

Anthony Hamboussi, ed. *Our Land*

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At first glance, the greyscale photograph at the outset of *Our Land* appears to be of an archaeological dig, pharaonic statues of varying shapes and sizes arranged amid piles of neatly cleared rubble as though recently pulled from the earth. Upon further inspection, however, it is clear that these busts, horses, sarcophagi, and scribes are only cement casts; indeed, a number of the “artifacts” shown are the modern molds that were used to make them. This is not an old photograph of an excavation site, but instead a recent image of the workshop at the Pharaonic Village, a living history museum in Giza.

The objects we see here are made to market a certain version of Egypt’s past to Egyptian and foreign visitors alike, relics of a once-booming tourist market that has largely collapsed in the wake of the 2011 revolution. Shot by the Egyptian-American photographer Anthony Hamboussi, the image at once summons and subverts Western representational norms, evoking the orientalist ideal of Egypt as the “land of the pharaohs” while highlighting its artifice. In contrast to the violent images of revolutionary Egypt that flooded the media at the time, this photograph focuses on the quotidian, even absurd space of a theme park/museum and underscores the real, material labor necessary to create such a fantastical environment.

That the volume should open with such an image comes as no surprise, as Hamboussi conceived of both the sixty-page catalogue and the exhibition it accompanies in response to a Western thirst for “sensationalist imagery of poverty, oppression, [and] revolutions” in depictions of the Middle East (3). In fact, the photographer launched *Our Land* at the Amelie A. Wallace Gallery, on the SUNY Old Westbury campus, in 2019 as a riposte to the Brooklyn Museum’s *This Place* (2016), an exhibition of photographs of Palestine/Israel taken by “outsiders.” *This Place* engendered controversy for amplifying the voices of “impartial,” for the most part Western photographers to the exclusion of Palestinians, presenting viewers with a highly aestheticized, misleadingly peaceful view of a brutal occupation. *Our Land*, by contrast, features photographs of Middle Eastern landscapes taken exclusively by photographers of Middle Eastern origins, approaching a broader geographical scope from a purportedly “insider” perspective. Per Hamboussi’s introduction, *Our Land* seeks to “challenge simplistic and false representations of cultural identity,” attempting to wrest the genre of landscape photography from the hands of imperialism (ibid.).

Following Hamboussi’s brief introduction, the book presents work created between 1991 and 2019 by eleven photographers. The photographs appear uncaptioned, identified only in a list that follows the final images. At the back of the volume, the artists have provided brief project descriptions, after which are biographies of each contributor. The result of this unconventional layout is mixed.

On the one hand, the images are left to “speak for themselves” — a bold statement coming from a region dominated by the explanatory rhetoric of photojournalism. The boundaries between projects are often blurred by the lack of captions, giving a fluid, practically seamless experience of the images that adds to their coherence as a collection. On the other, the physical layout of the book is a distraction to the reader, requiring a clumsy game of matching images, titles, artists, and projects across four separate sections of the book. Both project descriptions and biographies are listed alphabetically by artist, so they don’t align intuitively with the flow of the images; furthermore, dates appear on the initial list of captions, but not within the descriptions themselves, leading to additional confusion.

The projects contained in *Our Land* are predominantly photo series, punctuated by stills from a video piece, a film, and a performance. The first images to follow Hamboussi’s introductory photograph are video stills from Fouad Elkoury’s *Ruins* (2011), which portray the urban wreckage left by modern conflicts in Beirut juxtaposed with images of ancient ruins. The original work projects scores of slides, one after the other, on three walls of a room, so that three ever-changing images appear simultaneously. To the left and right of the viewer, these images depict architectural spaces damaged by war; directly in front of the viewer, however, are images of people inhabiting these cities in varying states of chaos. Interestingly, Hamboussi did not select any of the

central images for reproduction in the catalog, setting the tone for a volume only sparsely populated by human figures. Following Elkoury, Manal Abu Shaheen's *Beirut* (2014–16) explores the Lebanese capital as “a city of billboards” that visualize capitalist imperialism, enacting “our most recent form of colonialism” through images of a “mythologized Western ideal that is incongruous with the post-conflict city” (52). The artist's images show massive advertisements plastered against the landscape of Beirut and its suburbs. In one, Big Ben looms over an old Citroën parked amid gravel and scrub, the baroque buildings of London interrupting a bleak landscape of nondescript postmodern buildings and gathering clouds. In another, Kate Winslet gazes dreamily away from a wall pockmarked by mortar shells and crowned in barbed wire, in front of which a man takes a photo of a friend dressed in an American-flag-covered hoodie.

Rhea Karam's *Breathing Walls* (2007–09) also takes Beirut as its subject, conceptualizing its walls as “storytellers” that weave tales of changing social climates through the ephemeral appearance of posters, fliers, and graffiti. In the volume, two images of exterior walls covered in repeating wheat-paste posters face each other, each espousing oppositional visions of Lebanon through faces of the past. On the left-hand side, posters in varying stages of disrepair show former prime minister Rafic Hariri, a Sunni Muslim, who was assassinated two years before the photo was taken. On the right-hand side, Karam shows the flag of the Shi'a Amal party flying over a wall covered in the movement's posters, which feature the political and religious leaders Nabil Berri and Moussa Sadr. Sadr, significantly, was disappeared by the Libyan regime in the 1970s; in both photographs, political “martyrs” live on to exert influence over the visual landscape of the city.

With Rana El Nemr's *The Khan* (2010–16), *Our Land* returns to the theme of artifice with which it began. Here, we see the narrow alleyways, horseshoe arcades, and trefoil windows typical of an Egyptian souk, yet where one expects the hustle and bustle of commerce, the softly colored images are lifeless. These photographs, devoid of people, are of Khan al-Azizia, a colossally unsuccessful shopping center erected off the Cairo-Alexandria desert road in the late 1990s. Intended to replicate and replace Cairo's millennium-old Khan al-Khalil, the costly project flopped despite widespread hype and the efforts of developers to pressure Khan al-Khalil's shopkeepers to relocate their businesses. El Nemr's ghostly images reflect the soulless marriage of visual heritage and unbridled capitalism, their emptiness a testimony to the impossibility of duplicating a richly historical environment. They resonate with the following series, Hamboussi's *The Light That Remains* (2016), which, like the volume's opening image, is intended to “highlight the waste and decadence of [Egypt's] short-sighted vacation industry” (53).

The sense of desertion that permeates the work of Hamboussi and El Nemr continues through Moath Alofi's *Last Tashahud* (2015) and Camille Zakharia's *Al Bar* (2008–16). In the first of these series, Alofi presents strikingly melancholic images of mosques erected by philanthropists along the road to Medina, isolated and shot straight-on in such a way that simultaneously flattens the structures and ensures that the horizon line dissects them, rendering them “bridges” between the earth and the sky. Zakharia's *Al Bar* shows scenes from the eponymous region of Bahrain, focusing on the tents of its nomadic inhabitants and the furnishings placed within and outside of them. Through playful use of low-contrast color palettes, Zakharia suggests a continuity between the arid landscape of the desert and the impermanent structures strewn across it, blurring boundaries between interior and exterior space.

Aisha Mershani's *Apartheid Wall* (2004–2005) marks a break in the volume's aesthetic coherence, reasserting human figures and introducing explicitly political subject matter in its exploration of Palestinian landscapes around Israel's so-called security barrier. These images show men and boys going about daily activities — chatting, playing, carrying groceries — in the shadow of the cement wall, which appears as both a somber symbol of structural oppression and an everyday nuisance to ordinary people.

Yazan Khalil's *Landscape of Darkness* (2002) also addresses the particularities of the Palestinian landscape,

capturing the surreal experience of glimpsing the inaccessible city of Jaffa from the West Bank town of Birzeit. Bored to tears during the Israeli siege that trapped him in Birzeit, Khalil walked to the top of a hill one night and saw the lights of Jaffa shining in the distance, visible because of the power outages brought on by the Israeli incursion. With the sunrise came the paradoxical “disappearance” of Jaffa into light; per the artist’s description, “darkness declared itself a landscape” and “brought this fragmented land together, smoothed it and served as a platform where exiled space could be reclaimed and a narrative of continuous space constructed” (54).

Our Land’s final images are stills from a film and from a performance piece, respectively representing Youssef Chahine’s *Cairo* (1991) and Rania Lee Khalil’s *The Pan African Women’s Organization, Cairo to Conkary, 1960–1965* (2019). The twelve stills selected from Chahine’s film, which was banned in Egypt upon its release, are arranged across two pages to create a fragmented, contradictory portrait of the city. Smoggy cityscapes share space with grazing sheep, crowded roads, protestors, and soccer players, while captions taken out of context add depth to the mismatched images. “I love Cairo,” one reads; below it, “Sell your land. Every inch is worth a fortune,” followed by “. . . planes have been bombarding the capital.” “They want to tear everything down,” exclaims one interviewee. “Where the hell do we go?”

Khalil’s project makes use of personal archives to explore a women’s-rights organization cofounded by the artist’s grandmother and headquartered in Egypt and Guinea. Represented by two archival images and accompanying explanatory texts, *The Pan African Women’s Organization* seems more of a strange non sequitur than a conclusion to the volume. The first image, juxtaposed on a background of foliage, is a black-and-white portrait of the Cameroonian activist Martha Moumie (1931–2009); the text printed beside it is a brief biography that centers largely on her relationships with male agitators for Cameroonian independence. The second image is an undated black-and-white photograph of the Union Minière ore-processing plant in what was then Belgian Congo, accompanied by a brief text on the mining company’s brutal labor practices, its supply of uranium to the first atomic bomb, and, somewhat abruptly, the independence of the Congo and subsequent execution of its first president. It is unclear, to this reader, how these images contribute to an otherwise consistent collection of photographs, as they deal neither with landscape nor with the Middle East; indeed, the final image does not even evoke the women of the Pan-African organization.

The Pan African Women’s Organization is the obvious outlier of *Our Land*, but it raises questions that are relevant throughout the volume. Given the exhibition’s orientation toward decolonial self-representation, what are we to do with the US-born daughter of Egyptian immigrants appropriating images of sub-Saharan Africa? Though these were the only images to stray beyond the geographical boundaries of the Arab world, many of the participating artists did not cover their country of origin or ancestry. This need not be a bad thing, and indeed there is something refreshing about the potentially open, pan-Arab, intergenerational ownership implied by the diversity of the artists representing “their land,” but it is somewhat surprising given the position of the exhibition vis-à-vis *This Place*.

Indeed, in proffering an alternative view of the Middle East, the exhibition’s implicit claims to authenticity do not always ring true. The Arab-American artist Manal Abu Shaheen’s images of Beirut, for example, set up a false binary between “Lebanese” and “Western” culture, presuming them intrinsically and irreconcilably separate from one another despite Beirut’s long, if fraught, history of exchange with Europe. The artificiality of this binary is especially apparent in the photographer’s depiction of the suburb of Dbayeh, where the aforementioned Big Ben billboard towers over a beat-up car in a gravel lot. Based on this image, one might see this advertisement as a singularly intrusive announcement of Western decadence in a poor, culturally conservative area; in reality, Dbayeh is an example of Beirut’s cultural and economic complexity, hosting both a Palestinian refugee camp and a major commercial center replete with Western goods and companies.

Furthermore, the arid emptiness of the melancholy landscapes that dominate this volume, in conjunction with the militarized imagery of the Palestinian inclusions, might be seen to shore up rather than erode “simplistic and false representations” of the Middle East.

This being said, *Our Land* is a useful compendium of images by a diverse cast of talented photographers. The varying personal, cultural, and artistic perspectives represented within the volume make for a uniquely multifaceted understanding of the Middle Eastern landscape, and Hamboussi is to be commended for curating a selection of images that push the boundaries of the genre.

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