

**The Landscapes Are Not Beautiful:
On Translation and Transfixation in Basel Abbas
and Ruanne Abou-Rahme's *Incidental Insurgents***
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Basel Abbas and Ruanne Abou-Rahme, *Incidental Insurgents* [video still], 2012–2015. Courtesy of the artists.

I see *The Incidental Insurgents* for the first time in a small crowded theatre in Montreal. I hear a man say, “The landscapes are so beautiful.” **Ruanne Abou-Rahme** and **Basel Abbas**’s piece consists in a rapidly moving assemblage of sound, text, and image. The work is dense and voluble, yet it does not rush resolution. It does not show me landscapes, and I wonder if this is because I wasn’t raised to see them.

Landscapes are about resolution. Every landscape carries the same impossible and violent proposal, that stolen land surrenders, and that it does so just by being seen. It takes an enthusiastic practice of overlooking grief to see landscapes. Therefore, landscapes are not beautiful. They are the settler’s “alibi,” formed in the rewriting of land as commodity. When the landscape is lifted we are left with the work of witnessing. This is the work of not seeing landscapes, which is also the work of not seeing artworks as landscapes.

As a colonial framing device, the landscape will enact force, but it will refuse to name power.

The landscape as *tableau* is purely exoteric and intentional about this purity; it is always preceded and followed by both the premise and the promise of absolute legibility. In Sufi literature the exoteric is expressed as *zahir* ظاهر, what is exterior, apparent and visible, while the esoteric is *batin* باطن, what is interior, (un)seen and hidden. The word *batin* باطن itself is derived from *bat'n* بطن, meaning the belly. I understand the forces called upon by **Abou-Rahme** and **Abbas** as esoteric, and I am not saying that the artists are casting spells (although they very well could be). The esoteric events I would like to discuss are gestures that reveal the inner workings of history and territory. When the sentence “And these are the forces we had ranged within us” appears on the screen, the forces invoked by the artwork are untimely, they are brought back from the land, and are simultaneously found (again) in the body.

Articulations of Indigenous and diasporic resilience cannot be flattened. I read this resilience as esoteric form because it is at once embodied and removed from linear understandings of time



AND THESE ARE THE FORCES
WE HAD RANGED WITHIN US

(hence revenant). Just like the gravity that pulls us toward the earth, our knowledge of colonization, the mnemonic fullness of decolonial struggles past, present, and future, “these forces we range within us,” are stored in the belly. This may be what makes them so easily undetectable to the settler gaze, even when they are revealed, if not especially when they are revealed. The white man will always insist on searching for beautiful landscapes.

To the Arabic reader who is also in some capacity an English reader, witnessing *The Incidental Insurgents* is an exercise in diasporic ubiquity. I am stuck between two languages, and struck by the rapid pace with which **Abou-Rahme** and **Abbas** deliver their words. Events of translation and verification stretch and overlap rapidly. They accumulate in a hazy location, a kind of linguistic limbo, yet the place is by no means exilic.

The politics of translation are discussed in Nasrin Himada’s piece, “For Many Returns” in which they examine *The Incidental Insurgents*. The essay

tackles an especially difficult and beautiful case of translation, that of “for many returns.” And it feels important to add here a proposal to the contributions they’d been compiling because of how intimately revenance and return seem to be working together in **Abou-Rahme** and **Abbas’s** piece. This relation between revenance and return carries in it untimely inner motions, a capacity to invite transformation and to evoke transfixation. I find revenance in the velocity of *The Incidental Insurgents*; it does not stop at inviting shadows, ghosts, and ancestors into the work, rather it extends to the modes of disassembling and reassembling time, image, text, and language; it extends as well to the citational processes by which historical events and literary fragments are translated, collapsed and reshuffled. Revenance is what allows for the prefiguration of the returns that have not yet happened in the face of Israeli occupation.

I cannot and will not attempt to translate here the notion of Palestinian Return, which is distinct in Arabic from that of return in general. However, I

am interested in understanding how the formation “many returns” itself may be doubly untranslatable to Arabic due to the very structure of the word return.

Like in the English and French languages, Arabic words can be built through occasional use of prefixes, suffixes, and infixes however, their main operation involves the transfix. We speak of transfixation when a word decides to collapse and rearranges itself into another word, which is new but never completely other. When you open an Arabic dictionary, words appear and reappear as familiars, as discontinuous extensions of each other. They live horizontally in genealogy.

A return

awda, عودة

To return

aada, عاد

To repeat, to (re)iterate, to restore, to return something or to put it back in place

a-aada, أعاد

Repetition, rehearsal and restitution
e-aada, إعادة

To count
ad'a, عدّ

A number
adad, عدد

And I am especially fond of this one.

adad, عدد

You look at it, you say it, and you find that it is
already counting.

Maybe the expression “many returns” cannot
be translated into Arabic because the return is
already one and many. In this sense, **Abou-Rahme**
and **Abbas**'s work itself may be approached as
an experiment in transfixation. I want to say that
the return itself is counting, and losing count in
the face of the urgency of a great many returns.
And maybe these returns cannot be understood or
localized in their abundance, because they are now
so many that they exceed the capacity of the single

TO REAPPEAR AS ANOTHER FIGURE
أن تظهر من جديد كشخص آخر

figure. What prevents translation here is the event of revenance in transfixation: “To Reappear as Another Figure” precedes immediately “To have Many Returns.” Most importantly, these returns are rehearsing restitution: that is the settlement of “the debts of history” laid before the eyes of the viewer by **Abou-Rahme** and **Abbas**.

The landscape is resisted throughout *The Incidental Insurgents*, and maybe this is most felt in the invocation of the vast freedom of the ghosts that inhabit the land. I read this as the superimposition of the common over the idea of the landscape. A form of common land is still alive in Palestine, Al-Mashà. In her piece “Al-Mashà (المشاع) or the Return to the Common,” Palestinian architect, Sandi Hilal, is interested in how the notion of Al-Mashà could facilitate the reimagining of the common today, that is the reimagining of how we care for land, and I would add, how we circulate and encounter each other through it. The word المشاع invokes both a radiant location, meaning an expansive place that is opposite to enclosure, and the core center from which a radiant circulation

of bodies emanates. Al-Mashà welcomes the one and the many and allows for unsurveilled freedoms that are at once caring, individual, and collective. In meeting ghosts, **Abou-Rahme** and **Abbas**'s work restores these freedoms, and presents us with the infinite possibilities of resistance that live in transfixation.

When you are not searching for landscapes in *The Incidental Insurgents*, you encounter the land of course, which is beautiful. You see Palestinian artists at work. You may be able to grasp the contours of their friendship. You see shadows roaming and resting. You may see ghosts. You may witness a revolution and/in revenance. You may hear tales of failed rebellions and feel a great sense of sadness. You may attempt to translate poems on the spot. You will be shown graves and futures, maybe even the common. You will be informed that countless seeds are waiting below the ground.

All of the above is being saved by love because **Abou-Rahme** and **Abbas**'s invocation of grief is never separate from the abundance of survival.

When they name the overwhelming forces at play in the territory, “the forces ranged against them” are followed with and countered by “the forces ranged within them,” the land lives as witness.

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