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“THE MAP IS NOT THE TERRITORY”: PARALLEL PATHS – PALESTINIANS, NATIVE AMERICANS, IRISH’, LEVANTINE CENTER, LOS ANGELES, MAY 15–JUNE 22, 2014

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“The Map is not the Territory”: Parallel Paths – Palestinians, Native Americans, Irish’ was an exhibit conceived by veteran writer and curator Jennifer Heath and co-curated with Dagmar Painter, the director of Washington’s Jerusalem Fund Al Quds Gallery. Launched at the latter venue before its stop at the Levantine Center (15 May–22 June 2014) in Los Angeles, the show will tour throughout North America until 2018. Bringing together 39 artists and featuring 68 art works, its aim was to highlight the historical intersections and the shared present conditions among the Palestinians, Native Americans and Irish. The documentary dimension, central to the project, was made evident by the wall texts and accompanying catalogue as well as by the exhibition design, which revolved around seven themes: Territory/Map, Occupation/ Wall, Conflict/Resistance, Land/Food, Overlay/Identity, Words/Persistence and Home/Diaspora. The works were hung with simple clips in clusters around these seven wall panels, thereby reflecting visually and materially the show’s overall message that the predicaments of colonization and occupation in these three cases remain unresolved.

The statement ‘The map is not the territory’ was coined by Alfred Korzybski, the father of general semantics, in the first half of the twentieth century. Korzybski used it to draw attention to the limits of human knowledge which, unable to escape mediation, can never know things in themselves, but also, as in the context of Heath and Painter’s show, to distinguish between a thing and its representation. Maps are political documents whose seemingly official nature obfuscates the reality that the tracing of borders is, akin to the production of historical discourses, intimately tied up with power and, here, colonization. Palestinians, Native Americans and the (Northern) Irish remain unmapped peoples whose territories are glossed over by the cartography of contemporary politics. Many works poignantly expose the discrepancy between the politics of borders and the history of land. Manal Deeb’s ‘Passport. Palestine’ is a real passport issued to the artist’s grandfather, an orange grower from Deir Tarif, in 1947, just a few months before the partition of Palestine. Enhanced with historical photos, it is presented alongside a pre-Nakbah map of Palestine upon which Deir Tarif – now gone – can still be found. If the piece highlights the destructive potential and changing nature of maps, ‘Passport. Palestine’ nonetheless also suggests the anchoring strength of memory. Another compelling example is Rajie Cook’s ‘Epitaph for a Roadmap’, which frames the map as fiction: a folded blank piece of paper staring starkly at the viewer, serves as a metaphor for the now-defunct roadmap for peace.

The effects on individuals and communities of the hidden violent history of maps constitute another recurring theme of the show. Michael Elizondo’s ‘The Second Intifada’ is simple and eloquent in this regard. The Southern Cheyenne and Chumash artist’s painting features an orange, red and black landscape whose horizon is confined by the calligraphy-like lines of barbed wire. Sherry Wiggins’ colour photographic mosaic ‘Battles, Deeds, Fields, and Swords’ reproduces a large Palestinian flag, albeit one punctured by images of Israeli offensives on Gaza in both 2009 and 2012. If its aesthetic elegance partially reproduces the same mediating

distance as the TV news images upon which it draws, Susanne Slavik's 'Repercussion' makes the violent reality of colonialism and conflict too painfully overt. The photograph depicts the aftermath of an Israeli bomb that killed seventy-two people during the 2012 'Pillar of Defense' Israeli operation. Here the viewer comes face to face with the bombed kitchen of 80-year-old Amina Mznar, who was killed on the spot, her absence made all the more palpable by the remnants of her wheelchair lying in the colourless rubble and what is left of the swaying rows of beaded pink plastic flower curtains. Sometimes the consequences of occupation are addressed indirectly as in Hani Zurob's paintings of his son, Qoudsi. The series emerged after Qoudsi naively asked his father 'Daddy, why don't you come with us to Jerusalem?' not yet able to understand that the mobility of Zurob, who possesses an identity card from Gaza, is restricted. 'Flying Lesson #3' and 'Flying Lesson #4' depict Qoudsi realistically, but place him in a painterly no-man's-land: the tension between human presence and the absence of context conveys the exile and erasure lying at the heart of Palestinian modern identity.

Human presence offers hope; it is used by Zurob and other artists as a means to convey optimism or, at least, resistance. Michael Keating's photograph of Israel's wall 'Abu Dis – The Wall at Dusk' forms perhaps the best example of the capacity of the image to communicate the possibilities of human agency. The wall takes up most of the photograph that serves nonetheless as a testament to human resilience. If the graffiti on the wall reading 'The wall must fall' and 'Knocking for peace, pace, salam, shalom' evinces the power of speech, it is the figure of a veiled woman who, despite her small size, appears as a condensed embodiment of strength. Positioned centrally in the picture under the glare of lights, she somehow expresses the inevitability that one day victory over oppression will be achieved. John Halaka's multiple exposure photograph 'Forgotten Survivors' overlays a map of Palestine onto the image of an elderly woman. The scene of a refugee camp covering the whole lower part of the woman's face seemingly silences her, the pain of displacement marking her face and gaze. But by realigning self and homeland, the image also suggests that memory is a territory beyond the reach of colonial appropriation.

If it is impossible to circumvent the question of violence in an exhibit broaching the history of Palestinians, Native Americans and the Irish, it remains relatively understated in 'The Map is not the Territory'. The notion that personal testimonies and cultural identity constitute the means to fight back is woven throughout the exhibition. Present-day state boundaries cannot fully suppress the cultural imaginary often linked to the land or to a material culture of a people, underscoring the many references to cultural artefacts in the show whether a tipi, a Bedouin tent, a poem or Palestinian embroidery. In short, the exhibition sought to propose alternative maps to those of modern day geopolitics. The marginalized have their own maps and here they sometimes highlight their common quest for cultural survival. For example, Diné artist Melanie Yazzie's 'Seeing Each Other' shows a Native American and Palestinian woman side by side, each one featured with objects they consider important, and set against vegetation. Appearing in colour against the black-and-white bush, the women take on the iconic presence of holy cards and images. And Helen Zughaib's 'Woven in Exile' uses the transcultural trope of pattern to highlight the common histories of the Irish, Palestinians and Native Americans. This Lebanese-American artist's work is always underwritten by the theme of intra-cultural coexistence; her calligraphic mandala 'Beit/Salaam', a written invocation, introduces a spiritual element into the show.

These other maps expose the project of colonialism, and, as Said pointed out several decades ago, the imperialism underpinning the production of knowledge, maps included. While

an art exhibit certainly will not solve nor redress the issues at hand, there is some comfort to be gained in the continued belief in the power of the individual expressed by the artists. Visually articulating the ways in which politics, power, war, ideology and economics unjustly divvy up land, their works suggest that the human spirit, because indomitable, can help affect change. Seeking to drive home the importance of both art and change, participating artist Malaquias Montoya quotes Bertolt Brecht in the show's catalogue: 'Art should not be a mirror of reality but a hammer with which to shape a new reality'. Let us hope the German playwright's words are prescient of the effects of 'The Map is Not the Territory' exhibit.

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