



IBRAAZ

Platform 007

ESSAYS

Measures of Uncertainty

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'Constructed and deconstructed, ephemera are what we negotiate with, since we authorize no part of the world and can only influence increasingly small bits of it. In any case we keep going.'

– Edward Said^[1]



Jawad al Malhi, from the series *Measures of Uncertainty*, 2013-2014.
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Jawad al Malhi has always been a keen observer of people. His early monumental oil paintings (1986-1990), such as *Day of Peace* (1989), *Child's Play* (1988), *Winter Rain*, (1988), depicted daily life in the refugee camp during the first intifada, including community efforts to deal with flooded streets, children's games, life in the home, and days and nights in the camp. These canvases, with their thick encrusted layers, are inhabited by people who impart a strong sense of community and collectivity, and were created on burlap sacks of sugar and flour distributed to the refugees. Similarly, his new body of work, *Measures of Uncertainty* (2013-14), which was on show at Al-Ma'mal Art Foundation in East Jerusalem between 6 June and 4 July, consists of over 20 large-scale paintings that draw inspiration from hours of observing crowds in the Shufhat Refugee Camp: the largest camp in occupied East Jerusalem, with a population estimated at 60,000 people.

In this collection, which marks a return by Al Malhi to large-scale painting, the artist takes up varying positions and presents different vantage points so as to study people's gestures and engagements in public space, including how they mark territory, their confrontations with the authorities, and how people survey and watch each other in such open settings. Together, these observations reflect on the current conditions of a camp established in 1965, with 500 families who all originate from the villages that surround Jerusalem, and a certain disintegration Al Malhi observes in the community. Yet, unlike the media lens that focuses on the events that occur in and around Palestine that in turn create recurring and entrenched stereotype images of Palestinians and Palestinian crowds in general, Al Malhi is far more interested in the moment after solidarity dissipates and collectivity melts into thin air. As such, in his paintings people wander in all directions as relations show themselves to be contingent: moments are filled with uncertainty and trepidation, which undulate in the gestures of the crowd.

In this, *Measures of Uncertainty* mirrors what is occurring in numerous other locations across the Middle East, where communities are slowly losing their sense of collectivity. This experience of loss has been inscribed on bodies and choreographed in liminal spaces such as contact zones: marginal spaces like the checkpoints in Palestine that have divided and segregated Palestinians from each other. In other locations around the Middle East, such encounters take place around symbolic sites – congregational spaces located within the national landscape (for example, Tahrir Square in Egypt). On this, Al Malhi has noted:

I have been watching, for some time now, this recurring spectacle both from near and afar, through the frame of the TV screen of events across the Arab world, and from my balcony that overlooks my birthplace Shufhat Refugee Camp in East Jerusalem. I used to debate politics into the early hours of the day around a small wooden table – now I listen to the televised debates discussing

the region and further afield, alone until the break of dawn. I used to run with passion for change, my body a palimpsest that testifies to a risk-filled youth full of participation. No longer able to run and lead the pack, I watch the spectacle of encounters, of dreams of a different tomorrow, caught in a time loop of learned identity expressions, of an unfinished narrative.

Thus, in *Measures of Uncertainty*, time is a key component. As Edward Said suggested, 'Palestinian life is scattered, discontinuous, marked by artificial and imposed arrangements of interrupted or confined space, by the dislocations and unsynchronized rhythms of disturbed time.'^[2] Yet, one of the aspects that is often not portrayed in the media representations of Palestinian refugee camps is the duration and temporality of crowds in public spaces what takes place in time: the hanging around, the transmission of information, networks of commentary, the moment of action, moments of exhilaration, trepidation and despondence and the serendipity of simultaneity of events. Unlike the linearity of news media representation, a plethora of activities take place at the same time. As Al Malhi reflects:

No longer engulfed by idealism, it is the detail of the crowd, the paradoxes and idiosyncrasy of human activity that captures my attention. I am drawn to the serendipity of the scene. Public spaces are filled with the relationships of temporary clusters of people watching and waiting, who contour the urban terrain.

And these people – these 'temporary clusters' – inhabit Al Malhi's canvases, preserving and distilling the transience of the moment as it is articulated through gestures of the body. In *Measures of Uncertainty V* and *VIX* we gaze at a crowd of people: some are busy in conversation while others wait and watch a scene we are not shown. This position is common in everyday life of the streets, in which a passerby or witness becomes aware of an event through the tension in the street, but is unsure of what has or is going to take place. Here, word of mouth becomes a crucial social network for navigating the marginal urban spaces – roads and streets – that are in continual state of flux. In *Measures of Uncertainty IX*, a group of young men hang out, gossiping, while another couple observes them and a third group sit and observe the activity taking place on the street. The nondescript clothing and casual and disinterested postures of the painting's subjects suggest the contingency of the relationships depicted within the frame, while postures and gestures again suggest the temporary state of the crowd.

In these paintings, the crowd seems to lack purpose and direction, while gestures and poses suggest boredom disinterest and fatigue. Nothing in particular seems to unite these figures, apart from the fact they occupy the public space. Indeed, in contrast to Al Malhi's early paintings, in which the form and activities of the figures suggested a strong sense of

community solidarity, which were based on the premise that collectivity in the first instance stems from shared questions, experiences and aspirations, the collectivity of the crowd disintegrates in his new body of work. The recurring depiction of crowds seems to propose questions about how effective collective demonstrations and actions really are; how can the voice of the public be heard; and what happens after all the energy in recurring demonstrations is spent?



Jawad al Malhi, from the series *Measures of Uncertainty*, 2013-2014.
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In the Palestinian context, these questions specifically relate to how we might bring an end to occupation and an apartheid system managed by a crushing military and bureaucratic apparatus. Through the depiction of facial gestures and body poses and dust-filled backgrounds, the tangibility of these questions take physical form in the atmosphere surrounding the dispersed crowds in which the level of uncertainty is represented through all the elements of the painting. Figures appear to repeat common gestures in daily communication, yet they cast no shadows, as though somehow supplanted on to the surface of canvas. In *Measures of Uncertainty VIII*, for example, a group of over 20 young men are shown not as a collective but as a fragmented group. They each occupy a corner of the canvas, hauntingly staring outwards; figures are divided into several clusters, casting no shadows as they view us, the viewers of the scene, with a questioning air. *Measures of Uncertainty VIII* is perhaps the most haunting work in the series: a crowd of 20 young men gathered in clusters all looking out from the painting at us, their hollowed out eyes and grey attire, somehow questioning where we stand and on what ground.

Here, the question of our position as audience is paramount. Indeed, in many of the scenes captured in *Measures of Uncertainty*, the action takes place just beyond our line of view, beyond the picture frame. In *Measures of Uncertainty VII*, a young man walks towards the viewer carrying a ladder, while a large group huddles around a taxi and another group gaze out of the canvas's frame at an event that the viewer of the painting cannot see. Like time capsules, the painting presents a vacuum of uncertainty captured in pale, populated illustrations that measure a contemporary pulse. In this, a certain semblance is created, since all the figures are painted in tones of white, creams and greys, and occupy a nondescript urban landscape that appears covered in layers of dust. When surrounded by the paintings, there is the impression that we are at the centre of the crowd. Yet contradictorily, within this hustle and bustle, we remain separate from the activity. Similar to the experience of those waiting in the street, Al Malhi denies the pleasure and the privilege of actually seeing what has happened in his paintings, or learning why this crowd has gathered, so as to invoke a sense of absence despite the presence of bodies in space, both in the image being viewed and in the context of viewing. We are prevented access to a complete scene, and instead, the artist captures the serendipity of the everyday and its details: those prolonged periods of waiting that occur between encounters and events. What we are shown are fleeting moments – just before a street clears – when questions that remain unanswered return and a sense of absence emerges.

In this, the paintings evoke a sense of Michael Foucault's discussion of heterotopias, in which he wrote: 'I am over there, there where I am not, a sort of shadow that gives my own visibility to myself, that enables me to see myself there where I am absent.'^[3] As Al Malhi explains:

In particular, my gaze is drawn to the moment after, as what intrigues me most, some 20 years on, is not the pursuit of an ideal but, the moment after: as the gas clears, as the tyres burn to ashes, as the banners fall, when the cameras leave, when the debate is over and as people return to their routine. This is a moment when exhaustion fills the body contouring its form along with uncertainty. It is a moment of hesitation; in this fleeting moment, people appear as fragile shells, as though light passes through them, reflecting shadows onto one another, clusters of bodies and empty spaces, the residues of an ideal.

What this intends to remind us of is that we are, as viewers, standing on uncertain terrain. As Ernesto Laclau and Lilian Zac have observed: An act of identification is not purely a submissive act on the part of the subject who would passively incorporate all the determinations of the object. The act of identification, on the contrary, destabilizes the identity of the object.^[4]

In the case of Al Malhi, the destabilization takes place on the objects of his depictions: the people who inhabit his painted worlds. In these images, the act of identification is explored in how people exist within a group, how they see themselves as part of it, what they bring to it, and their own acts, understanding and beliefs, (e.g. a political identification) within this context. This underscores the fact that identity – both personal and projected – does not remain fixed but remains in a constant state of transformation both in form and in action. The different groups found in Al Malhi's paintings, for example, the absence of certainty and clarity in terms of what unites these figures within the frame highlights how these groups can and will regroup, form and react at any moment.

At the same time, we as viewers are also included in this process, which denies the audience the pleasure and reassurance of surveying, with authority, a scene of the 'other'. There is continual intrigue in having access to (from afar) scenes of life in the refugee camps. Instead, he offers complex propositions of social formations, showing them to be contingent and unstable, particularly through the accumulation of quotidian detail. And though Al Malhi's paintings draw on the specificity of place, they address a larger pressing question of a condition that people all over the globe are faced with, especially when change is imposed upon them regardless of their needs and desires. Thus, agile boys climb the electricity poles for better views; women remain hidden behind curtains; a street vendor tries to gain extra customers; traffic diverts; the national news is broadcasted; people hurry to get home. In this, the artist observes the energy of solidarity but chooses to highlight how quickly that dissolves in the contingency of everyday life and the relations that occur therein.

[1] Edward Said, *After the Last Sky: Palestinian Lives* (London: Faber and Faber, 1986), 37.

[2] *Ibid.*, 20.

[3] Michel Foucault, 'Of Other Spaces,' *Diacritics* 16.1 (1986): 23

[4] Ernst Laclau and Lilian Zac, 'Minding the Gap: The Subject of Politics' in *The Making of Political IdEntities*, ed. Ernst Laclau (London: Verso, 1994), 14.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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Dr Tina Sherwell lives in Jerusalem. She graduated from Goldsmiths' College, London in Textiles and Critical Theory and received her Ph.D.

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