



CHALLENGING





FAMILIARITY

TAYSIR BATNIJI

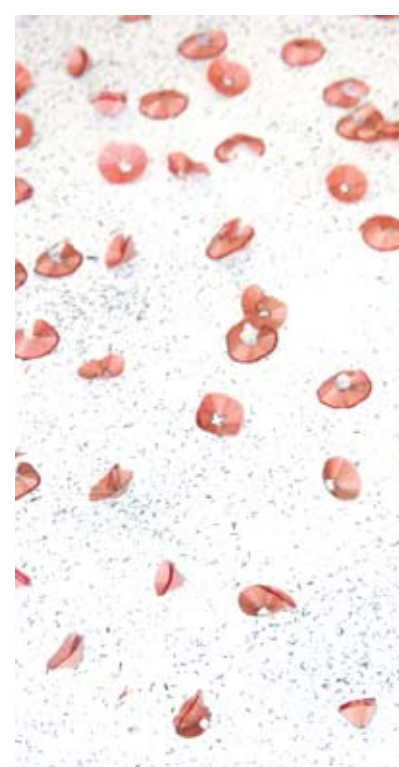
Artworks by Taysir Batniji often give the impression that they address one personally. It remains uncertain whether they point out an identified conflict, or simply the general uneasiness of life and of placing oneself within the world. **Judith Souriau** meets one of the 2012 Abraaj Capital Art Prize winners in his Paris studio.

In one fixed shot for his 2007 video, *Background Noise*, Taysir Batniji strives not to blink as bombs and gunshots burst around him. The shot is tight – it frames the artist's face, waiting for the next 'boom'. As the artwork's name suggests, the viewer suddenly realises that this 'noise' is an everyday occurrence, a habitual sound in some areas of the world – in this case, Gaza. The sound of blasts occurs continuously, yet however frequent and repetitive they might be, one never gets accustomed to them and is startled at each blow. "The original project of this video was to remain stone-faced when the bombs burst. Unblinking, indifferent, to show that life actually keeps going on in Gaza," explains Batniji. "But I failed; it was impossible. The explosions are both permanent and totally unpredictable. And so this work finally became the film of a failure." *Background Noise* undoubtedly speaks of defiance, but also of resistance on an intimate and personal level. It addresses the everyday effort of resistance each person will have to carry, one day or another; here it's war, but it could equally be illness or grief. The piece works as a metaphor for our most intimate struggles. Batniji's works do not shout, nor do they protest. Rather, they smack, like a slap in the face.

LANDSCAPES OF TURMOIL

Born in Gaza in 1966, Batniji studied fine art at the An-Najah National University in Nablus, Palestine and at the École Nationale Supérieure des Beaux-Arts, Bourges from 1995–97 and Marseille 2002–03,

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in France. During 2000–06 he travelled constantly in and out of Gaza and then one day, found it impossible to return home. “The day my exhibition at the French Institute in Amman opened [25 June 2006] was the day [Israeli Defence Forces soldier] Gilad Shalit was captured by Hamas. Gaza’s borders were immediately closed. I was abroad with an eight-day visa and understood that it would not be a question of days or weeks, but years [to return],” says Batniji, who was finally allowed re-entry to Gaza in January 2011. In his installation *Hannoun* (1972–2009), shown at the *Palestine c/o Venice* collateral exhibition at the 2009 Venice Biennale, a picture of

Opening page spread: *Watchtowers*. 2008. Black and white framed digital inkjet print. Set of 12 from a series of 26. 50 x 40 cm each. Edition of eight plus two artist proofs. Image courtesy the artist and Sfeir-Semler Gallery, Beirut/Hamburg.

Above: *Hannoun*. 2009. Performance and installation incorporating a large floor of pencil shavings and the artist’s 2006 *Date Video*. Variable dimensions. Photography by Myrna Ayad.

Right: A detail of *Hannoun*.

Batniji’s empty Gaza studio hangs above a floor covered with red pencil shavings. It symbolises a field of poppies and tackles notions of freedom, writing, childhood and even van Goghian alienation. *Hannoun*, which means poppies in

PROFILE

the Palestinian dialect, is tied to the theme of landscape through the 'field' of make-believe poppies strewn across the floor; the actual material used – pencil shavings – relates to one of Batniji's childhood memories, which involved the continuous copying of school exercises "to make sure we learnt them". The young Batniji had sought to escape this process by sharpening his pencils instead, believing that they were "never sharp enough". Through *Hannoun*, the artist seeks to link past and present: a home he cannot return to, an interrupted artistic practice via an abandoned studio, and a childhood fascination with pencil shavings, which invariably takes on a multitude of interpretations.

Is it possible to avoid discussing territories and separation? I ask. "Yes, and you must even

call for this option," explains Batniji. "Altogether, a small portion of my works speak of Palestine, and those that do take root in my personal history; they relate to something I have actually experienced." Clearly, in Batniji's work, the expression of the self comes before political discourse. His *oeuvre* deals with exile and displacement and their effect on one's perception of things. And then of course, there is the concept of home – one of the first levels of awareness acquired by a child and one that remains painful and fatally truncated when this home happens to be in Gaza. In Batniji's vocabulary, this concept takes on his trademark poetic and subtle approach, which can be seen in works such as *Untitled* (2007), a glass duplicate of his Gaza home keys – the material harks at fragility; and in the instal-

lation, *Socle du Monde*, a cobblestone mattress which takes its name and inspiration from Italian conceptual artist Piero Manzoni's *Socle du Monde* – *Homage a Galileo*, a work which suggests that the entire world is available as material for artists. Batniji turns this theme on its head by using the bed, a symbol of dreams, meditation and conception, and complementing it with the use of stone – a hard, enduring material evocative of the earth, but which eventually disintegrates into dust.

SEEDS OF IDENTITY

His works are always fragile, subtle and intrinsically poetic. "It's a personal look. I'm interested in what codes and associations our minds refer



**North of Al-Shati refugee camp,
170 m from the beach**

Area: 370 m² on 550 m² of land. Ground floor: 2 apartments of 150 m² each. 1st floor: 2 apartments of 180 m² each. In each apartment: 5 rooms, kitchen, 2 bathrooms/wc, sitting room, 3 balconies. Open sea view. Inhabitants: 22 people

GH0809



GH0809

to when we look at things," says Batniji. "Our cultures and experiences give us images and symbols that shape our perception of the world. In a certain way, we are determined; according to the Gestalt theory, when we see lines our brain is able to generate forms relating to other, previously learned, visual images. Such ability depends on your culture as well as on self-improvement and personal history". But sometimes, a connection slips out or a clue is missed, like the day Batniji read 'Le Monde (The World) has not arrived' on a news kiosk in Paris and did not immediately understand that it referred to the French newspaper. Incidentally, he has chosen *Le Monde N'est Pas Arrivé* (The World Has Not Arrived) as the title of his current show at Paris's Eric Dupont.

One major piece on show at the exhibition

is *GH0809*, a photographic body of work which stands for Gaza Houses 2008–09. Laden with irony, the 2010 series features images of Gazan ruins (after Operation Cast Lead in December 2008) marketed like real estate advertisements, selling seemingly perfect settings and unobstructed views. The series misleads one to assume that such a real estate agency actually exists. Batniji was not able to shoot the images of *GH0809* himself due to the enforced blockade during the Israeli bombings on Gaza between December 2008 and January 2009. Instead, he asked journalist Sami Al-Ajrami to photograph the demolished houses; over 150 images were taken and information pertaining to 33 houses, either entirely demolished or partially destroyed, was gathered.



Facing page:
Left: *GH0809*, 2010. Plexiglas.
35 x 37 cm. Page one of a series
of 103 digital prints.
Right: *GH0809*, 2010. Plexiglas.
35 x 37 cm. Page three of a series
of 103 digital prints.

This page: Untitled, 2002.
Two-minute video still.
Variable dimensions.

"When you destroy the house, you destroy the family centre and you leave people bare."

“In my work, I make use of a certain reality. Using it as a material means that you don’t just ‘undergo’. You shape it up, build it in. That’s the least you can do in order not to go crazy.”



The copy on some of these quasi ads reads ‘Inhabitants: 6 people.’ ‘It speaks of destruction, but I did borrow another language, another means of representation,’ says Batniji. ‘Mentioning the people living there is the only difference between my work and an actual real estate ad. I had to be careful about a possible misunderstanding. It’s not mockery, I can’t afford to be sarcastic.’ Cynicism is a notion far removed from this series, which is punctuated by Batniji’s core intention: the *approach* to the work and its re-appropriation of form and content. As viewers, we are exposed to a stark reality, hitherto diluted in journalistic coverage. *GH0809* details an existing livelihood but also hits at a topic close to the Palestinian heart: home. ‘Building a house in Gaza is a life achievement, and in Palestinian culture the house is the core. When you destroy the house, you destroy the family centre and you leave people bare,’ adds Batniji.




TOWERING FIGURES

GH0809 isn’t the first body of work which Batniji was unable to shoot images for in Palestine due to an Israeli blockade. For his phenomenal 2008 *Watchtowers* series, the artist commissioned a Palestinian photographer to take images of watchtowers on the West Bank border with Israel. *Watchtowers* was a sensation at international art fairs and was also exhibited at the 2011 Istanbul Biennial. Layered



with connotations, the images refer to German artist duo Bernd and Hilla Becher's industrial architecture photo series, *Water Towers*, which made an inventory of these structures for their aesthetic qualities. In Batniji's 'version', the subject is not industrial equipment, but war. *Watch-towers* may be a photographic body of work, but it is also a process, a documentation of the actual buildings, their classification and, of course, of the hazardous environment surrounding this shoot; the latter element breaks away from the Bechers' work – whereas the artist duo had carefully set up each shot, Batniji's images are devoid of light editing and focus, and are even awkwardly framed. "The essential difference is that the Bechers sometimes spent a full day creating one image. The quality and composition of their pictures is obvious," explains Batniji; "Here, the context is tremendously different and it shows in each photo; taking pictures of Israeli military equipment is forbidden, so some are shot from a long distance with a telephoto lens while others are over-pixellated."

Whether or not the situation in Palestine is addressed directly, Batniji's works articulate his blurred perception of the world and of his own identity. In the two-minute video *Untitled* (2002), his shadow – reflected on the sea – disappears as the tide goes out, leaving his image absorbed by the sand. Is it an allegory for people denied access to, and ownership of, their land or an evasive statement of his own presence? Perhaps both. While his forms suggest the impossibility of return and hint at the stunningly poetic uncertainty of all things, time and topic seemingly escape. "In my work, I make use of a certain reality," he says. "Using it as a material means that you don't just 'undergo'. You shape it up, build it in. That's the least you can do in order not to go crazy." 

For more information visit www.eric-dupont.com and www.sfeir-semmler.com

Facing page:
Above: *Fathers*. 2006. C-print.
40 x 74 cm. Edition five of 27.
Below: *Socle du Monde*. 2011.
Stones. 15 x 196 x 134 cm.

Above: *Untitled*. 2007. Glass and a metal ring created to look identical to the artist's keys. Variable dimensions.

All images courtesy Galerie Eric Dupont, Paris unless otherwise specified.