SHADI HABIB ALLAH

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ArtReview
October 2016

Work by Shadi Habib Allah is included in 74 million million million tons *at Sculpture Center, New York, through 30 July 2018.*

Night shrouds Jerusalem in a blue gloom. Opening with establishing shots of the city after dusk, Shadi Habib Allah's eight-minute video *30kg Shine* (2015) interweaves three stories linked by their literal darkness. Among the artist's images in this nonlinear work are ones of the subterranean construction of the catacombs Israel is currently building (an infrastructure project that will eventually consist of 22,000 crypts for the holy city's dead). Between the occasional overheard moments of builders' conversations, Habib Allah provides close-cropped footage of an oozing mass. While in all probability we're watching sewage, in the artist's hands it seems sentient as it moves lavalike through the tunnels, eventually exiting through an outflow pipe into the city.

Sitting in his Chinatown flat under the Brooklyn Bridge in New York, the Palestinian artist, now in his late thirties, makes sense of this unearthly phenomenon by telling me a ghost story, one that apparently circulated through Jerusalem in 1936, about a malevolent amorphous 'thing' that haunted the fortified city after dark. As a Manhattan-bound train rattles overhead, Habib Allah adds that this tale was spread to scare citizens into staying inside at night, allowing grave robbers to go about their crimes undisturbed. Yet even without this background information – and like much of the artist's work, *30kg Shine* is informed by multiple stories and histories that might remain opaque to the casual viewer – we can feel a sense of underlying terror to the shadowy video, with its ominous droning soundtrack and near silence.

When the video was first shown at London gallery Rodeo in 2015, only a minimum of light illuminated the space, most of it coming from two chandeliers, both tipped on their sides, one on the ground and the other on a desk. Two further sculptures, untitled, also occupied the space, barely perceivable in the gloom.

These resonate with the third narrative strand to Habib Allah's video, intertwining with the portrait of the catacomb construction and the references to the ghost story, in which we see an elderly lady moving about her home in the dark. This is a Palestinian woman who has, the artist tells me, been forced to live nocturnally because of antagonism from her neighbours. The electricity fails frequently in Jerusalem's Old City area, so she often lives in molelike sufferance. In the guttering candlelight we see the woman's ornaments and framed photographs of loved ones as the camera follows her carefully feeling her way through the cluttered, but under normal circumstances possibly quite cosy, home. The accompanying sculptures at the London show were furniturelike in appearance: one, for example, approximates a cabinet or Welsh dresser, yet in the shadows of the gallery space we might equally have been looking at a coffin.

Taken as a whole, there's a commentary on Palestine and the State of Israel (and the *state* of Israel) present in *30kg Shine* – on a territory where politics is bound up in fear, and questions of ownership abound; where to bury the dead is to make something akin to an eternal claim to the land, as it might be argued that if the bodies of one's ancestors rest here, there can be no ambiguity concerning to whom this place belongs. Conversely the lady's relationship in the film to her possessions is uncertain: she hardly gets to see any of them properly; her home is something only felt.

Habib Allah's work does not solely concentrate on the territorial issues of the Middle East. His 26-minute film *The King & the Jester* (2010), for example, a part-scripted, part-observational documentary, took a Miami body-repair shop as its subject. While there is some chat between the mechanics on life in Afghanistan and other, unnamed, cultures ("Wonder how they fuck in their country?"), the mainstay is otherwise innocuous bickering and jokes about the job, women and bear attacks over the steady hum of car repairs and paintjobs. The work takes shape as a portrait of a particular social ecology at a given moment, one where notions of masculinity, class and race are carefully teased out. Yet elsewhere Habib Allah returns more explicitly to questions of conflict and statehood: *Marat Bathtub* (2013) was a sculptural reproduction of the bath that Jean-Paul Marat, one of the most radical voices of the French Revolution, wrote his articles in and which was, in 1793, the site of his assassination at the hands of the more moderate antimonarchist Charlotte Corday. (Marat's constant use of the boot-shaped bath was due to his chronic eczema, a condition he partly suffered as a consequence of having to live in Paris's sewers for two years as the revolution unfolded.) *Evacuated Containers* (2013), meanwhile, is a series of large-scale pencil drawings that depict an administrative room in Tel Aviv's Ben Gurion airport. This is the room in which a sculpture by Habib Allah – a cast of a leg he made in Palestine – was destroyed by security staff, having been confiscated from the artist as he attempted to travel with it to New York. Habib Allah based his drawings on those of a police sketch artist who had, in turn, been given a description of the space by an airport security guard who had been persuaded to help the artist.

Perhaps Habib Allah's most ambitious and affecting work to date, however, is *Daga'a* (2015). Over 18 minutes, the artist documents his travels across the Sinai Peninsula with the Bedouins who control this area. 'Travels', though, gives a false sense of control on the artist's part. The area is a lawless one; the Egyptian authorities, whose land this ostensibly is, have throughout history found it a difficult place to police, and the Bedouins' income is now mainly derived from the smuggling trade, which partly helps Islamist militants to operate in the area. Habib Allah is just one of the many (unseen) loads to pass through the hands of these occasionally gun-brandishing men. It must have been a dangerous work to make, but the outcome is not at all sensational: Habib Allah imbues his edit with a kind of wistfulness – the men are shown as having a quiet sense of perseverance in what otherwise seems a desperate existence – and perhaps even a hint of magical realism. Imagery of snakes and fires abounds in the film.

The Bedouins are wrapped in headscarves that cover all but their eyes, and as they drive Habib Allah in their pickup trucks and 4x4s across the uniform landscape of scrubby desert, we never get a clear view of the smugglers or what else they're transporting. (At one point we see a man collect an assault rifle from under a tarpaulin in the middle of a vast desolate plain, but this might be a personal possession rather than loot.) Through snippets of conversation, moments of prayer and snatched instances of bravado, we gain only the barest of portraits of the individual men and their activities. Taken as a whole, however, the video documents the economic and trade networks they have built across this inhospitable terrain, networks that seek to evade the Egyptian authorities and other outsider eyes.

In New York, Habib Allah tells me of two new works he is developing. The first is for his solo show at Reena Spaulings Fine Art, his American gallery, in which he has cultivated and will exhibit kudzu plants, the invasive species that can be found all over the southern states of America, especially prevalent on roadsides. The second is a project for Green Art Gallery in Dubai, to be shown on their booth at this year's Frieze London, which uses further material collected during the artist's time on the Sinai Peninsula. In this proposed installation, the conversations Habib Allah recorded between the Bedouins will be played on old 2G mobile phones – these, linked through the existing phone network, will connect with each other in a predetermined pattern, and visitors to the booth will be given the opportunity to eavesdrop on the smugglers' exchanges. This is perhaps the most formal manifestation of the primary motif in Habib Allah's work. Whether it's the necropolis that lies below the living city, the nocturnal population that operates separately from the diurnal one, factions of revolutionary France or the Bedouins of today, the artist seeks to shine a light on the radical possibilities of the parallel networks that run concurrent with, or counter to, official infrastructure. Perhaps this is a natural subject for a Palestinian artist – one returned to in recognition of the country's ambiguous status in the eyes of international officialdom and

of a nation of people living within the military and political confines of another. Yet perhaps there is also a more universal, philosophical and perhaps in some ways less political reason for Habib Allah's frequent revisiting of the idea of an independently operating network. Uniting his work is a mood of resilience in its subjects and the groups they bond with; a sense of strength and humour in the face of life's often bleak circumstances.

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