video installation. Dimensions variable. Image courtesy of the artist.

 For me, part of the appeal of using the dual technologies of flight and photography lay in the possibility of the landscape itself becoming the bearer of particularly resilient and recurring memories by exposing signs on the surface, not only of loss but also of survival. I wanted to demonstrate how intensely the landscape had been occupied and worked by focusing on sites ranging from ancient field systems to bronze age copper mines, Nabataean ruins, Roman forts and WWI trenches dug during the dying days of the Ottoman empire and to bring it right up to date with modern industrial farm complexes.

Regarding the differences in form of the two *Shadow Sites* films, I wanted to distinguish between the process of surveillance and that of attack. So *Shadow Sites I*, which is shot on 16mm film, is made up of a succession of vertical aerial

shots, which dissolve one into the other in a rather hypnotic way. I wanted the film to replicate the point-of-view of a surveillance mission, perhaps to put the viewer in the role of the pilot or the drone operator seeking out particular sites or targets as they scans the landscape. In contrast, *Shadow Sites II* is made from a series of high-resolution aerial photographs shot from a tiny ultra-light plane. Dissolving from one image to the next in a long, continuous zoom, the film suggests the vantage point of a Predator drone or a cruise missile and replicates the action of 'locking onto a target' in anticipation of a strike.

NM: You seem to play with a seductive image in your work, whether this is a seduction scripted, perhaps not wholly intentionally, on the bodies of the women who perform in your earlier work, or beautifully mesmerizing landscapes of the Jordanian desert in *Shadow Sites*. Can you talk about this dynamic? Does beauty cover up, or distract from, certain truths or does it reveal them, especially in the case of *The Aesthetics of Disappearance: A Land Without People*. Where do beauty and your interest in forensics converge?

JA: I'm really interested in the slippage between beauty and abjection and one of the starting points for this work is a story I've recounted on many occasions now about the forensic anthropologist Margaret Cox. In 2004 I came across an article on Cox who was then working in Iraq after the 2003 war to help identify victims of the Baathist regime whoes bodies were being uncovered in mass graves across the country. The article began with an account of Cox's work in Kosovo in the late 1990s, in which she talked about her search for a particular species of blue butterfly that feeds exclusively on the wild flower Artemisia Vulgaris. It turned out that her interest in the flora and fauna of the region was driven by her mission to excavate the mass graves of Albanian victims of Serbian genocide, for wherever the soil had been disturbed and the nutrient levels increased as a result of decomposing bodies, the flowers and the butterflies could be found in abundance. What was most striking for me about this story was the contrast between the beauty on the surface – the flowers and butterflies, and the horror that lay just a few feet below. Clearly, the disappearance of civilians in times of war and conflict is a universal phenomenon but the thing that interests me is what happens to the evidence of atrocity and how it affects our understanding of the often beautiful landscapes into which the bodies of victims disappear.

NM: You work predominantly with photography, video and film, mediums that have conditioned our gaze ideologically in significant ways, especially if we think of orientalist representations of the female body and the Middle Eastern landscape. To what extent is a critique of the limitations of these technologies themselves an issue in your work?

JA: The thing that excites me most about lens-based media is their capacity to perform magic tricks because of their indexical quality and apparently intimate relationship to the real. Imagine how extraordinary studio portraits of Middle Eastern women, made by European photographers in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, must have appeared to a western audience? Drawing heavily on a pre-existing repertoire of themes already established by the fantastical genre of Orientalist painting, such as the harem and the odalisque, the photographs would have provided a form of evidence that the fantasies mapped out in the painting had some foundations in the real world. What I attempt to do in my work is take on such entrenched iconography and short

circuit it. So in the works I produced in the 1990s that dealt with the veil, I tried to flip the power relations between the viewer and the women in the photographs by reversing the usual dynamics between subject and object. Because they are many, they make the audience acutely aware of their own engagement in the act of looking. Because they can see but not be seen, they become the photographer not the photographed.

I am certain that those of us who have experienced life under the tight control of dictatorships and authoritarian regimes, have a different, more sceptical relationship with all forms of mediated information. For me it's the space between blind trust in the technologies of image making to tell us the truth, and the infinite possibilities they offer for fabrication and propaganda, which is most fertile.
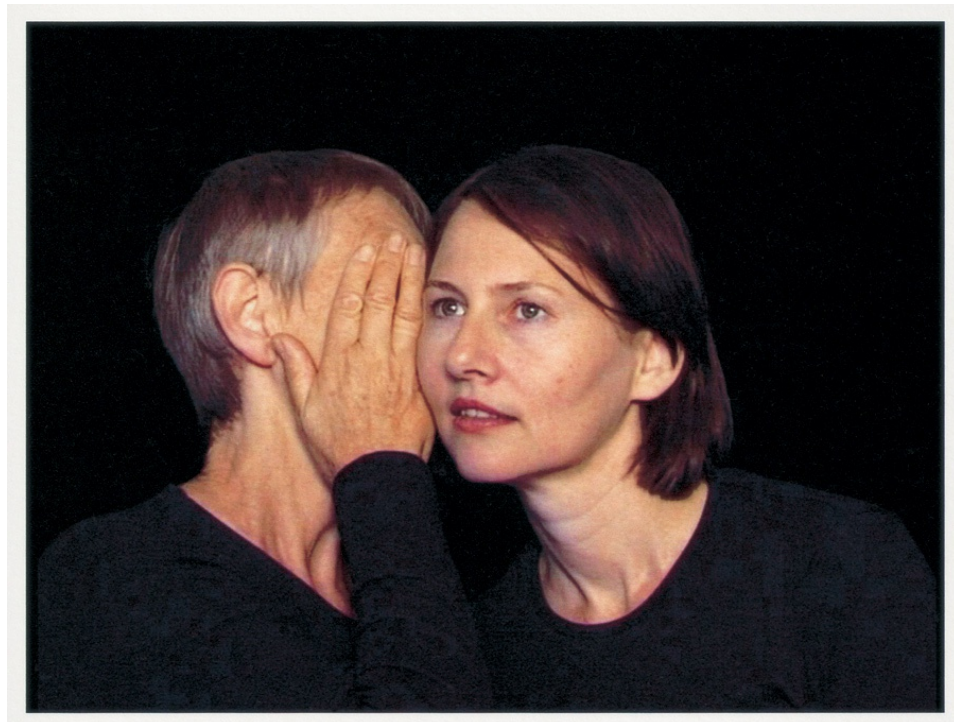
Jananne Al-Ani, *She Said* (2000). 22', 5-Channel video installation.
Image courtesy of the artist.

NM: Can you speak about how moving from the controlled intimate studio environment of your earlier work (in which you often worked with your mother and sisters), to the different scale and vastness of the landscape affected the way you work? Which challenges and opportunities (conceptual and practical) did this pose, and how can this move be seen as a continuation of your thematic interests?

JA: The work I made in the studio was extremely pared down visually. Based on the formal device of the 'talking head', which is borrowed from documentary filmmaking, it is the voices of the performers, the spoken word, which carries meaning in the work. The tightly cropped fixed camera position makes individual films appear like animated portraits.

When working outdoors the process is similarly constrained. So, although the landscape, in theory, offers limitless horizons (particularly desert landscapes) in terms of image making, I tend to use it very much like a stage, looking through

the proscenium arch of the theatre or via the limits of the photographic or filmic frame. With all the aerial material the shots are perfect verticals and focused on particular details in the landscape, there's no sense of distance, no horizon or vanishing point so the work resists the conventions of landscape painting in favour of a much more forensic approach. The experience is closer to looking through a microscope than gazing out at a landscape.

NM: Following the above question, how have conventions of portraiture and landscape painting and photography informed your work?

JA: The works are not about landscape, in terms of the conventions of painting and photography, but have more in common with cartography. The vertical aerial perspective transforms the sites in the films into territory rather than place.

NM: In video installations such as *1001 Nights* (1998), *A Loving Man* (1996-9) and *She Said* (2000) performative speech and the fickleness of memory play a key role in the production of narrative. How has your engagement with the performativity of historical narrative and with biography evolved over time?

JA: When I began work on the *Aesthetics* project I was interested in memory (and forgetting) and the way personal and political narratives relate to contested landscapes, in particular those burdened with conflicting signification and how confession (in both the religious sense, the documentary film making tradition and the confessional mode in contemporary art practice) might be adopted as a means of confronting and coming to terms with such events. I decided to focus on sources readily available in the public domain but which are often overlooked or ignored so I compiled material I found on blogs, in oral history archives, and from transcripts of war crimes tribunals. I also examined interviews carried out in the field by other researchers, among them anthropologists and sociologists, who had worked with survivors of atrocity and mass killings. My intention was to create an archive of fragmented and anonymized extracts of first person testimonials, which would provide a textual element to the work.

However, once I began to identify the locations I wanted to film and photograph and the production of the work got underway, the relationship between image and text became more problematic. On one hand, the explicit nature of much of the material was in danger of being overly sensationalist and on the other hand, the imagery itself began to speak in interesting and subtle ways of damage, not just to the site but to the body. In the end, the human voice barely features in the *Shadow Sites* films and when it does, the words spoken are impossible to decipher.

NM: In the five-channel video installation *Groundworks* (2013) you show animated aerial photographs of the Sonoran Desert in Arizona (USA). These videos are shown on small screens framed in various geometric shapes. Can you talk about how the display choices inform the formal properties of the work? And perhaps more in general, how do issues of scale – small, large or multi-channel projections – feature as strategic conceptual decisions in your practice.

JA: *Groundworks I-V* focuses on the landscapes of southwestern USA and consists of four subtly animated aerial photographs of sites including open cast mines, abandoned WWII runways and industrial farms. The fifth element is a re-

mastered edition of the 16mm film *Excavators* featuring ants building a nest in the sand.

Each of the five films is shown on a small scale and cropped, using a series of bespoke frames, in a range of geometric shapes including a square, circle and triangle, which reflect the outline of the sites while creating a further layer of abstraction. By concealing the frame of the monitor, the conventional format of the rectangular screen is avoided and it becomes much less clear that we are watching a moving image. The ambiguity of scale and the juxtaposition of the four animated landscapes with the ants also set up a tension in the installation between the 'microscopic' view on the ground and the long-distanced cartographic view from the air. The films recall video footage shot by fighter pilots in action, reducing those on the ground to an insect-like scale and allowing for the dehumanization of their targets.

Showing *Groundworks* alongside the *Shadow Sites* films was a way to link signs of ancient and contemporary activities in the landscape and to pull the American and Middle Eastern territories closer together, both literally and metaphorically. I am currently working on the outstanding element in the triangle of geopolitical relationships I've been exploring in the *Aesthetics* project, which will focus on the British landscape.

Jananne Al-Ani, *Excavators* (2010). Digitized Super 16 mm film, 2'24".
Image courtesy of the artist.

Jananne Al-Ani is a London-based Iraqi-born artist. She studied Fine Art at the Byam Shaw School of Art and graduated with an MA in Photography from the Royal College of Art (1997). She is currently Senior Research Fellow at the University of the Arts London.

Solo exhibitions include *Excavations,* Hayward Gallery Project Space, London (2014); *Groundwork,* Beirut Art Center (2013); *Shadow Sites*, Arthur M. Sackler Gallery, Washington DC (2012); *Jananne Al-Ani*, Darat al Funun, Amman (2010) and *The Visit*, Art Now, Tate Britain (2005). She has participated in the 13th Istanbul Biennial (2013); Sharjah Biennial 11 (2013); 18th Biennale of Sydney (2012) and the 54th Venice Biennale (2011).

Recent group exhibitions include *Concrete,* MUMA, Melbourne (2014); *Memory Material: Jananne Al-Ani & Stéphanie Saadé*, Akinci Gallery, Amsterdam (2014); *She Who Tells Story*, Museum of Fine Arts, Boston (2013); *Catalyst: Contemporary Art and War*, Imperial War Museum North, Manchester (2013); *Before the Deluge*, CaixaForum, Barcelona and Madrid (2012) and *Topographies de la Guerre*, Le Bal, Paris (2011). Al-Ani has co-curated exhibitions including *Veil* (2003/4) and *Fair Play* (2001/2).

Recipient of the Abraaj Capital Art Prize (2011), her work can be found in collections including the Tate Gallery and Imperial War Museum, London; Centre Pompidou, Paris; Smithsonian Institution, Washington DC; SFMOMA, San Francisco; Museum Moderner Kunst, Vienna; Mori Art Museum, Tokyo and Darat al Funun, Amman.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Nat Muller

Nat Muller is an independent curator and critic based between Rotterdam and Beirut. Her main interests include: the intersections of aesthetics, media and politics and media art and contemporary art in and from the Middle East. She is a regular contributor for *Springerin* and *Metropolis M*. She has taught across the Middle East and has served as an advisor on Euro-Med collaborations for the European Cultural Foundation (ECF), the EU, and as an advisor on e-culture for the Dutch Ministry of Culture. She recently co-curated*Power Cut Middle East*, a themed programme of films from Syria and Egypt at the International Film Festival Rotterdam, and is curator of the Abraaj Capital Art Prize 2012.