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about borderlines

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Conceiving Movement in “From These Streets”

By Libby McAvoy
May 15, 2015

The following is part of a series of short posts on photographic practice in Palestine. In the fall of 2014, Al-Azza’s work was exhibited at Tufts University, an event facilitated by Amahl Bishara and her students, a few of whom are featured here in the series. Though focused on the work of Mohammad Al-Azza, the posts speak to the broader situation of artistic practice in Palestine and its effective censorship under the ongoing occupation, but also to questions of intimacy and the public role of photography in the context of conflict.

In “From These Streets: A Palestinian Refugee Perspective on Community,” photographer Mohammad Al-Azza frequently captures movement in progress by allowing elements of the image to blur: a man walking past a graffitied

wall in the camp, another throwing a tear gas canister back toward Israeli soldiers. Yet, what at first appears to be just a choice of style is much more. Movement captures the tension between freedom and constraint that is so powerfully illustrated throughout the exhibit. Movement is significant on two levels: 1) it resists Al-Azza's own confinement as a photographer living under military occupation; and, 2) it reflects the larger project "From These Streets", the mobility of ideas and experience through the artistic practice of documentary photograph.



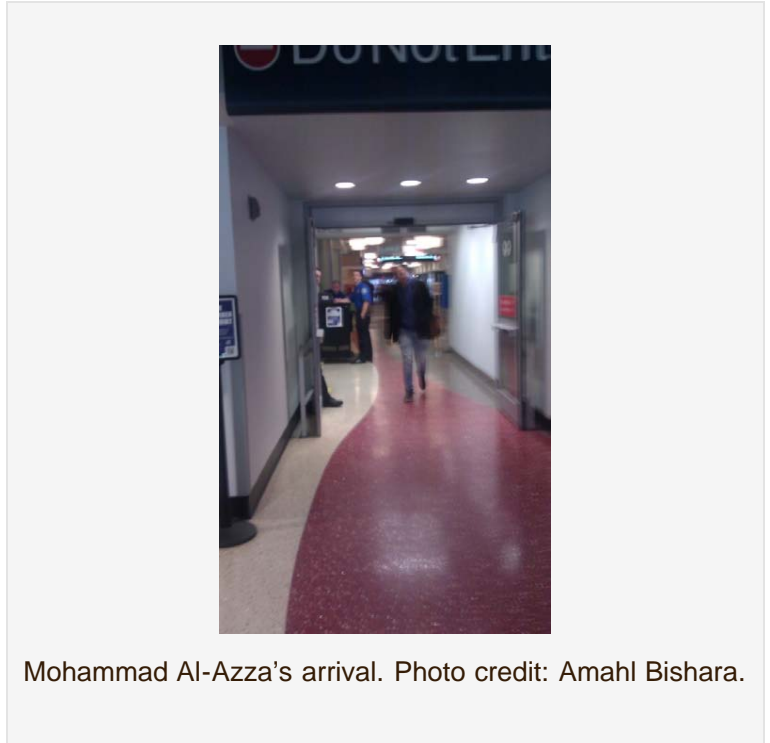
As Al-Azza has explained this image, "Before Israel built the Apartheid Wall surrounding Aida Camp, camp residents could play soccer or graze sheep and goats on a large piece of land next to the camp. Today this land is behind the wall, and the camp is extremely overcrowded. In whatever way they can, children try to break out of the siege, racism, and confinement that the wall has brought." Photo credit: Mohammad Al-Azza.

In his "Behind the Screen" series, Al-Azza produced an image of a boy on a horse, blurred by speed. The horse is running in front of the Israeli wall surrounding the Aida Refugee Camp, where Al-Azza has lived all his life. If one takes in isolation the subjects of the image, the movement in the photograph communicates a sense of freedom—a movement so fast that the subjects have blurred and vanished to another place. However, the indistinct subjects are firmly locked in place: the wall, looming and graffitied behind the horse and rider, is not blurred. It is solid and limiting. As told by Al-Azza, this exact stretch of wall separates the horse and the child inside the enclosure from the open space on the other side, once frequented by the inhabitants of Aida Camp. The freedom conjured by the subjects is illusory, created by the photographer and undercut by the wall in the background. As related in more detail by Amahl Bishara in her essay, Al-Azza's own experience embodies this juxtaposition. He had been temporarily unable to cross the border to Jordan, the first part of his journey to attend the exhibition in Boston, due to restrictions placed on his travel by Israeli authorities.

Yet, the image speaks to a further limitation on movement. It is bordered by an old television frame, a visual element repeated throughout the entire “Behind the Frame” series. This framing illuminates the struggle over media and the circulation of images around the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Media representations of Palestine especially in global media are limited in many ways. Palestinian perspectives often become distorted, changed, or altogether erased. The image here suggests the limits of Palestinian photography, setting the scene of movement within the frame of the television screen. Even the image of the horse and rider, seeking a global freedom of movement and expression through media, is restricted and has limits set on it.

Yet, in the context of its exhibition, the photograph puts on display the nuanced complexity of movement in Palestine, thereby seeking to create a bridge of understanding across international borders and challenging the very limits it portrays. On one of the feedback cards filled out at opening night of the exhibition, an attendee responded that, “These photographs make me feel acutely conscious that the occupation does not cease to exist where the frame ends or when the television is off. It colors everything.” In eliciting such comments, the images extend beyond the frame and into the exhibit space itself, creating a link between the spectator, the photographer, and his subjects.

In reviewing materials from the exhibit, I found an image: a snapshot taken of Al-Azza himself as he walked into the arrivals hall at Boston Logan International Airport. In it, his figure is blurred, framed by gray security gates. Though taken without artistic intent, the coincidence speaks to the concept of Palestinian identity in the media and to the experience of Palestinians, both moving through and restricted by the structures within which they exist.



Mohammad Al-Azza's arrival. Photo credit: Amahl Bishara.

Author Bio

Libby McAvoy is a graduating senior at Tufts University studying International Relations and French. She is currently writing her Senior Honors Thesis on interactions between photography in a global media context and at-risk or traumatized populations, analyzing image-based mobilization factors for human rights movements in the international community.

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