

An image within reach of a world out of reach

by Ahmad Zatari

In a report on the Al-Jazeera Channel, Mohammad Saleh, a resident of the village of Sawayma (74 kilometers southwest of Amman and almost 1.5 kilometers east of the Dead Sea), talks about a paradox familiar to Amman residents: the way the geographical East and West creates an intense social stratification. Saleh states, “We only watch. As you walk and view Sawayma, you will feel the difference between the western side of the road as opposed to the eastern side. It is like the difference between black and white. The western side of the road features services and tourism, while the eastern side suffers from power outages most of the time.”

“Sawayma” can be considered as a reflection of Amman, for the eastern side of the latter suffers from marginalization as well as poor services and infrastructure, while all investments are focused on the city’s western side. This division was mostly caused by the forced migration of (the Al-Ja’arat clan that fled the Karak governorate earlier in the twentieth century after some “Karaki” tribes had defeated the Al-Amr tribe, from which the clan descends. This led the Al-Ja’arat clan to seek shelter on the shores of the Dead Sea. They were joined by clans that fled southern Jordan to eastern Amman due to battles and retaliation concerns. Ever since the beginning of this division, the social stratification has increased remarkably until this very day, when we see it clearly even in Sawayma, a village frozen in time, standing across from luxurious Dead Sea hotels.

Photography as well found its way to Jordan and this region through forced migration. For the Armenian refugees who had fled Ottoman Empire massacres had brought the concept and tools of photography, introducing it as a new invention in Egypt, Lebanon, Syria, Palestine and Jordan. Photography has evolved since then through various stages, starting with personal and governmental documentation for purposes related to studies and spying, until it reached the stage of artistic photography. During these phases and even today, several photography studios have relied exclusively on manual (non-digital) photography, which is nowadays associated with a popular concept. Despite the prevalence of smart phones with high-resolution images and relatively cheap prices, these studios have remained because of the of their culture’s prevalence based on documentation, beautification and travel. If we were to examine these elements, we would notice that documentation is clear

and direct. You would like to document a new addition to your family for instance: a newborn, a wife, a friend, a uniform, a weapon or even a horse. Despite the fact that the concept of documentation itself remains unaltered, the additions have escalated (a car, a university degree etc.) and the beautifying tools have evolved rapidly, starting from the drawing and coloring tools used to repair blurred images, followed by background colors and nowadays digital tools. The concept of travel is revealed as a beautifying element as well, illustrated in the usage of images of Paris and Venice as backgrounds, or nature scenes of lakes or forests.

When we look at the evolution of photography in traditional studios, we notice the significant social stratification illustrated throughout the above-mentioned elements, especially in terms of beautification and travel. While some people are photographed in front of a fake background showing the Taj Mahal, the Pyramids or the Eiffel Tower, the wealthy are shown at these actual sites. Digital photoshop's role is nowadays most often limited to removing pimples or lightening skin tone and less often used to produce experimental, conceptual or abstract art. Nevertheless such programs make a popular art possible, one that can be used in lieu of the traditional art that had spread in the early days of photography. This is how this art was introduced as a technological show narrating a story or creating a narrative alongside reality, whether it be photoshopping Angelina Jolie's body posing next to her "new boyfriend" in front of a Ferrari or reproducing three figures from only one, whereby one of them makes the second apologize to the third, who on his part, refuses to forgive (himself). Or even more extreme: a young man cuts his foot off with a sword in order to offer it as a sacrifice to his beloved lady.

Other societal strata received this art, which we can consider to be a new popular art based on amusement, with derision. They allocated several social media pages, especially on Facebook, to identifying these "creativities" and adding their sarcasm, mocking the accents, the fashion trends and the prevailing body and street gestures. When the Swiss artist Gilles Fontollet spoke to me about his new project "Sowayma", I wasn't particularly enthusiastic. I initially classified it, almost immediately, among the foreign artworks that illustrate and enhance stereotypes, transforming the daily life in countries such as the Middle East into an "exotic" artwork for the Western viewer, who starts out already loaded with stereotypes about the "East". Especially in that Gilles himself had already fallen into this trap in his artwork "The Palestinian Space Agency", which he accomplished in Jordan and Palestine (2011-2012), establishing a fake space agency for a people under occupation in a naïve manner that

isn't new to many Arab artists, for it appears in their artworks as well .

But Gilles did the opposite of what was expected: throughout five years, he visited the village of "Sowayma" and became friends with its residents. He took their photographs with his camera and printed them for those lacking printed photos of themselves. Then he decided that the residents should take their own photographs, in poses they found suitable, in the locations they desired, with their relatives and friends, and with backgrounds they had made themselves.

Here, the act of capturing spontaneous photographs took on a whole different dimension. It went beyond merely being a social experiment of a foreigner who doesn't speak the local language and beyond being an act of development or humanitarian charity whose "activists" disappear after its completion. Gilles himself was transformed, as seen in the video accompanying the artwork, into a part of this spontaneous studio: posing the way the new photographers wanted, responding to the invitation of being photographed- neither imposing the act of photographing, nor hiding behind the camera in the role required of an observer/ journalist/ researcher. But is that enough? Is there anything in this discourse, to start with, that would hold an artist such as Gilles responsible for apologizing on behalf of all the campaigns that spread stereotypes about societies far away from the West, campaigns that were either deliberately organized for that purpose as well as those that were only the result of sheer naiveté?

If we were to leave such questions unanswered, maybe the artwork's content would save us by helping us receive it in its original context. The artwork does not aspire to represent a conceptual challenge; it moreover doesn't derive its value from the aesthetics of prevailing contemporary art. For this artwork, with its photographs and the accompanying video, sweeps away the concept of the standard ideal final image, with its digital additions and compatibility with prevailing aesthetic standards, and this is the best that can be concluded in its regard. Instead of the final "clean" product, we view blurred, pale images where the focus point is almost non-existent, with either superfluous or poor lighting. In several photographs, members of a family stand individually in front of a decorated corner of shelves, in the center of which lies a television, decorated with artificial flowers and leaves. We can conclude that this corner is of value to the family, for the father is wearing an official police uniform and the daughter is wearing her prettiest dress to pose in front of that corner, with her arms crossed and her finger leaning on her cheek, in an ideal photograph that perhaps represents delicate girls contemplating the unknown, or awaiting it.

This corner can be considered as popular art, of which the creator or creators can be proud. For the art of coming up with a “beautiful”, colorful corner in the house requires an enormous effort of alienation from the outside environment that is drowning in the color yellow as well as horrible heat. And the contrast that fiercely separates Sawayma from the Dead Sea hotels (where one night’s stay costs more than the monthly income of an entire village family) can be simply considered as a sort of dominance that prevents the development of creative ideas. Nevertheless, there are those who created that corner, and all are proud of it.

But can we consider Gilles’ artwork to be a “good work” because it didn’t include sarcasm, evoke social concerns or portray technical superiority, or only because he didn’t start his artwork by quoting Gilles Deleuze or Michel Foucault? Maybe it would suffice to think of the fate of these photographs if they came within reach of those behind the sarcastic Facebook pages. We would then realize that Gilles contributed to diluting the prevailing aesthetic values in contemporary artworks – and perhaps that would be enough for now for one reason: he handed the people of Sawayma an image that can be real, within their own reach and understanding, in front of a world that doesn’t seem to be within their reach.

Sources

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Transparency

This critique was commissioned and paid by the artist Gilles Fontolliet.