



Photograph by Isabel de la Cruz of one Shaheed's Qur'an.

The Eloquence of Objects: The Hundred Martyrs Exhibit

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Khalil Sakakini Center, Ramallah: 21 February - 15 March 2001 and then on tour in other Palestinian towns. Curator: Samir Salameh.

Leaving the noon bustle of Ramallah behind - a bustle too often pierced by the wail of an ambulance or the chanting of a funeral procession -- we enter the One Hundred Martyrs exhibit at the Khalil Sakakini Center apprehensively. Perhaps we feel we have already seen too much: the posters of the dead fill the streets, our daily collective icons. Most unforgivably, we have witnessed some of the deaths in the comfort of our living rooms, "live" on the television screen and

then repeated as we click the dial. The act of seeing, unavoidably but disturbingly, becomes an act of voyeurism. How can the martyrs of the intifada be represented without further violation and how can we respond without becoming voyeurs?

Inside the exhibit, there is a feeling of quiet, almost of repose. A single object belonging to each of the dead is placed in a translucent plastic case, with a small black and white photo bearing the name floating above it. Objects are carefully wrapped in twine. Clothing is folded with care that, as one friend noted, is maternal, as a mother folds a beloved object of a beloved child. There is a formal element as well. Worn shirts are folded and presented with an elegance reminiscent of traditional Japanese packaging, where the human touch contains both reverence and reserve. The human presence in the exhibit then is not simply in the photos of the dead, but in the artistic and human attention and respect paid to these mute objects, witnesses to a person and a life that is wholly individual and irreplaceable. The act of seeing is restored to an act of attentive care and respect, far away from television images and propaganda.

In this, the team, who put on this important exhibit, was partly achieving a conscious aim - to mount a minimalist exhibit that would "give back each Shaheed his/her individuality," as the notes to the excellent catalogue explain. However, what the exhibit "gives back" to the viewer through the presentation of these objects is perhaps a more subterranean process. This reviewer was perhaps fortunate to view the exhibit first without the benefit of the well-edited and designed catalogue, which provides brief narratives for each martyr, as well as sepia-

toned pictures of the person and the object by photographer Isabel de la Cruz. While narratives necessarily construct and select the story of each life, the viewer who experiences the objects without a mediating text is confronted with mute witnesses that do not narrate so much as bear the imprint of a human life and body, from the over-sized sneakers of the youngest martyr, Muhammed Al Durra, to the floral head-dress of one of the oldest, Aziza Danoun. The viewer is allowed a space for contemplation and mourning that is not framed in narrative, but located in the poetry of objects. The separation of the objects from the viewer by the translucent plastic boxes also serves to create a public space that does not appropriate the private nature of the objects, but respects it.

The catalogue then can provide another form of understanding; both the subdued but effective design by Sharif Waked and the moving narratives, collected by fieldworkers and edited by Adila Laïda, Laura Fragiacomio, and Akram Mousallem deserve commendation. The stories of each life and the circumstances of death move us into the broadly and importantly political, as well as human, realities of both the present intifada and the conditions of Palestinian families - the ambulance driver, Bassam Al Bilbeissi, killed while trying to rescue twelve-year-old Muhammed Al Durra, the martyrs who are not the first or only martyrs in their families: and the many who were motivated to participate in the demonstrations by the death or injury of a friend or relative, as well as poignant family memories of favorite pastimes, whether 30-year-old Ra'ed Hammudeh drinking coffee with his mother each morning, or 15-year-old Nizar Eideh's

fondness for birds. Nizar's empty birdcase commemorates him in the exhibit; on the morning of his death, he released a bird he has purchased several days earlier, worried that the bird's mother might miss him.

A number of martyrs are represented by worn working tools: a drill, a trowel, a plumbing joining string. The narratives also repeatedly tell us of young men forced to leave school to help their families. Their deaths -- at the borders that refuse them work and livelihoods - emerge from social, as well as political conditions. While each object stands alone as a testament to an individual life, there are commonalities as well. The trappings of young manhood - cigarettes and ashtrays, cassettes, tee-shirts - are witnesses to a generation of Palestinian young men and boys in peril.

For much of human history, young men have been the combatants, although not the only victims, in wars and conflicts - as the old anti-war song has it, "It's always the young who die." The 100 Martyrs exhibit is ordered by age; one walks from the oldest victim, 68-year old Dr. Harald Fischer, to the youngest, Mohammed al Durra. The simple principle is very powerful: one is reminded of another extraordinarily moving and minimalist monument, Maya Lin's Vietnam War memorial in Washington, D.C, ordered by the date of death. Yet the sense of resolution and peace provided by both exhibits does not preclude, but opens up, space for individual questioning that asks how lives can not only be remembered, but preserved. The objects of the 100 Martyrs exhibits are also wrapped as gifts; it is up to the viewers to decide what to give back.

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