

FOCUS CASE STUDY: SHADI HABIB ALLAH

A work-in-progress about the complex world of the Bedouins.

Text by Daniel Horn
Frieze, Issue 158
October 2013

New York-based artist Shadi Habib Allah has spent the past few months in Ramallah, conceiving a new work around an endemic yet dispersed clan: the Bedouins of the Sinai Peninsula. The group inhabits the buffer zone that separates Israel from Egypt, whose domain the peninsula has been on and off since 1949. Carved up and redrawn many times, Sinai is the closest thing to home for the nomadic Bedouins, who have been disenfranchised of any claims to the land for nearly as long as they have traversed its rust-coloured desert. This fraught subject matter – as Habib Allah is clearly aware, and wary, of – prefigures another complex issue: the decay of the Arab Spring overlapping with an Arab ‘moment’ blossoming in the international art market. (Last year saw the debut of two Dubai-based galleries at Art Basel, one of which, Green Art Gallery, showed Habib Allah’s work as part of Statements.) Any such ‘moment’ benefits as much as it seems to challenge Habib Allah. A Palestinian who grew up in Israel, the artist is conversant with the region’s struggles; but his works don’t exhibit their tropes. For him to consider engaging with the loaded locales of this region at a time when it is receiving increased exposure in the market constitutes an exploration of unfamiliar terrain.

So, why chose Bedouins as the subject of his new video work? Northern Sinai is reportedly becoming a hotbed for jihadism, considerably restricting travel to the area. The Bedouins are a faction on the rise, representing a contemporary cast for both Western news and Islamic propaganda. But their precarious status remains outperformed by the cultural imaginings they’ve inspired: from David Lean’s *Lawrence of Arabia* (1962) to the swaggering, bearded warriors toting AK-47s that populate contemporary factual and

fictional portrayals. Habib Allah considers this stock imagery ‘Bedouin pornography’, which he seeks to ‘drain’ of such connotations in his film.

To this end, he plans to capture images of Bedouins at the bottom of Egypt’s social pyramid, where they must pursue the careers customarily available to them: maids, kitchen hands, rubbish collectors and other menial positions at bustling tourist resorts such as Sharm el-Sheikh. Alternative occupations – transporting people and goods across the desert – have belonged to the Bedouins since antiquity. (Currently, they help operate the tunnels beneath Sinai connecting Egypt with Gaza.) For this reason Habib Allah’s coverage will likely extend to the similarly ‘invisible’, though potentially more lucrative, enterprises of smuggling, prostitution and alleged human and organ trafficking. ‘The Bedouins, like the desert sand, constantly shift,’ Habib Allah has said. This characterization of the group in Arab culture suggests a variation on the simultaneously fetishized and degraded ‘Oriental’ described in Edward Said’s classic *Orientalism* (1978). To deflate this latter-day ‘pornographic’ imagery, Habib Allah posits a sort of hazy cinematographic ‘distance’. Distancing as artistic strategy, of course, brings up its own paradoxical canons: the understated and uncommitted aesthetics of New Objectivity and the overt ‘estrangement’ of Bertolt Brecht’s Epic theatre to effect political education. Habib Allah’s blend of distance and aesthetic critique waives both of these forms, collapsing overwrought concepts like homeland and milieu.

This approach, which the artist plans to deploy in his new work, is manifest in his 2010 video *The King and the Jester*. The work’s courtly title betrays little of its protagonists: the owner and employees of a Miami car workshop. Communication in this environment consists of scraps of unidentifiably scripted and ‘genuine’ shop talk: ‘Wonder how they fuck in their country?’ ‘Same way we fuck.’ ‘No, we fuck like animals over here.’ This tension of the anonymous ‘they’, ‘their’ and ‘we’ further rubs against the rather desolate setting of the garage in the improbably named Liberty City, a late-capitalist wasteland illuminated by pimped rides and odd shapes of desire. *The King and the Jester* registers present-day conditions of the working class in Florida through details that, despite the sunny locale, evoke the dreary Manchester workshop described by Friedrich Engels in *The Conditions of the Working Class in England* (1845), only here it’s a grimy garage in perpetual need of cleaning while a Rolls-Royce is being serviced. Even so, the workforce, while retaining some kind of self-estrangement, seems perfectly jovial throughout, trading foot massages, and discussing everything from diamonds to ‘fruit fights’. Habib Allah

effectively individuates the workers from their conditions. If this is what the artist means by 'distance', it will be interesting to see whether he can transpose the same approach onto the Bedouins of Sinai. One thing is certain, however: Habib Allah's works are hard to pin up, and even harder to pin down.

Shadi Habib Allah is an artist based in New York, USA. He recently participated in the group shows 'Frozen Lakes' at Artists Space, New York; 'Nouvelles Vague' at Palais de Tokyo, Paris, France; and 'Empire State' curated by Norman Rosenthal and Alex Gartenfeld, which travels to Galerie Thaddeus Ropac, Paris, this autumn.

<https://www.frieze.com/article/focus-case-study-shadi-habib-allah>