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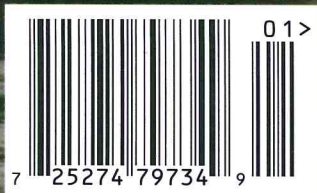
FULL FOCUS

Another Country

By Mitra Tabrizian

Wapping Project Bankside

London, UK

September 21–November 2, 2012

Historically, the concept of "the Middle East" has been constructed from the outside. The region bears the scars of Ottoman, French, British, and American politics and mandates. Its geographic borders are notoriously contested, while a wave of recent political uprisings, including the 2011 Arab Spring, has put the region under the spotlight. Postmodern and globally aware curators and art critics, as well as the popular media, have focused on these political and religious extremities and conflicts that have come to influence our readings of the artwork from the region. It would not have been surprising if spectators of Mitra Tabrizian's exhibition *Another Country* at the Wapping Project Bankside, London, approached the exhibition with preconceptions of the work.

Tabrizian was born in Tehran, Iran, and lives and works in London. *Another Country* consisted of a series of large-scale choreographed group and individual portraits of Middle Eastern sitters photographed in and around mosques, schools, bathhouses, cemeteries, and teahouses. The locations were pictured in full focus and appear to match expectation of what life might be like in the Middle East.

The exhibition rewarded the observant viewer. Some of the images include text—there is writing both in Arabic and Urdu, but not in Farsi, despite the artist's Iranian background. The series also includes a picture of a cemetery with a female figure. The focus of the image is on gravestones that have text in English. Behind the cemetery, blocks of brick flats have a style similar to many council-supported housing estates across Great Britain. The weather is typically gray and cloudy—another clue that Tabrizian's photographs were taken in London, not Tehran.

Blurring the boundaries between fact and fiction, Tabrizian's narrative was also constructed. Rather than reinforcing any simple "Middle Eastern" readings of the work, the spectator was invited to consider the immigrant population and their practices in the extended, frozen, and hesitant space of London. The photographs raise questions about how one reads images. A group of men sit together in a teahouse. At first glace, the men appear similar; however, there is little talking, and the sitters seem self-conscious. Tabrizian has brought together a group of

Above
Untitled photograph from the series *Another Country* (2010) by Mitra Tabrizian

men of different religious affiliations, both Shia and Sunni. As Tabrizian suggests, some of the teahouses are male-dominated, and focus on catering for specific religious and ethnic groups. Thus, the men in the photograph would not normally mix with one another.[1] In the photograph, the sitters sip their tea in a shared space of unease. The photograph was taken soon after the men arrived at the teahouse—before they relaxed and began conversing with one another.[2]

Outside the Imamia Mosque, a group of women and girls attending a Sunday school stand frozen in space.[3] They stand quietly, close to one another, without looking into each other's eyes. Beneath their black hijabs and long black garments they wear jeans, sneakers, and leggings. Viewers may wonder whether they attend the same schools, work in the same offices, and sit next to these women and girls in busy peak-time subway cars. The subjects are clearly Londoners; however, there is a sense of isolation and hesitation that hints at some of the challenges in their process of integration.

Tabrizian's work addresses the complexity of cultural systems in the art that is produced by diasporas and the discourses of the other. As Fran Lloyd has asked:

> Do we always subtly frame and classify art produced in the diaspora or in non-western countries as other and create a separate sphere of difference for it? Or, in the postmodern and postcolonial world which supposedly characterizes the late twentieth century, do we subsume this difference into a floating sign of sameness which ignores the ways that we as historical subjects are differently located by gender, race and class within its power structures?[4]

These polarities of sameness and the other fail to detect the variety of narratives reflected in the exhibition. As Tabrizian argues: "The depiction of the 'lone' individuals in the group . . . could also raise a subtle and somehow contradictory critique of the homogenization of Islamic community."[5] Tabrizian allows the differences in gender, race, and class. She acknowledges that there are power structures that exist within both immigrant

communities and the perception of these communities by the larger British society. The complexity of the images, depicting the sitters as they practice traditional customs, also invites questions about the complexities of individual immigrant identities and lived experience. In the series, twenty-first-century London may seem like another reality, but the location suggests questions about the collision of multiple identities and realities that may be articulated in the quiet uneasiness of the sitters in many of the photographs. There are a variety of possible narratives, but none of these stories are easily given away in Tabrizian's work.

Tabrizian's photographs challenge some of the perceptions encouraged by news media and recent curatorial practices that focus on portraying politicized sociocultural practices from the Middle East. Locating the photographs in London, Tabrizian invites the spectator to reconsider some of the complex identities

of immigrant populations. The series also serves as a reminder of London's cultural heterogeneity, and questions what the concept of "Britishness" may entail. The sitters of *Another Country* and their traditional customs are a part of London life—no less than Big Ben or a plate of fish and chips.

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NOTES 1. In-person communication between the author and Mitra Tabrizian in London, September 20, 2012. 2. Ibid. 3. Ibid. 4. Fran Lloyd, Contemporary Arab Women's Art: Dialogues of the Present (London: Women's Art Library, 1999), 13. 5. Mitra Tabrizian, Another Country (Berlin: Hatje Cantz, 2012).

UNTYING IDENTITIES UNDER RULE

Dor Guez: 100 Steps to the Mediterranean
Rose Art Museum, Brandeis University
Boston
September 20–December 9, 2012

On a dreary November day in 1856, American novelist Herman Melville set out on a pilgrimage to the Mediterranean and then the Holy Land. He was in despair—his faith, his marriage, and his career were deteriorating, and his homeland was shadowed by the looming threat of civil war. So he sought to make tangible the biblical texts that once triggered his imagination and gave him hope. Yet, scripture did not coincide with his experience of the place. Barren, bitter, desolate, and diabolical is the ancient land; it lacks the "grace of decay," he wrote. "No country will more quickly dissipate romantic expectations than Palestine."[1] Riding from the Church of the Holy Sepulchre to Jaffa on January 20, 1857, Melville stopped at the city of Lydda and was disturbed by the violent mayhem that plagued the place.[2]

Melville's Lydda looms up repetitively in the oeuvre of multimedia artist Dor Guez. Morphing the same landscape, Guez unhooks Lydda from definite geography and infuses it with political action. The city, its geographical face, and the genealogies of its dwellers are exposed through Guez's personal history (he is the son of a Palestinian Christian and a Tunisian-born Jew) and brush up against the Israeli erasure and denial of the Arab chronicles. Through videos, stills, and archival documentation, Guez traces the degradation of al-Lydd to the point of exhaustion. In the same repetitive gesture of *100 Steps to the Mediterranean* (2012), in 2009 Guez exhibited his installation *Georgiopolis* (the birthplace

of Saint George and the seat of the Latin rite diocese) at the Petach-Tikva Museum of Art in Israel. Then in 2010, alluding to the city's Ayyubid name, Guez's *Al-Lydd* was displayed in Berlin. Reconstructing the Christian-Arab history during the occupation of Lod on July 13, 1948, art historian Gannit Ankori, an expert on Palestinian art and the Middle East, has been endeavoring to give a voice to the silenced. Together with curator Dabney Haily, Guez and Ankori bring to center stage the complexity of creating identity in the midst of political blindness. The installation recounts the intimate recollections of Guez's family, the Monayers, to track the movements of the Christian-Arab community as it cracked apart during the *Nakba*—the Arabic term for "catastrophe," referring to the founding of Israel and the expulsion and exodus of over 700,000 Palestinians from their homes.

Four main bodies compose the intricate installation: a collection of photographs, passports, and other documents comprise Guez's *Scanograms #1* (2010). Here, images are reconstructed to create a new foundation, or, as the title suggests, a new diagram. Following Western historiographical traditions, Guez registers the series in the Christian-Palestinian Archive (2012–) he has founded. The images are manipulated readymades, Guez explains, and they are inspired by the Israel State Archives and by the Arab Image Foundation established in 1997 in Beirut. Nonetheless, their unique genealogical nature differs from the state apparatus as they create a united map of the Christian Palestinian diaspora across Cyprus, Cairo, Jaffa, Tel Aviv, and Lod during the 1940s and '50s.

The mute archival evidence resonates in the second body of work, a group of videos recounting stories of expulsion, nostalgia, and the multifaceted identities of Guez's family. In *July 13* (2008–2009), Guez's grandparents remember the very day al-Lydd was occupied by Israel. The unsettled ties between generational dwellers and the new state is disconcerting: "My Name is Jacob, son of Salim Yusuf Rizek Monayer of Lydd,"