

Access & Closure
Bearing Witness in Occupied Palestine

by

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Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements of the Degree of Master of Fine Arts

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April 25, 2007

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Abstract

This thesis stems from a visit to East Jerusalem and the West Bank in occupied Palestine, though it is further rooted in a longstanding concern for the general region.* It weaves together various media and methods in an attempt to understand the place, the politics, and the people in between.

My work is not a historical account. It is not unmediated testimony. It is as much about myself as it is about a place. My own perceptions, experiences, and vision permeate the work. Combining photography, cutout drawings, maps, and textual narrative, I chronicle my encounters in Palestine in bits and pieces.

* According to the CIA World Fact book, the West Bank consists of 5,860 square kilometers of territory (slightly smaller than the State of Delaware). From 1917 to 1948, the West Bank, along with the Old City and the Eastern neighborhood of Jerusalem, was under British control as part of the Mandate of Palestine. After the Arab-Israeli War of 1948, also known as the Palestinian *Nakba* or Israel's War of Independence, these areas were taken under Jordanian control. Israel later captured these territories during the June War, or Six Day War, of 1967. The Old City and East Jerusalem, which up to this point were considered to be part of the West Bank, were annexed under what was termed the "reunification of Jerusalem," despite the fact that most of the residents of the Old City and East Jerusalem were Muslim or Christian Arabs while the residents of West Jerusalem were predominantly Jews. At this point, "Israel almost immediately gave the city a legal status different from that of the occupied territories and took action to separate it from the rest of the West Bank" (Tessler 403). The West Bank was never annexed, but it is still under Israeli occupation to this day.

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Acknowledgements

Who would have guessed that I'd be starting to assemble all the pieces of this page during the summer I spent in... of all places... Suriname? Little did I know that the frantic e-mail that I received from Jim Cogswell on May 4, 2005 (and carbon copied to Graduate Dean, Brad Smith) *insisting* that I seek out this new faculty hire by the name of Tirtza Even would change my artistic life forever. Though this letter, which included the word "must" in all caps, was quite frankly, a little too presuming for my taste (why would I want an Israeli as an advisor?), I have Jim to thank, not only for giving me advice (that he thinks I didn't take) during the year he served as my advisor, but for leading me to Tirtza. During this same time, I was also introduced to Rebekah Modrak, in part as a guide to Suriname's capital of Paramaribo (along with Nick Tobier), but more symbolically as the mother of the all-trusting baby Lucy. I didn't realize that the risks Rebekah let me take with her first-born as I swung her naïve one-year-old upside down by her ankles and tossed her off to total strangers on airplanes were almost as great as the ones she would encourage me to take two years later during this thesis project.

Anton Shammass was also in my thoughts during that summer, though the only proof I have of this is a duplicate snapshot of the not-so-illustrious *Anton Supermarket* in the Frimangron neighborhood of Paramaribo. I had no idea this four-by-six inch bribe would pay off so well. Anton has challenged and supported me in ways way beyond my expectations ever since my first year of graduate school, when I was only beginning to work through the ideas that now drive this work.

I have also been incredibly lucky to have met Catherine Benamou when I did. Catherine has been an invaluable source for information and encouragement. She introduced me, through the back door of AC/SAC 381, to thinking about the global implications of making art about Palestine. She also provided the space where it was actually shown! Without her efforts my work would probably still be holed up in the flat files of my studio.

Other faculty who have put up with me throughout my three years at Michigan, and who have contributed to my creative subconscious include David Chung, Alicyn Warren, Stephanie Rowden, Dan Price and Takeshi Takahara. And of course, thanks also to the big guys, Bryan Rogers, Brad Smith and Wendy Dignan for supporting this MFA program.

And for the little guys... I also want to thank the other graduate students: Brent Fogt for his optimism and Alison Byrnes for her pessimism. Sandwiched between the two of you kept me safely and sarcastically grounded. I suppose Inca deserves a thanks too though I'm not sure why.

Forest Bright, Zack Denfeld, Charles Fairbanks, Kat Hartman, Gabriel Harp, Kris Kurzawa, Chris Landau, Jim Leija, Nicole Marroquin, Shafei Dafalla Mohamed, Carrie Morris, Francie Riddle, Ann Stewart, Adrienne Vetter and Sadie Wilcox...each of you helped me catch my breath at one point or another. Thank you for being my Arabic tutor, my hanging crew, my punching bag, and my support system. Grad school would have been a real drag without you guys.

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Introduction

Many of the shebab (youth) had a hard time remembering my name, so I told them to just call me Fatima. The next day, everyone was calling me Fatima, even guys who weren't around the day before, so I told them, "No, that was yesterday, today my name is Khadija." On the third day, the shebab surrounded me first thing in the morning, begging to know if my name was still Khadija or if it was something else today. I told them that today they could choose my name. After a few were voiced, Wujdan stepped in to mediate the discussion, apparently the shebab were suggesting names that were "not beautiful." In the end, the name we could all agree upon was Bisan. And so on Friday, I was Bisan.*

*Six thousand Arabs were expelled from the city of Bisan in 1948. Many were loaded onto trucks and taken across the Syrian and Jordanian borders. Today, no Palestinian residents of Bisan remain.



I focus my practice on exploring the intersection of identities, media, and politics surrounding the Israel-Palestine conflict. After several years of working with newspaper articles, historic documents, and found imagery, I spent the summer of 2006 in Palestine’s East Jerusalem and West Bank writing first hand accounts and gathering images.* I kept a shorthand diary of my experiences, photographed public and private spaces and collected maps. I also met a lot of people. These people ranged from 5-year-old villagers, teenage urbanites, civil servants, and Palestinian exiles returning for a brief homecoming. This research formed the basis for my creative work, which takes several forms yet intertwines similar ideas. Invisibility and fragmentation are the concepts that connect the work to the place. Inkless embossments, paper cutouts, textual narratives and documentary-style photographs serve as evidence to my observations of everyday life under a long and continuing occupation.

I saw, and to a very small extent experienced, the way in which the Israeli occupation shapes the daily reality of Palestinians living in the West Bank and Jerusalem. These observations and experiences drive my work. Many of the people I met wanted me to take home testimony of the long overlooked and continuing occupation. I don’t merely want to transfer evidence. As an artist, I am not bound to journalistic rules. In fact I put myself and my views in the work. I politicize the mundane and conflate the inhumane with the everyday. I shape the way I perceive daily reality in Palestine until the stories take on new meanings. I wish to interject my own way of seeing.

I see the Israeli occupation as a brutal and suffocating force whose ultimate aim is to fragment and eradicate the Palestinian existence: historically, culturally and politically. The Arab-Israeli

* As the geo-political entity of Palestine is contested, and the borders within and around the land of historic Palestine have been changing since biblical times, it is never quite clear what one refers to when they speak of Palestine. The same piece(s) of land are referred to by different names depending on who is doing the naming. Few Israelis ever refer to Palestine as a geographic place though they will refer to the people living there as Palestinians, or sometimes, Arabs. Some Israelis refer to the West Bank as Judea and Samaria, while Gaza often retains its name as Gaza. Many of the Palestinians I met recognized Palestine’s 1967 borders as Israel, though when referring to a past that pre-dates 1948, the word Palestine is still used with a verbal footnote that this particular city or village is now in Israel. I generally use the term “Palestine” to refer to what the United Nations terms the “occupied Palestinian territories.” This includes the areas that Israel captured after what Palestinians refer to as the June War, or what Israelis refer to as the Six-Day War, and consists of the Gaza Strip, the West Bank, and East Jerusalem (even though East Jerusalem was annexed by Israel in 1967). However, I will also use the word “Palestine” when referring to places within Israel that are inhabited or remembered by Palestinians (see Appendix for detailed maps).



Biblical Palestine
(c. 1020 B.C.)



Palestine UN Plan
on Partition (1947)



Israel (2004)



Gaza Strip and the
West Bank (1994)

War of 1948 was named the War of Independence by Israel. Palestinians call it *al-Nakba*, which translates as *the catastrophe* or *the disaster*. *Al-Nakba* refers to the expulsion and flight of hundreds of thousands of Arabs from cities and villages across Palestine and their subsequent status as refugees.* While this history is well known throughout Palestine and the Arab World, it is virtually nonexistent in the West. Israel emerged as the victor of the 1948 and 1967 wars and thus it gained control not only of much of the land of historic Palestine, but also of the dominant narrative. Through crafting and controlling its own narrative, Israel also suppressed the Palestinian one.

* The exact number of Palestinian refugees created after Israel's declaration of independence and subsequent war is still in dispute and ranges from 500,000 to 940,000. The UN cites the number of refugees as 750,000 at the beginning of 1949 and 940,000 by June of 1949 (Tessler 279).

Motives

A friend once asked me a number of years ago, if I had to pick an animal to characterize me, what kind would it be? I decided that I am like the little bird that sits on top of the rhinoceros in the typical National Geographic photograph. Although I may belong to the flock of birds somewhere else, I am most comfortable when I'm slightly out of my element, even when it is a place that is considered to be slightly dangerous.



By the time I was born, I had already acquired a history that should have led me to become someone much different than who I turned out to be. My maternal grandparents are from Poland. They are survivors of World War II concentration camps and the Holocaust shrunk their large extended family down to five members. Their daughters, my mother being one, were born as refugees in a “displaced persons” camp in Germany after the war. My paternal grandparents have a more eclectic history. My grandmother was a fifth generation Jerusalemite of European descent, born into a religious Jewish family, married my grandfather, a secular, Zionist Jew, born in Jaffa, and bore their sons, including my father, in Cairo. All of these factors should have shaped me into a staunch proponent of a Jewish homeland, one to be supported at any cost. Yet several experiences led me to question what that cost actually is.

In 1998, en route to Tel Aviv from Cairo, I accidentally had a political awakening. While I crossed into Egypt via the frequently traveled Eilat/Taba border crossing, I left via Rafah, the southern border crossing point in Gaza. There I, along with the other Westerners on the private Egyptian bus, waited over an hour for the Israeli bus to take us to *Hatakhanah Hamercazit*, or the Central Bus Station in Tel Aviv. In the waiting area, in the space between the Egyptian and Israeli borders, the other tourists from the bus clustered amongst themselves, while I sat with a group of Palestinians. I overheard some young boys whispering to each other in Arabic, mixing bits of English, “What is your name?” and “How are you?” into their conversation. It was clear they were mustering up the confidence to talk to some of us. I looked at them and responded, “My name is Toby, what is your name?” But their knowledge of the language was limited and our communication in English ended there. After some struggle, I asked in my broken Hebrew whether they spoke Hebrew too. Immediately, the older men and women sitting amongst us gave me quizzical and suspicious looks and moved away. Simultaneously, some of the other younger boys looked over and moved closer. We exchanged chewing gum and cigarettes and spoke, in our limited Hebrew, about our experiences. They asked about America, I asked about Palestine. This passing conversation was the first one I ever had with Palestinians who actually lived in Palestine, and it felt wonderful to break out of the role that I, as a Jewish girl visiting Israel, was expected to play. Our conversation ended when the bus arrived and I was allowed to cross. The actual crossing, going from the liminal space between borders into a space controlled by Israel was a pivotal experience for me. As my backpack was on the x-ray belt, Israeli border police asked me for my passport. Due to an Israeli law that was extremely surprising to me, I had become a dual citizen a month earlier, and so I handed over my Israeli documents. When they realized that in fact, I was an Israeli, my bags were taken off the belt un-scanned. I was asked a few simple questions in Hebrew and left to wait, while the other foreigners were interrogated at length. At this moment, I realized that I was in a very unique position. Only minutes earlier, I was the only one talking to “the enemy” but at the same time, I was the only one spared from interrogation. At that time, this discrepancy made me wonder whether this ability of mine, to slip between political and cultural boundaries, could be used for purposes other than chit chatting with strangers and crossing borders. Now, while I still haven’t fully come to realize how to harness this chameleon-like characteristic of mine for any “useful” purpose, I believe it has slowly come to define me.

The same year, back in Tel Aviv and before this incident, I enrolled in a government subsidized *ulpan* or language school for new immigrants in order to learn Hebrew. The 1993 signing of the Oslo peace accords (which hadn’t completely collapsed at this point, though the Israeli Prime

Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's policies were leading in that direction), did not affect the racism and hatred that I observed in my teachers and classmates at the school. Where I expected to simply learn a language, I was pressured to sing nationalistic Israeli songs, attend guided field trips to politicized and contested areas of the country (the occupied Golan Heights, the Jewish Quarter of Jerusalem's Old City, *Yad Vashem* – the Holocaust Museum), and listen to daily digressions about the importance of supporting a Jewish State and avoiding "suspicious objects." At this time, I didn't know where my sympathies lay. The more the Israeli government tried to convince me of one reality, vis-à-vis the *ulpan*, the more I tried to seek out the other one. I wondered whether the Palestinian construction workers who were renovating the façade of the school had any idea what kind of activity went on inside (now, I'm sure they did).

Being forced to accept an Israeli passport in lieu of a 3-month tourist visa, gave me all the rights and responsibilities of citizenship, something that only select few are entitled to. I felt as though this status obligated me to stay educated and open minded in order to maintain my identity as an individual, despite the indoctrination processes that all new immigrants to Israel are subject to. The mingling of these experiences – interacting with young and curious Palestinians en route to a school designed to make me suspicious of them (as the other American tourists on the bus were) – made me realize that I was in a unique position in Israeli society. I didn't subscribe to the mainstream agenda, and I was curious.

Photographs

I really wanted to walk around and take pictures, but she just wouldn't let go of my hand.



I had several reasons for photographing in Palestine. I used photography as a means to engage with people and landscape. I photographed in order to be a part of what I was seeing, to be more than a passive observer. I also relied on photography as a means to document, to prove that something existed and to prove that I was there. Photographing also served a creative function as part of the process for my paper narrative works. In some instances I photographed as one might jot down notes or create sketches in a notebook. I photographed in order to remember. Sometimes I photographed people and places to serve as “markers” so I could remember names, places, or snippets of conversations that I recorded in my notebook. At the time, I did not realize that these “notes” were going to be source material for my paper cutout works (see page 18). Only when I returned to the U.S. and looked at these images did my memories surface. My memories were often more vivid than my images, yet both were inextricably connected. For this reason, I felt as though they belonged together, however, the literal representation that photography duplicates was not what I wanted. Instead, I used the photographs as guides to create metaphors for a larger narrative.

But I also took photographs to present them, unaltered, to others. I saw Palestinians who are resilient. The people I met have been able to retain a strong identity and culture despite the fact that they are not visible to, and have little support from, the rest of the world. The mere act of photographing, for me, was a way to protest the narrowed visibility in the region. With the exception of images of war and violence, so few photographs that depict daily reality seem to be coming out of Palestine. Though photography is not an unbiased method of communication, it can still provide tangible evidence of a thing or an occurrence. “Something we hear about, but doubt, seems proven when we’re shown a photograph of it...A photograph passes for incontrovertible proof that a given thing happened. The picture may distort; but there is always a presumption that something exists, or did exist, which is like what’s in the picture” (Sontag 5). I saw rural landscapes and urban centers, land that is fertile and flourishing but disconnected through checkpoints and settlements. I visited cities that were closed due to settler violence and harassment and others that were bustling and thriving. I formed warm, albeit brief, relationships with people, participated in Palestinian-led, non-violent protests, and shared close moments between families and friends. My photographs bear witness to these episodes. Though some of the images I recorded are infused with violence, or allude to a society marred by violence, they show a view that most people in the West do not see. They aim to fill the dangerous gap in people’s mental image of Palestine, distinct from the picture that the mainstream media has shaped.

At the same time, I photographed in order to participate in, and at times protest against, what

The day I took the picture titled *Shebab, Farkha*, I was hanging out in a schoolyard with a bunch of younger kids. At one point I handed over my camera so they could photograph as they posed for each other. These four guys were sitting and watching. Once the young kids all finished their fun, one of these four asked me to photograph them relaxing on the grey plastic chairs. I don’t know any of their names nor did I ever have a conversation with them. They didn’t ask me for a copy or question what the future of the photograph would be, but they asked me to photograph them nonetheless. I still don’t know why. I imagine that they wanted to be photographed simply to be in front of a camera. Perhaps these boys asked to be photographed as a way to be included. Even though they sat along the periphery of the schoolyard where the young kids and I were photographing each other, they may have wanted to participate. It seemed like being photographed was a way of drawing attention to themselves, putting themselves in the center. But as a foreigner, or as a woman, perhaps I was the center, and requesting a photograph was a way of drawing themselves to me.



Millman. *Shebab, Farkha*, digital photograph, 2006

Miki Kratsman is a photographer who is very much aware of how he positions himself as both a photographer and an Israeli. In his *Machsom* project where he documents checkpoints he says, "The exact place from which a photograph is taken is more important than the aesthetic of the image. Policing procedures can restrict both the photographer's movement and his view of an event. He has to decide if and to what purpose he will permit his camera to be recruited. When I first began work on this project *Machsom* (roadblocks), I positioned myself near a group of soldiers who were checking Palestinian cars at a checkpoint. I suddenly realised that the Palestinians were seeing me as part of the checkpoint procedure, my feelings were reinforced when a Palestinian man called me MOUCHABARAD, MOUCHABARAD (Israeli intelligence!) Traumatized and insulted I folded my equipment and went back home. My colleagues suggested I return and this time shoot from a car, a situation they said would enable me to adopt the point of view of a Palestinian being stopped and searched at a roadblock. I rejected that suggestion. I am not a Palestinian and could not simulate their suffering. I am not hurt by the roadblocks that are positioned there by my people. I returned to my original vantage point and continued to photograph" (Hon, 32).

I was seeing. At the demonstrations against the building of the wall, cameras were encouraged.* Organizers of the demos emphasized the importance of documenting the protests, not only to show their peaceful nature but also to capture any acts of aggression committed by the Israeli border guard. Carrying a camera in and of itself was an act of protest. Thus, when I photographed at checkpoints, for example, it was a way of protesting their existence. At the same time, I was very conscious of where I (and my camera) was positioned. As I photographed, I never changed my point of view. This was both a practical and a political decision. Wherever I was, wherever I planned to go, I never altered my movement or my position in order to "get a good photograph." I did not want to violate the welcome I was given when I was invited into people's homes, and so I photographed only where and when I was invited. In other circumstances, at checkpoints for example, my goal was to photograph quickly and surreptitiously. Since my small consumer quality digital camera did not have a commanding presence, I took advantage of this and merely took pictures as I conducted my routine. I did not, as many professional photographers might, go to places specifically in order to photograph, yet I took my camera with me everywhere. As I photographed, I was not aware that this method was a political move, but now I think that it was. I did not try to

Though Kratsman attempts to responsibly adopt a point of view vis-à-vis Palestinians crossing the checkpoints, I believe that by locating himself alongside the soldiers, he positions himself as a collaborator. His photographs do not show the restrictive nature of the checkpoints. His hesitance to adopt a position that causes him discomfort, and his insistence on positioning himself comfortably, is evident in those photographs. Although he may feel as though he shares certain privileges with the soldiers, despite disagreeing with their overall political agenda, I do not think this prohibits him from attempting to adopt a unique vantage point. Even if the position he selects is inconsistent with that of a "typical" Palestinian, if he hopes to show the inhumanity of the checkpoint, he should make the conscious decision to avoid positioning himself as a soldier. I believe that would allow for true empathy. Just think, if every Israeli were able to experience these checkpoints – and not as a soldier, perhaps the general Israeli public would begin to understand the true brutality of the occupation.



Kratsman. from *Machsom* series, (date unknown)

* "The wall" has also been termed the "Security Fence," by its avid supporters, "Apartheid Wall" by its staunch opponents, as well as "Separation Barrier" and "West Bank Barrier." It takes various forms along its route ranging from a 25-foot high concrete barrier to razor wire and/or electric fencing. It divides the West Bank from Israel though it cuts into large portions of the West Bank itself and does not follow any internationally recognized border or armistice line. It essentially re-draws the pre-1967 borders and divides Palestinian cities, villages, and farms, expropriating more land for Israel. Israel began constructing the wall in June 2002, and in 2004, the International Court of Justice in The Hague issued an advisory opinion stating that, "The construction of the wall being built by Israel..in the Occupied Palestinian Territory, including in and around East Jerusalem.. [is] contrary to international law" (*Legal Consequences...*). Despite this ruling, the wall continues to be built. According to B'tselem, an Israeli human rights NGO, it will run more than 700 miles upon completion.

emulate any particular point of view - that of a soldier, nor that of a Palestinian. I only later realized, however, that since I was passing through these checkpoints, rather than being stationed there all day, my point of view, perhaps, is closer to that of the Palestinian. However, I am not Palestinian, and for this reason, I did not feel entitled to photograph others when in these tense situations. My photographs of checkpoints are more about their imposing architecture or their imposition on the landscape than they are about their effect on the human experience: of waiting, of humiliation, of systemic violence.

Photographing also opened up opportunities for communicating. Despite the fact that John Berger does not seem to give the photographer's method of communication equal status to that of other artists, my camera, and my photographs, often gained me entry into conversation. Berger says, "The photographer's intelligence or his empathy with the subject defines for him what is appropriate. Yet unlike the story-teller or painter or actor, the photographer only makes, in any one photograph, *a single constitutive choice*: the choice of the instant to be photographed. The photograph, compared with other means of communication, is therefore weak in intentionality" (89-90, emphasis in original). I do not subscribe to the notion that the photograph is made in the single moment in which the shutter is pushed. I believe that both the process (photographing) *and* the product (photographs) are together, a unique form of communication. I used my camera, and the instant images that popped up on my camera's LCD screen, as tools for connecting with those I photographed.

My first time going through the Qalandia checkpoint, I was photographing out the window of the bus. Another passenger noticed and began telling me about the checkpoint and its effect on his daily routine. He lived in Ramallah and worked as anesthesiologist in Jerusalem and so he traveled through Qalandia every day. It was only by expressing interest through my camera that this stranger began speaking to me. I also found that showing people my images as they appeared on my LCD screen, as soon as I created them, provided an opportunity for a conversation. At one point, this even meant going to someone's house (though not a total stranger this time) so he could download all my photographs from my memory card to his computer.

I do not presume that photographs (and photographing) are all encompassing in their function as Berger may assume photographers to think. But Palestinians - random strangers and others I knew - often asked me whether Americans knew of what was going on in Palestine. In an attempt to reach different audiences through different methods and venues, making photographs, for me, was one way of making sure people would know.

In their *Forest* series, Adam Broomberg and Oliver Chanarin use photography to document the process of erasure as it regards Israel's expropriation of Palestinian land into its national park system. Since Israel's founding in 1948, over ten million pine trees have been planted within the country's shifting borders. However, say the artists, "These forests are planted on the ruins of Palestinian villages evacuated since 1948. They are a political construction, designed to obscure the layers of history evident in the landscape" (*Ecotopia*). Broomberg and Chanarin's photography, it could be argued, is the antithesis to my work. Whereas I use photography to document existence, they use it to document non existence. This concept of erasure or disappearance, however, is present in my cutout works. Like *Forest*, my map series (see page 26) depends on contextual knowledge to frame the works. Rather than providing this context in the works themselves, both series' use a very traditional concept in visual art - beauty - to attract a viewer who might otherwise be repelled.



Broomberg & Chanarin. *Rabin Park*, 2005

Millman. *Checkpoint, Al-Khalil*,
digital photograph, 2006



Millman. *Checkpoint, Qalandia*,
digital photograph, 2006

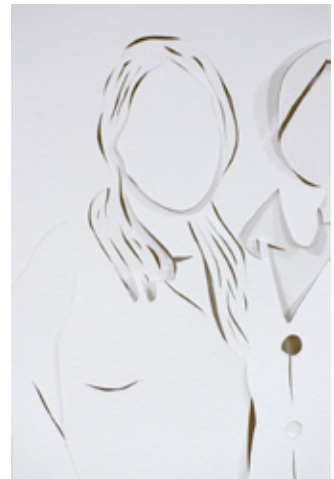


Millman. *Checkpoint, Bethlehem*,
digital photograph, 2006



Narratives: Image / Text / Text + Image

As we were on our way out, I thought I would snap one last picture, but Hussein's older sister accidentally walked into my photograph with her hair uncovered. I told her not to worry, and showed her that I was deleting it off my memory card. She indicated that I should take another one as soon as she arranges her headscarf, but then she paused, took it off and said, no no, it's ok, put her arm around her sister and smiled for me and my camera.

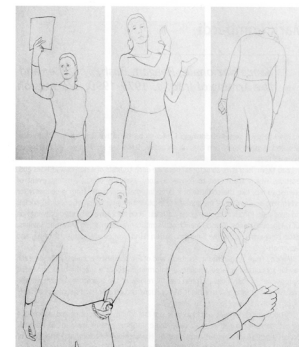


Narratives: Image

I trace photographs to allude to subjective reality. In my photographs I chronicle moments that actually happened – they are not fiction and the photographs are intended to serve as proof or evidence. However, by tracing, I drastically alter them. The images I create are removed from the photographic medium and transformed into drawings. Then I shape the images through cuts, bringing attention to certain visual elements. Through varying the amount of paper I incise or completely cut away, I control which elements are brought to the foreground and which recess back. By abstracting the photographs to such a degree, I can change their initial readings and create layered new ones. When I ignore the background setting and leave the page blank, a restaurant kitchen can be imagined as a checkpoint. Straight, harsh lines of countertops become decapitating barriers. In *Eight Soldiers and Their M-16s*, thin lines construct the form of a jeep, but they also violently split a landscape in half. A figure lying on a beach towel suddenly connotes death in *Salim. Said & Amr* draws a faceless portrait of two friends, representing both the anonymous individuals and the collective group. In *Hussein's Sisters*, the image may appear to only illustrate the text, yet once we read on we realize that my respect for these women in not showing the actual photograph is implied in the cutout picture. Unlike the photographs, the cutout images are no longer simple quotations from the physical visible world.

Each individual image and its accompanying text informs the choices I make in translating photography to cutout drawings. Alternately, in order to allude to their concealed nature, each image shares a similar form – fading images on white paper. This technique refers to the fact that these people and their histories are generally hidden or invisible.

Pia Lindman is an artist who alludes to newspaper photographs of people mourning in Palestine, Israel and America. She performs their gestures in front of a video camera and then traces their images, removed from the context of the original story. My work alludes to photography in a similar way, conflating the notions of authenticity with personal interpretation to generate a third meaning. However, Lindman, in an attempt to eliminate distinctions based on nationality or ethnicity in regards to suffering and mourning, appears to subscribe to the common notion that politically motivated violence between two parties is binary and equally weighted.



Lindman. *Languages of Mourning: Trauma and World Politics*, 2003

Narratives: Text

“He was wearing a yellow shirt, and looked very nervous,” Aharon Roseman, the cafe owner, told Channel 2 from a hospital bed, where he was recovering from light wounds. “He asked a waitress if she knew ‘what this is,’ pointing at his chest. I immediately understood what he meant. He set off the mechanism, I think with a lighter, said, ‘Allahu Akbar!’ ” -- God is great! – “and blew up.”

“Bombing, and Shooting of Arab Girl Deepen Fear in Israel.” *The New York Times*. August 13, 2001

The object of the game was to be the first one to get rid of all your cards. I won the first two, not because I was good but because some of the kids had a hard time figuring out the rules. When Fadi’s turn came along, I took a risk and shouted out “kazab!”* But I was wrong, so when he hollered “Allahu Akbar” I knew my winning streak was over.

*Kazab means “liar” and is also the name of the game

I kept a loose diary of my daily experiences while in Palestine. When I returned to the U.S., I found that I had an urgent need to relay every moment to my friends and family. Fighting the possibility that my memories would fade away and disappear, I went through my notebook and wrote down my memories in the form of short vignettes. I translated these moments to works on paper, which pair text and image. In this series, I narrate my encounters throughout Palestine in various circumstances. The vignettes relay small moments as I stand up to Israeli soldiers, joke about atrocity, embarrass myself at checkpoints or attempt to hide my American-Israeli identity. I intertwine personal experience, history and traditional storytelling to tackle controversial topics, reshape stereotypes or simply observe.

Everything I saw and experienced was filtered through my own politicized lens, and I often found it difficult to disassociate some of the simplest moments from the overarching political arena. So when I resort to name-calling during a card game and my opponent shouts “Allahu Akbar” just as he is about to win the round, I can’t help but laugh at the fact that we are both, in some sense, playing with and against our own stereotypes. Yet this small episode simply chronicles the joyful end of a card game – exclaiming delight at winning after being the loser for so long. I call Fadi a liar, as the Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Olmert may call the Palestinian Prime Minister Ismail Haniya an “unwilling partner for peace.” In response, Fadi yells the widely reported Arabic phrase (probably second to “Death to America”), which the US media has made synonymous with Islamic fundamentalism or militant fanaticism. I hope that by retelling and reshaping moments like these, I can help to redefine images that many Americans do not question.

However, I wasn’t always playing card games. Often, I found myself in situations that were representative of the political condition, and humanitarian crisis, at large. At these times, I fixated on the moments that were tangential. For example, in *Qalandia Kiss*, I peripherally describe the heavy amount of security equipment that I need to pass through. But the story reaches its climax when I mistake the word “kiss” for “bus” and thus embarrass myself in front of a young boy. This feeling of embarrassment becomes the focus while the environ of the checkpoint lurks in the background. Yet, I do not illustrate this text with a kiss, the image I chose to accompany the text is based on a photograph of the checkpoint: a closed and sealed interior with an arrow pointing toward an unknown destination. This work alludes to the vast system of checkpoints that have permeated Palestinian society in the West Bank; it points out the sheer fact that these checkpoints

are now so integrated into social interactions among Palestinians who pass, or can't pass, through them. Instead of being didactic, this piece integrates the injustice into the everyday, which is exactly how checkpoints function, as a daily tedium, intended to eventually break society and disconnect Palestinian communities from each other.

These textual vignettes also speak to more general ideas. My periodic use of (bad) Arabic shows how vital language can be in connecting with people. In only one vignette I speak in Hebrew, but I force the conversation to switch to Arabic out of respect for the place I am visiting and the people I am speaking with. It should also be noted that Palestinians, and Arabs in general, are very proud of the Arabic language. For this reason, the use of Arabic has an even greater cultural significance, as it is not a neutral language of communication. In fact, I was not learning the Arabic of day-to-day communication, but a "higher" form. Each country (and cities and villages within those countries) have their own spoken dialect. I was learning Modern Standard Arabic, or Fusha, which is situated in between Quranic Arabic and the general Palestinian dialect and is considered to be the literary form of Arabic (and the shared language of the news media across the Arabic speaking world). My impression while travelling was that so few foreigners travelling in Palestine know Arabic, that even my meager attempt to speak this written version endeared me to others.

These writings also use humor and sarcasm. Not only is this tone closer to my true nature of speaking than any of my previous work, but I believe this tone serves as an entryway for broaching topics that might otherwise seem too heavy handed. Seriousness infused with humor leaves the reader unsettled, which is the intended effect. In *Bisan*, I start with a joke as I arbitrarily change my name to Fatima, but only in a footnote do we understand the significance of names and naming. The name that Wujdan and the *shebab* deemed me two days after I was Fatima is not merely a pretty name, it is the name that commemorates the destruction and elimination of a piece of Palestine.

Narrative: Image + Text

The photographs that I took, traced, and then cut out of paper, frame the textual narrative and place each moment in a point in time. The texts rely on the images both as documents to validate their authenticity and also as visual metaphors to complement or oppose the literal narrative. Neither the images nor the texts is simple. They do not illustrate or explain each other, but together they form a third meaning.

Roland Barthes claims that, “In the traditional forms of illustration the image functioned as an episodic return to denotation from a principal message (the text) which was experienced as connoted since, precisely, it needed an illustration; in the relationship that now holds, it is not the image which comes to elucidate or ‘realize’ the text, but the latter which comes to sublimate, patheticize or rationalize the image” (25). In other words, at one time, when image and text were paired, the image was merely intended to clarify the writing, to put a visual picture in place of an implied one. However, he claims, the current relationship between image and caption is reversed. In these instances, the text explains what we are shown and focuses our reading of the image. My narrative work doesn’t operate in either fashion. My images border between the literal and the abstract. In most cases, we can comprehend what we are looking at, and they are not necessarily significant in any momentous way: a portrait, a figure, a clump of abstract shapes. Once we read the text, the image is not any “clearer.” It is only reframed. The woman’s hair in the portrait now takes on an added significance when we learn that she consciously left it uncovered for the photograph; the figure in the frame now appears trapped; the shapes become a pile of rocks symbolizing land and one person’s connection to it. Yet the text alone does not provide us with these readings. The images speak back to the written passages. The texts, written from a first person voice, are mere observations and perceptions. Many are simply quotations taken from casual conversations. Without the images, they could be read as insignificant snippets. But the visuals load conversations and inflate moments. Rather than providing a literal illustration, the intricate detail of the cut imagery makes us read the sentence closer as we search for its underlying narrative. The images also provide a subjective form of “proof” that these written moments occurred. The people in the texts are not posing as models or drawn as multipurpose clip art. They are unique enough that we assume that those we see are the same ones we meet in the texts. Even though they are often faceless figures, their postures or gestures describe an individual who existed at a point in time.

Together, the images and texts connote much more than they literally describe. The images and the texts are translations of my everyday experiences and observations. But through my eyes, nothing in Palestine is benign. Mundane moments such as lying on the beach, exchanging photographs, or waiting for a bus, speak to large issues such as refugee formation, land confiscation, and violence.

Invisibility, Disappearance, Fragmentation

Umm Sa'ad Radi said she wanted nothing. 'They took Palestine? Let them have it. I just want to visit the grave to make sure I buried him correctly. I don't care about al-Kabri or anywhere else, they're all going to disappear.'

--Elias Khoury, from *Gate of the Sun* (190).

*I go through a path of wings like glass.
Transparent and have no shadow,
Free myself, trap my limbs within my limbs,
And like the sparkle of a pearl
I strike the eyes and return to my pupils.*

-- Adonis (Ali Ahmad Said), Song



Davies. *Palestine: A Homeland Denied*, 1979

The *Nakba*, which chronicles the same period of time as Israel's establishment and expansion, is only one example of Palestinian history that is kept out of the dominant historical narrative. In a 1969 interview with the London Sunday Times, then Prime Minister of Israel, Golda Meir said, "It was not as though there was a Palestinian people in Palestine considering itself as a Palestinian people and we came and threw them out and took their country away from them. They did not exist" (qtd. from Giles 3). By denying their mere existence, in line with the Zionist myth of, "A land without a people for a people without a land," Israeli policy makers slowly eliminated Palestinian voices. Israel tries to continue this process of cultural erasure. Even where Palestinians still reside, the Arabic names of streets and villages are either omitted from maps or renamed in Hebrew. The wall that snakes around and cuts into the West Bank blocks all views into Palestine. The Israeli permit system, which not only prohibits one population from mingling with the other has also led to "their [the Palestinians] apparent absence within the West Bank itself" (Keshet, 70) since Palestinians need to obtain Israeli permits to travel in certain places within their own territory. In several of my projects, I translate these political devices, which remove Palestinians from view, both literally and metaphorically, by creating nearly invisible, fragmented, and white-on-white images.

Cutting drawings out of paper, using incision as line, is violent and permanent. The act of cutting fragments the paper. Sometimes the cuts refer to the carving out of borders or the dividing up of land. In every case they provide contours to define the aesthetic of the images. In the figurative forms, scalps detach from heads, hands from arms, legs from torsos. In almost all cases, the figure is cut away from its external, blank environment. The cut is permanent. I use this formal technique as a metaphor for the fragmented nature of Palestine and Palestinians.

There is no doubt that the land of Palestine is fragmented. It was divided in 1947 when the United Nations partitioned historic Palestine into two states: a Jewish one and an Arab one. It was divided again after the 1948 war and again in 1967. The Oslo accords led to its dissection again into many pieces, and currently the wall, checkpoints, and bypass roads continue to splinter it into smaller and smaller bits. The people themselves are similarly fragmented. Some found themselves displaced once in 1948 and then again in 1967, and they are often defined by which borders they live between. Those in Israel's 1948 borders have a different history than those who live in the post-1967 borders. Those in Gaza share a different experience than those in the West Bank. Jerusalemites are their own

An added consequence to cut imagery is its shadow. When hung against a wall and lit from the front, the open spaces of the cut paper create matching shadows behind. These shadows are enticing because of their elusiveness. Shadows are temporal. They change their size and intensity and allude to images while keeping them at a perceptual and physical distance. Roberto Casati describes shadows as, "a disturbing example of lesser entities: they are a diminution of the objects that project them. They are flat, immaterial, and without qualities, without color. Their outlines enclose an indistinct interior. But above all they are absences, negative things." (6, emphasis in original). I see them as one more layer in a complex relationship between the tangible, the ephemeral, the visible and the vanishing. My shadows represent land, people or objects that exist in a hidden place, in memory or in the subconscious. They are connected to the tangible, yet they are not there.



Millman. *Restricted & Prohibited* [detail], incised paper, 42"x92" 2006

class in themselves. Communities are divided from each other just as individuals find themselves acquiring new identities on top of old ones. I met one family who once lived in Brazil. The mother and all the children hold Brazilian citizenship even though most of the children, now in their 20s, have no memories of having lived there. I also met a 16 year old boy with U.S. citizenship who had never been to the U.S. though his immediate family (including his parents) lived in pre-Katrina New Orleans and now lives in post-Katrina Mississippi. One of my Arabic teachers at Al-Quds University, originally from Al-Khalil, held Jerusalem residency and told me of her dilemma of whether to apply for Israeli citizenship or retain her citizen-less Jerusalemite status. She had political, cultural, and practical concerns with adopting citizenship. As an Israeli, she would hold a more permanent residency status. Many Jerusalemites she knew had their residency revoked for being absent from Jerusalem for “too long.” These instances included living abroad, or accepting a job, buying property, or moving in with family in the West Bank. The loss of Jerusalem residency also means the loss of job and educational opportunities and freedom of movement and travel. She was also afraid that as the building of the wall progressed and checkpoints became electronically monitored, she would eventually lose her residency for travelling to the West Bank, again, “too much” as she owned a house in Abu Dis.* But while Israeli citizenship might grant her certain practical benefits, it might eliminate others. Israeli citizens, whether Jewish or Palestinian-Arab, are prohibited by law from travelling into the West Bank or Gaza. In addition, she could not reconcile the idea of becoming a citizen of Israel with her political and cultural consciousness. As of this summer of 2006, she decided to risk uncertainty and put her citizenship application on hold. She also abandoned her house in Abu Dis. This complicated layering of identities is prevalent throughout Palestine.

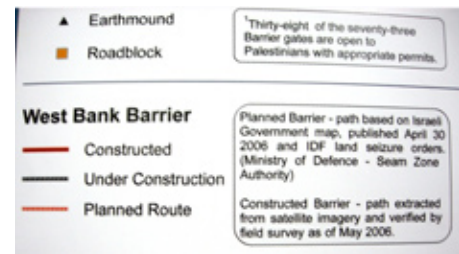
* Abu Dis is about two kilometers from Jerusalem though it is within the Greater Jerusalem municipal boundaries. It is also on the Palestinian side of the wall.

Maps

I purchased a map of Jerusalem at a chain bookstore in Tel Aviv before heading out to begin my class at Al-Quds University. In search of Nablus Road, I followed the map in the general direction of East Jerusalem, the Palestinian neighborhood of the city, which was occupied after the 1967 war. Despite knowing that Nablus Road was a major street, I couldn't locate it on the map. When I asked people around Damascus Gate where it was, I was directed right across the gate's arch. As I moved closer, I saw that this road had two names, both of which were posted on the façade of a corner building. In Hebrew I was able to read "Shchem" which was labeled on my map, in Arabic I was able to read "Nablus" which wasn't.



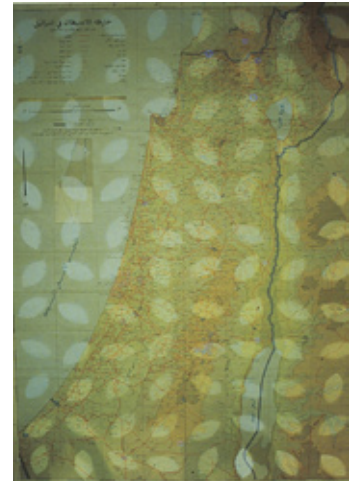
West Bank: Access & Closure (June 2006)



A poster-size map issued by the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) titled: *West Bank: Access and Closure* (June 2006) forms the basis for one of my projects. This map, which is one of many that I acquired from OCHA in East Jerusalem, is updated every few months to reflect current situations in Jerusalem, the West Bank and Gaza. For example, as checkpoints are built, relocated or dismantled, OCHA documents these changes. The information illustrated on this map is complex and nuanced. It outlines Israeli settlements, “closed” military areas, and marks checkpoints, barriers, and gates. To the untrained viewer, it may not be immediately clear how these lines and symbols - the facts on the ground - affect the people who reside in or travel through the area. The bypass roads which are restricted only to “Israeli” cars bearing yellow license plates, (as opposed to “Palestinian” green ones) are drawn in blue. The wall in its varying stages – planned, completed, or currently under construction – is marked in broken red, solid red, and broken black line. This single map shows the numerous physical devices that restrict movement and cut Palestine into pieces (see page 75 for an enlarged map).

In this project, I created three visual interpretations of the OCHA map. Each of my three maps isolates a single element described in the original. Using the lines of the legend that describe each restricting device, I trace and cut one at a time. *Planned and Constructed* follows the route of the wall; *Restricted and Prohibited* follows the direction of Jewish-only roads. *Areas A & B* outlines the areas to be controlled either fully or partially by the Palestinian Authority according to the now defunct Oslo agreement. The cutout areas of each work split the paper to such a degree that it takes the form of a three-dimensional object. Referring to the fragmented land of Palestine itself, this single sheet of paper verges on disintegration.

One of the three pieces, *Planned and Constructed*, takes its title from the legend on the original map. The work conflates all phases of the wall into a single line. It is a tracing that has been cut out and away from a large sheet of paper. It has the appearance of an abstracted shape; a thin, jagged strip separates one portion of the paper from the other. The paper appears to be falling apart as it tries to peel away from itself. The large falling shape is the landmass of the new Palestine: the West Bank as it has been reshaped by wall, dividing it from Israel. The white paper represents the land, but the thin strip, the wall, is not a securing presence. As it makes tight and sharp angles, incising the otherwise pristine paper, we see how this small strip affects the entire page, or geographic area, encircling areas which drop out or barely hang on.



Glotman. untitled, 1993

Joshua (Shuka) Glotman is an Israeli artist who works with maps. In his untitled work from 1993, he uses a map of Palestine in which all the settled areas are labeled in Arabic. He uses these labels as evidence of Arab ownership prior to Israel's. “It is language which occupies the land through the processes of naming that appropriate and override existing histories, says Glotman's map: change the language and one changes the very ownership of both the terrain and the history” (Rogoff 84).



Glotman. untitled [detail], 1993

The feeling of fragility and fragmentation that we see as this single sheet of paper is cut into pieces, just barely holding together, feeds into the idea that this wall and the route it takes is further segmenting the land of Palestine. Large pieces of paper have been completely removed where the wall fully encircles Palestinian land. Some villages are being squeezed and cut out of the landscape while others are surrounded by Israeli settlements and thus appropriated into Israeli borders.

Planned and Constructed, as well as the other two works, also resembles a larger-than-life body. It is just under eight-feet high, extending down to the ground. But even though this body is beautiful, it is not healthy. Organs and veins are spilling out of its shell. It only barely supports its own weight. The heaviness and natural curl of the paper is working against itself as it tries to fall down and fold up.

Though I made these cutout drawings by tracing an actual map, they are not meant to be instructive. As each work focuses on one specific type of barrier or border, it also omits others: checkpoints, settlements, roadblocks and watchtowers, as well as the green line. Instead, each work is intended to provoke an emotional response: to the wall, to borders, or to dividing roads as symbols of the scarring, cutting, fragmenting occupation.



Hatoum. *Present Tense*, 1996

Mona Hatoum's work *Present Tense*, a sculptural installation of soap and beads, also draws from the Oslo era map. She arranged square bars of olive oil soap, a traditional product of Nablus, north of Jerusalem, into a grid form and set red glass beads in them, outlining the shapes of these drawn borders. Her piece elicited multiple readings: Palestinian viewers recognized the smell immediately and thus to Hatoum, using Palestinian-produced soap became a symbol of resistance. Jewish viewers, however, associated the soap with Holocaust concentration camps ("Michael Archer in Conversation with Mona Hatoum" qtd. from Prochaska, 85).



Hatoum. *Present Tense* [detail], 1996

Martyrs

When I visited some of the major urban centers: Ramallah, Bethlehem, Jericho, I was both intrigued and repelled by the imagery contained in the martyr posters plastered around those cities. I photographed these posters, intending to “export” the street-side Palestinian-made images to the U.S. Upon my return, I realized that to a Western viewer, the faces of the martyrs, often posing with an ominous weapon and sometimes in the foreground of a spectacular scene of masked gunmen and religious iconography, looked violent and menacing. I saw them differently. Often times, the martyr, possibly killed by Israeli troops in an “accident,” isn’t posing with a weapon but smiles from the shoulders up as in a high school yearbook portrait. I interpreted these images as a visual scream. They scream at the Israeli occupation and at the murder of Palestinians who actively resist it. Yet these martyrs, viewed as freedom fighters and symbols of resistance, have become invisible in the same way, I believe, Israel hopes that the Palestinian struggle and Palestinians themselves will disappear. They have been simply stamped as terrorists, demonized, dehumanized, and defined as perpetrators of violence rather than victims of the occupation. I decided to take these screams and transform them into whispers in the hope that those who may be repelled by the photographs’ deafening noise, will instead listen to their new form. This quiet translation takes the form of embossments: colorless images pressed into blank pieces of paper. By making vanishing prints, I draw attention to a political and cultural policy of erasure and de-contextualization.

Kara Walker’s silhouettes have been a great influence on my work in several ways, some of which are more apparent than others. She has been able to condense layers of history, identity, sexuality, and racialized mythologies into simple paper cutouts. Her work, however, is far from subtle. Her black and white silhouettes are graphic and complex representations of the South’s racist history. Formally, and to a smaller extent conceptually, my work draws from hers. The martyr series mimics silhouettes through their simple rendering, yet unlike Walker’s black and white silhouettes, mine are visually without contrast. My series relies on a single color. Instead of drawing attention to a contentious history, it uses a lack of contrast or color to refocus our awareness on a hidden piece of it. Here, the phenomenon of the martyr maintains its mythical status, but it is reshaped into a disappearing icon of a passionate but losing form of resistance. Walker’s work also informed my choice to transform my photographic images into paper cutouts. Though again, I use the form differently. While her aesthetic choices borrow from an 18th century practice of literally tracing human forms from behind a lit screen, each of my traced cutouts relies on the cut itself as much as on the image it forms and traces.



Walker. *World's Exposition* [detail], 1997

Additional Precedents & Influences: Emily Jacir

Emily Jacir has probably been one of my greatest influences to date. In her work, activism and art making is inextricably linked. She alludes to oral histories and present-day realities through a variety of means. *Return* points to the common tragedy of the *Nakba*'s first victims who left their houses with their coffee still unfinished, never to return. In her series, *Where We Come From*, she fulfills the symbolic dreams and practical requests from Palestinians from all over the world, in inaccessible areas throughout Palestine. Even before this series, I was drawn to the way she engaged others in her work. In *From Texas With Love* we can listen to the songs that many Palestinians would choose to listen to if allowed to drive long distances without being interrupted by checkpoints. In her *Memorial to 418 Palestinian Villages which were Destroyed, Depopulated and Occupied by Israel in 1948*, she enlisted a small community of people to help embroider a canvas refugee tent with the names of these villages. I greatly admire her conceptual approach. It is clear that she is haunted and angered by every aspect of the Israeli occupation. Her position as an American, or rather, a Palestinian with dual identity is also apparent, and she acknowledges this part of herself in a way that further engages us with the scattered nature of the Palestinian existence. Her work reflects her own privilege as an American citizen, but embedded within it is also a sadness that comes with being an individual in a form of exile.

I hope my work affects others in the way that Jacir's work has touched me. In *Where We Come From*, her presence underlies the work. In my narrative pieces, *I* am essential to the work. However, I am going to Palestine and meeting Palestinians for the very first time. I allow myself to be pulled from person to person and place to place, and I ask my viewer to come with me regardless of how hesitant I am myself. Jacir asks her viewers to identify with the loss of a homeland, the removal from one's family, the yearning for a memory. She is both insider and outsider. I am part outsider, part occupier, and part sympathizer.



Jacir. *Return*, 2003

Additional Precedents & Influences: Elia Suleiman

Filmmaker Elia Suleiman has been immensely successful in melding narrative, irony, humor and political sensibilities. His works, which include several shorts and two feature films, *Chronicle of a Disappearance* and *Divine Intervention*, have a distinct aesthetic. Linda Butler describes his style as “a progression of sketches – witty, surreal, ironic, often devastating – and a virtual absence of narrative” (63). Suleiman’s films do not subscribe to an easily defined genre, though they use the qualities of film, as a creative medium, in a very deliberate manner. Audio, for example, is used sparingly. His films are very quiet, but when he does use sound, it is symbolically loaded. In one scene in *Chronicle...*, we see an older character (Suleiman’s real-life father) encouraging his silent, caged bird to sing. After several frustrating attempts, the character leaves the scene, and only then do we hear sound of the singing bird. When the bird is trapped under the watchful eye of its proprietor, it stubbornly resists, yet when it is alone (yet still caged), it produces music. Visually, Suleiman’s films are also quite stunning. Camera movement is minimal and each scene functions like a moving photograph. These photographs keep us at a distance, and we are rarely allowed close up view. His actors do not appear to be actors, but rather everyday people. (In fact when I was in Nazareth in June, I recognized one of the storefronts from *Chronicle...* and when I went inside, the shopkeeper from the film was sitting behind the counter. His name is Jamal Daher. He is a friend of Suleiman’s and acted in both of his feature films.) Suleiman himself is also a character, the main character in fact, in both of his features and several of his shorts, though he appears in less than half the scenes and he never speaks. He is silent and observant yet the audience is never quiet clear as to what he’s thinking about. Instead, his subdued presence juxtaposed with loudness – aggressive Israeli soldiers, or malfunctioning audio/video equipment and cell phone ringing – reads as ironic and somewhat sad.

It is difficult to say what his films are about. His films are translated observations. The vignettes that bind his films juxtapose the charged with the banal. They depict life’s absurd moments in front of a highly politicized backdrop. Even he is unclear as to what his films are about. He says that *Divine Intervention* is “about a man who’s losing his father, who is dying, and he’s losing the woman, who’s on the other side of the border. But it’s not really about that, in fact. I mean I speak near the subject, I never really talk about it—I don’t have that presumption . . .” (qtd. from Butler 72). However, when he mentions the word “subject” I get lost. The subject is not his father, his love interest, or even the Israeli occupation. The work is about how all these things connect or clash or inform each other. For what other reason would he include a scene where he blows up a tank with an absent-minded toss of an apricot pit out of a car window?

Like Suleiman’s films, my work is also a series of vignettes. My observations shape my work and only as a whole does a theme emerge. As I get dragged around to wedding parties or am left waiting at checkpoints, the Israeli occupation serves as a frame around a general sensibility. In addition, he appears in his films much like I am present in my narratives. Yet he is silent while I am always talking or thinking aloud. He pairs silence and picture similar to the way I combine language and image. I rely on my images to convey silence he refers, my voice, however, lends the irony and humor that his character’s silent yet watchful presence often embodies.



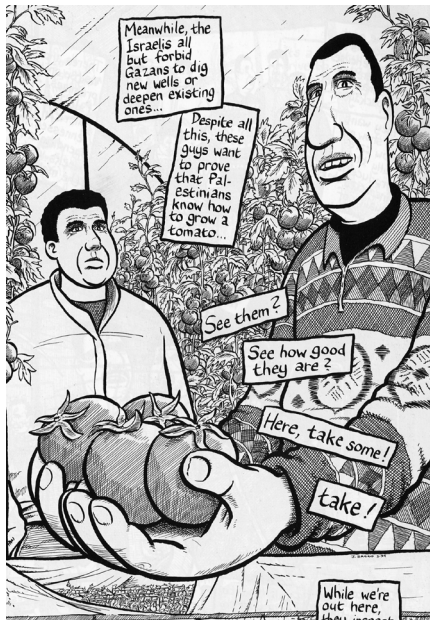
Suleiman. film still from *Divine Intervention*, 2002

Additional Precedents & Influences: Joe Sacco

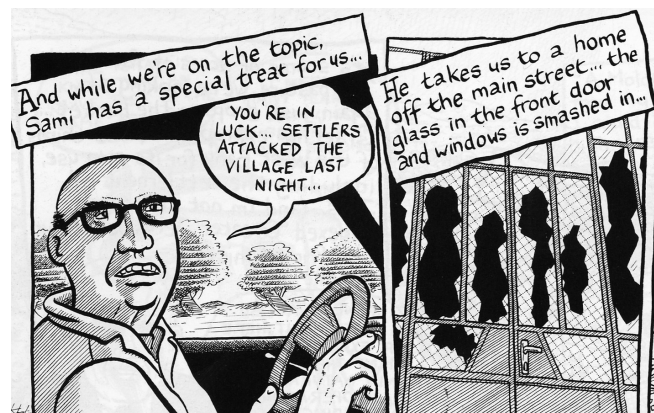
Joe Sacco's *Palestine* is a reportage style comic book based on a two-month visit to Gaza and the West Bank where he interviewed more than a hundred Palestinians and Israelis. Unlike typical documentary accounts of Palestine, he inserts himself in every moment. He posits himself as either a listener, as one man tells his story of being interrogated by the Israeli army, or as a player, as he breaks curfew to visit the friends of his guide in a Gaza refugee camp. He is one of the few characters we remember and he is the only character who is present throughout the book. In my narrative works, I am also the main character. I voice my unspoken thoughts, re-tell conversations, and recount moments.

Sacco's writing is riddled with wit and sarcasm, and his images often function as self-deprecating jokes. In one episode, he is invited to dinner at a home in a Gaza refugee camp. As he is sitting at the dinner table, narrating the poor conditions of the home and commenting on his host's lack of appetite, he is also thinking about how much he loves eating. He says, "me? I've never been a mousy guest..." (174) while stuffing his mouth with what looks like hummus and bread. At the same time, every story he finds, or at least every story he chooses to tell, is framed by the Israeli occupation. Evidence of a Palestinian "culture" is secondary to evidence of Palestinian suffering. Old women wearing embroidered dresses offer tea as their sons recount being abused; farmers insisting on sharing their tomatoes are under a text box that explains the Israeli practice of controlling the water supply. Every character is first and foremost a casualty. The farmer, the refugee, the political prisoner, the child - all these people are victims. We see only glimpses of what it means to live in Palestine, day-to-day, as a Palestinian.

Sacco's comic, and the risks he takes, has had a tremendous influence on my narrative works. Not only does he take an incredible risk by translating the atrocities of the Israeli occupation into what has been largely considered a child's medium (though Art Spiegelman had previously pushed that boundary in 1991 with *Maus*), the way in which he inserts his presence and uses his own voice has given me the courage to do the same. Though I too use humor and sarcasm to frame events that are quite serious, with one exception (*Yusef's picture*), I avoid a discussion of violence. Instead, I choose to focus on the moments that celebrate Palestinians' resilient ability to keep a strong culture and maintain a strong identity as they live under the occupation's shadow.



Sacco. *Palestine* (chapter 6, p.171), 2001



Sacco. *Palestine* (chapter 3, p. 64), 2001

Dilemmas

About a day after the Israelis started to bomb Gaza, I was sitting on the beach with Tal, watching the waves and listening to the repetitive clapping of the paddleball players. But I remembered where I was, and where I wasn't, when the clap of the bouncing ball was joined by the roaring of fighter jets returning from the south.

As an American-Israeli Jew, I am certainly not in a position to narrate history as experienced by Palestinians, especially since I experience life in Palestine much differently than those who are prohibited from traveling between Palestinian cities or to the other side of the Green Line. I am privileged. I can afford the air travel to Ben Gurion Airport. My Israeli passport and Jewish last name gain me easy entry into the country, and I can always retreat to my family's apartment in downtown Tel Aviv if I tire of being tear gassed or harassed. My home will probably never be demolished and my chances of being caught in the middle of an air attack during my afternoon shopping are slim. However, I think we all have the ability to empathize. We can all attempt to understand the experiences of others. My dilemma is how to factor in my reality, another's reality and my empathy with it in a way that doesn't seem too didactic, too vague or too "politically correct." In addition, how do I weigh these factors so that my work does not speak only to a single audience? Am I speaking only to liberal guilt-ridden Jews, left-wing Americans, Palestinian exiles, apolitical museum-goers? I am still not certain who my audience is, whether I should know who my audience is, or whether I need to direct my work to a particular audience or group of audiences. And how, when I direct my work to a Jewish, a Palestinian, an Israeli, or an Arab audience, for example, can I make sure that I have some control in shaping their experience?

Conclusion

The text below is excerpted from a blog that I kept during the summer:

Tuesday, August 15, 2006

“How are you enjoying our Occupied Country?”

The title comes from a conversation we had with the father of one of the friends we made in Farkha. My response, “Except for the Occupation it’s a wonderful place”. Our friend’s name is Hussein (though everyone calls him Sein) and we visited him and his family in Beit Anan last week. He was born in Brazil and holds Brazilian citizenship along with his brother and mother, though he speaks only Arabic (and shway – a little – Hebrew). He met us in Ramallah with his cousin Muhammad (Karlos) and they showed us a good time around the city and an awesome time in his sister’s village of Beit Duku... Sein’s father works in the Ministry of Education in Ramallah and is a member of Fatah. He also knows how to make you feel really guilty when it’s time to go home.

Some more notes:

On the service taxi from Beit Duku to Beit Anan, I met a 16 year old kid who looked 12. He was with (I think) his grandmother. He was born in the US and an American citizen. His grandmother flashed his passport at the checkpoints. She isn’t an American, though she told me that some, I think 2 or 4, of her children still live in the US. At least one lived in New Orleans and was displaced after Hurricane Katrina, now they live in Mississippi. My vagueness with the details comes from the time delay and the fact that all conversations recorded (exceptions noted) are in my lousy Arabic.

I saw that kid the next day in Beit Anan when I returned for a wedding.

Even in the villages, the girls are saucy once the headscarves come off. They congratulated me for being unmarried at the ripe age of 31.

When you’re invited for dinner, be prepared to eat.

There’s a fine line between a warm welcome and a kidnapping. Our visits have always ended with a nonviolent struggle, an insistent invitation to return again, and heavy feelings of guilt.

Five months later, someone commented on this post. The comment reads:

“My son told me that he met an American about a year ago, I think it was you. I was searching for Beit Anan and your article came up on Google. It described my son to the T. I think I know the guy you talked about Hussein, their dad’s name is Mohammed who was my English teacher. I am glad that you visited our village and saw how Palestinians treats [sic] people and how hospitable they are.”

That last sentence resonates with me. Here is an anonymous stranger, thanking me for visiting his village. I think he is also thanking me for reporting on what I saw, for bringing an account of his village into the public domain and giving his world some degree of visibility. This is precisely the kind of response I hope my work will generate.

I traveled to Palestine as a student, an artist and an activist, but foremost I was there as an observer. My work chronicles these observations.

Images



Millman. 2007, *Ramallah*, digital photograph, 2006



Millman. *Car dealership. Jerusalem to Qalandia*, digital photograph, 2006



Millman. *Bayan, on the way to Ariha (Jericho)*, digital photograph, 2006



Millman. *Amr and Sana. Farkha*, digital photograph, 2006



Millman. *Qalandia Checkpoint (pedestrian waiting area)*, digital photograph, 2006



Millman. *A kid and his slingshot, Bil'in*, digital photograph, 2006



Millman. *The Hamiedeh home & family photographs. Beit 'Anan*, digital photograph, 2006



Millman. *Column. Ramallah*, digital photograph, 2006



Millman. *A soldier at a weekly demonstration against the Wall. Bil'in*, digital photograph, 2006



Many of the *shebab* (youth) had a hard time remembering my name, so I told them to just call me Fatima. The next day, everyone was calling me Fatima, even guys who weren't around the day before, so I told them, "No, that was yesterday, today my name is Khadija". On the third day, the *shebab* surrounded me first thing in the morning, begging to know if my name was still Khadija or if it was something else today. I told them that today, they could choose my name. After a few were voiced, Wujdan stepped in to mediate the discussion, apparently the *shebab* were suggesting names that were "not beautiful". In the end, the name they could all agree upon was Bisan. And so on Friday, I was Bisan.*

*Six thousand Arabs were expelled from the city of Bisan in 1948. Many were loaded onto trucks and taken across the Syrian and Jordanian borders. Today, no Palestinian residents of Bisan remain.



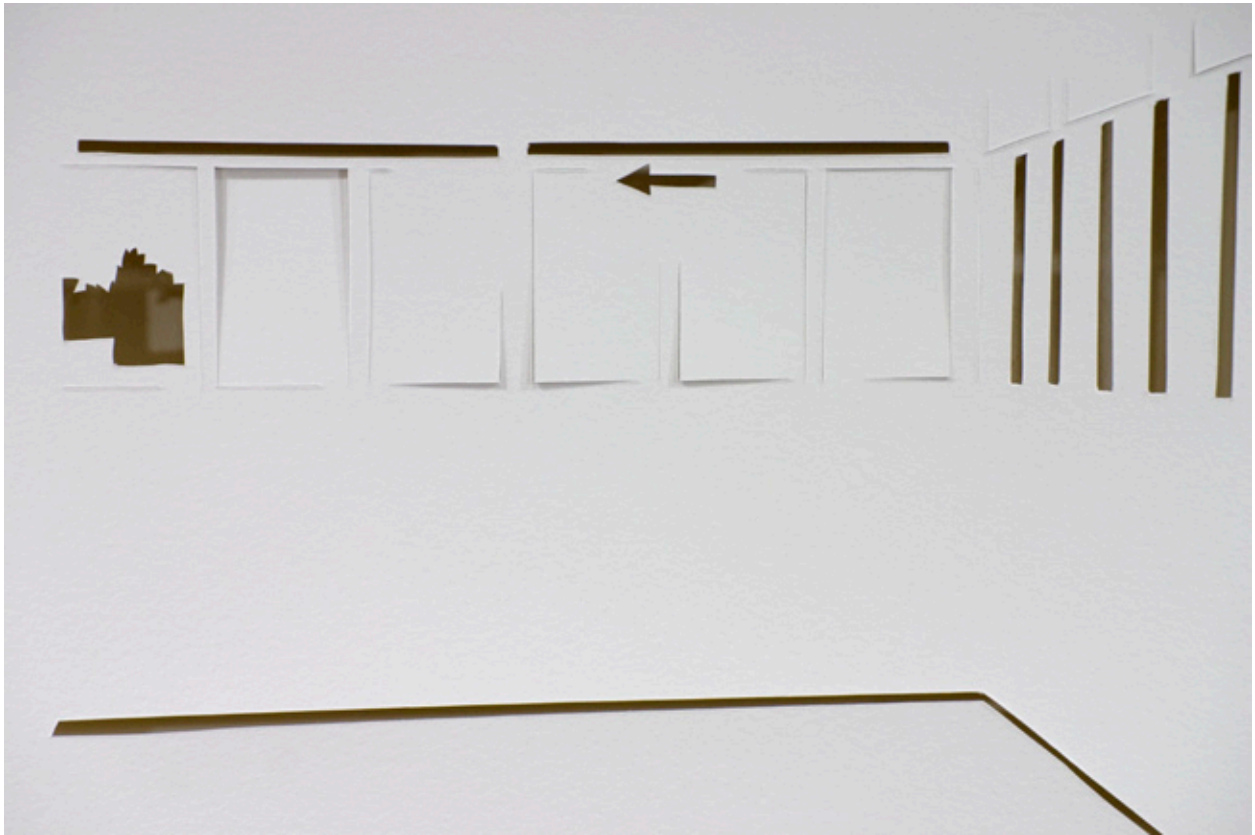
Millman. *Bisan* [detail], incised paper and ink, 15"x 22" 2006



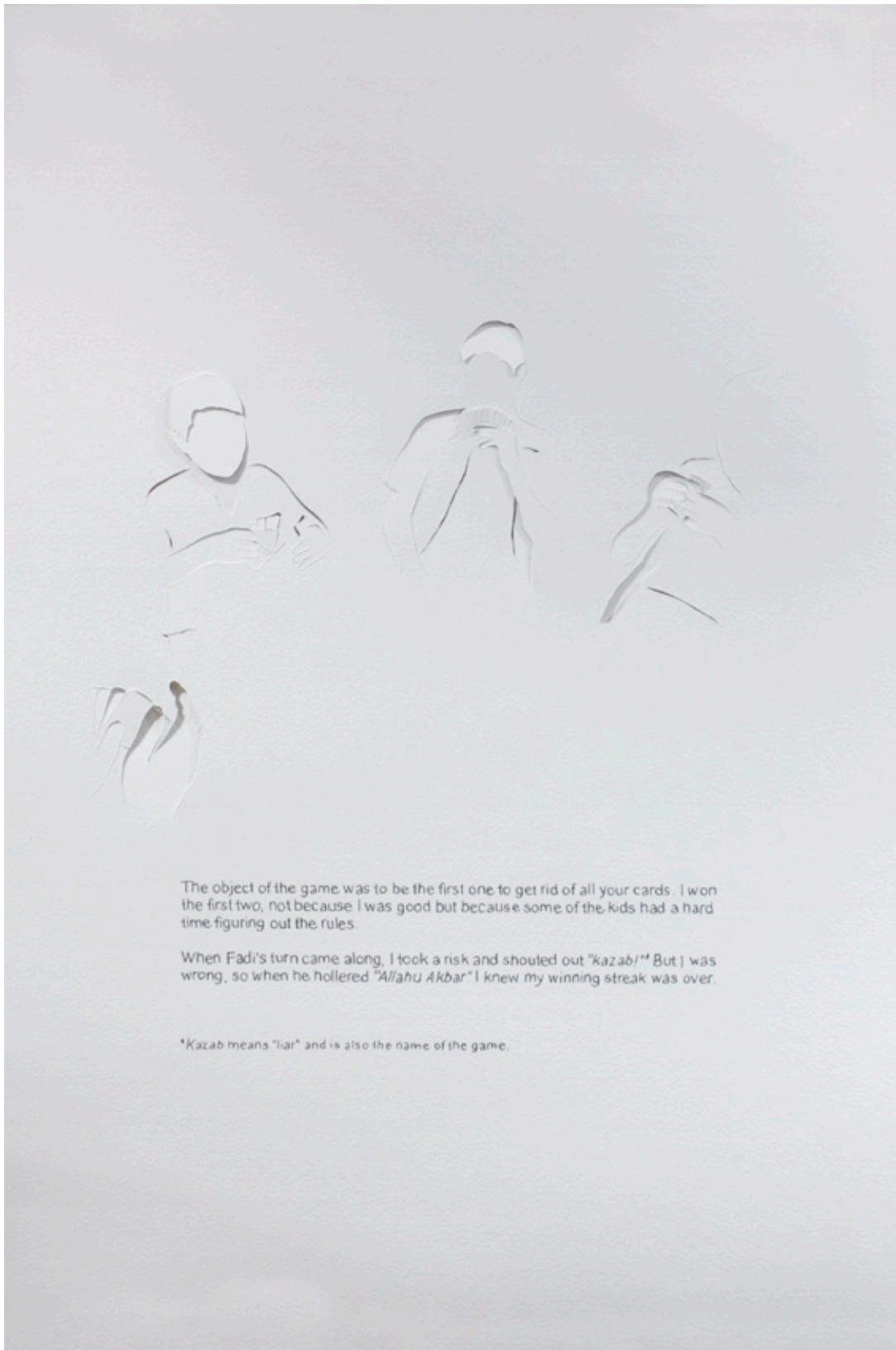
My first time coming back through Qalandia, the bus driver left us on the Palestinian side and motioned that he would pick us up on the other side of the checkpoint. Once we passed through the three gates, the metal detector, and put our things through the x-ray machine, I walked to where I believed the bus would pick me up. I saw a young boy there, he was maybe around 13 years old. Afraid I wouldn't recognize our bus, and be left behind, I asked him, "nahnu fi nafsil bas?"* And when he smiled and said yes, I pointed to the bus and I asked, "hada basna?"** And he repeated what I said, emphasizing the "basna" with a nod and a grin, while his mother smiled in the background. I later realized that I asked him, "hada boosna?"*** and not "basna" and so then I understood the reason for his grin. I enjoyed it when people laughed at me, especially at checkpoints.

*Are we in the same bus?
**This is our bus?
***This is our kiss?

Millman. *Qalandia Kiss*, incised paper and ink, 15"x 22" 2006



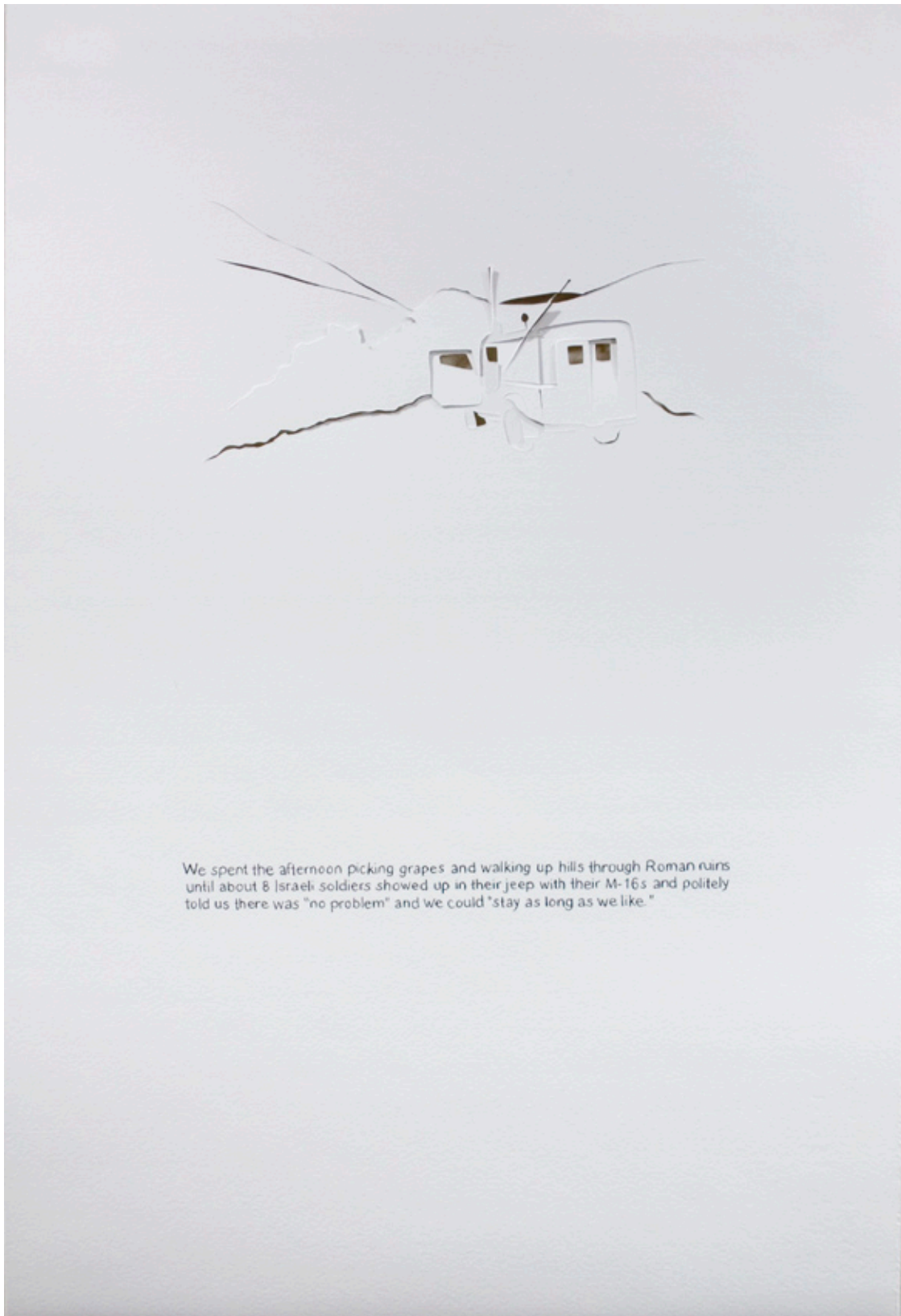
Millman. *Qalandia Kiss* [detail], incised paper and ink, 15"x 22" 2006



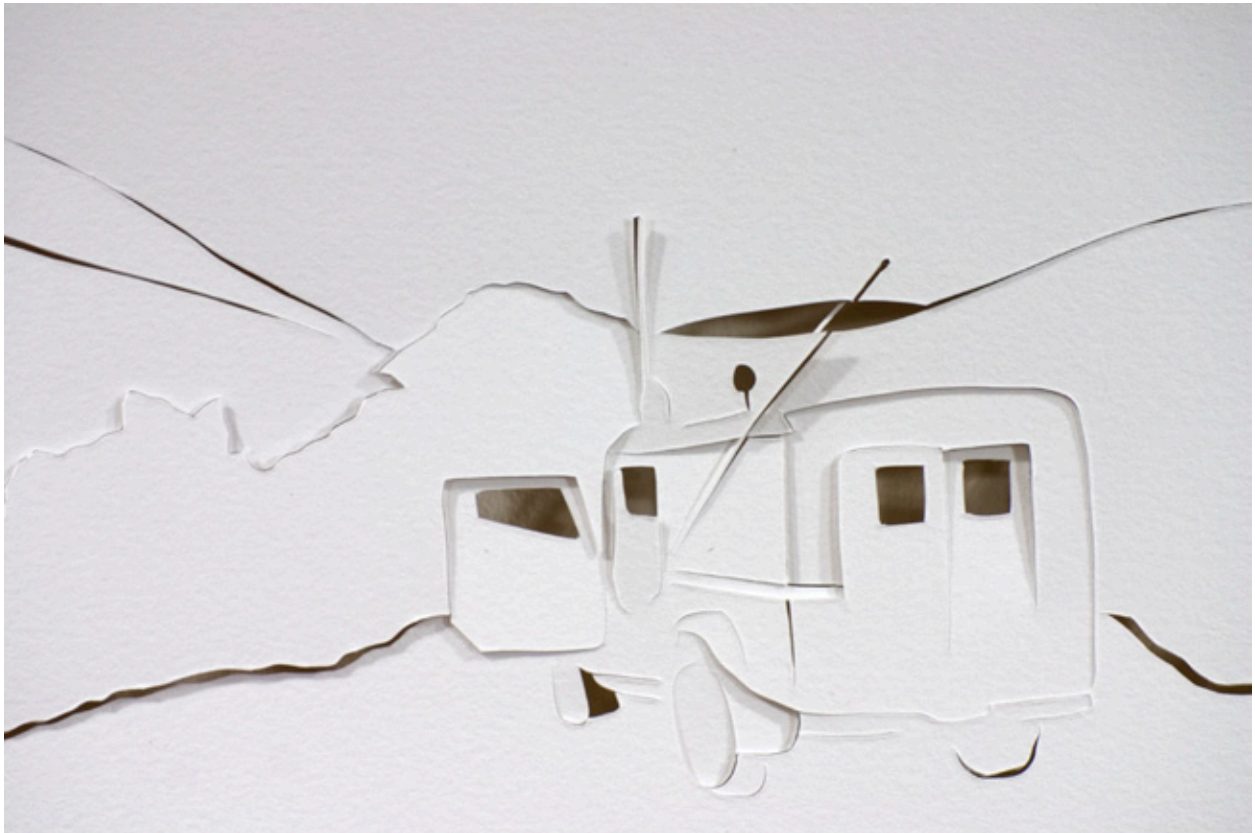
Millman. *Liar*, incised paper and ink, 15"x 22" 2006



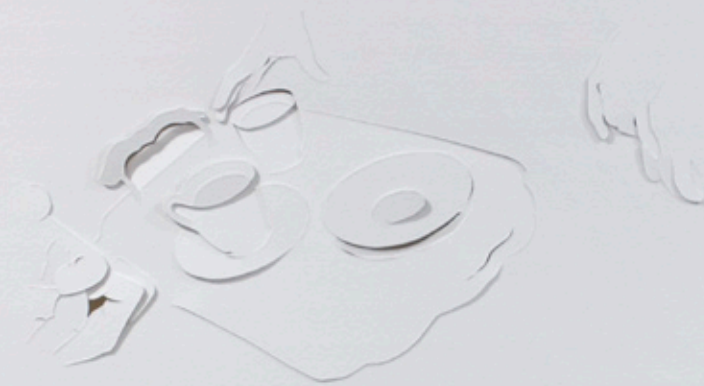
Millman. *Liar* [detail], incised paper and ink, 15"x 22" 2006



Millman. *Eight Soldiers and Their M-16s*, incised paper and ink, 15"x 22" 2006



Millman. *Eight Soldiers and Their M-16s* [detail], incised paper and ink, 15"x 22" 2006



Mahmoud had us over at his house for coffee, sweets and *nargileh*. We spoke with his father, who corrected me on my pronunciation of the word "*ohev*." He said, I'm supposed to say, "*b'hev*," and that when I say "*ohev*," it sounds too much like "*ohev*," which also means love, but in Hebrew. And so when he asked me whether I spoke Hebrew, I had no choice but to say, "a little." And then the language of the conversation switched, and I spoke with Mahmoud's father while everyone else remained silent and listened to us speak the occupier's language. After a few minutes I said, "Enough, now we're in Palestine and I'm studying Arabic. Please, let us speak in Arabic."

Millman. *Mahmoud's father*, incised paper and ink, 15"x 22" 2006



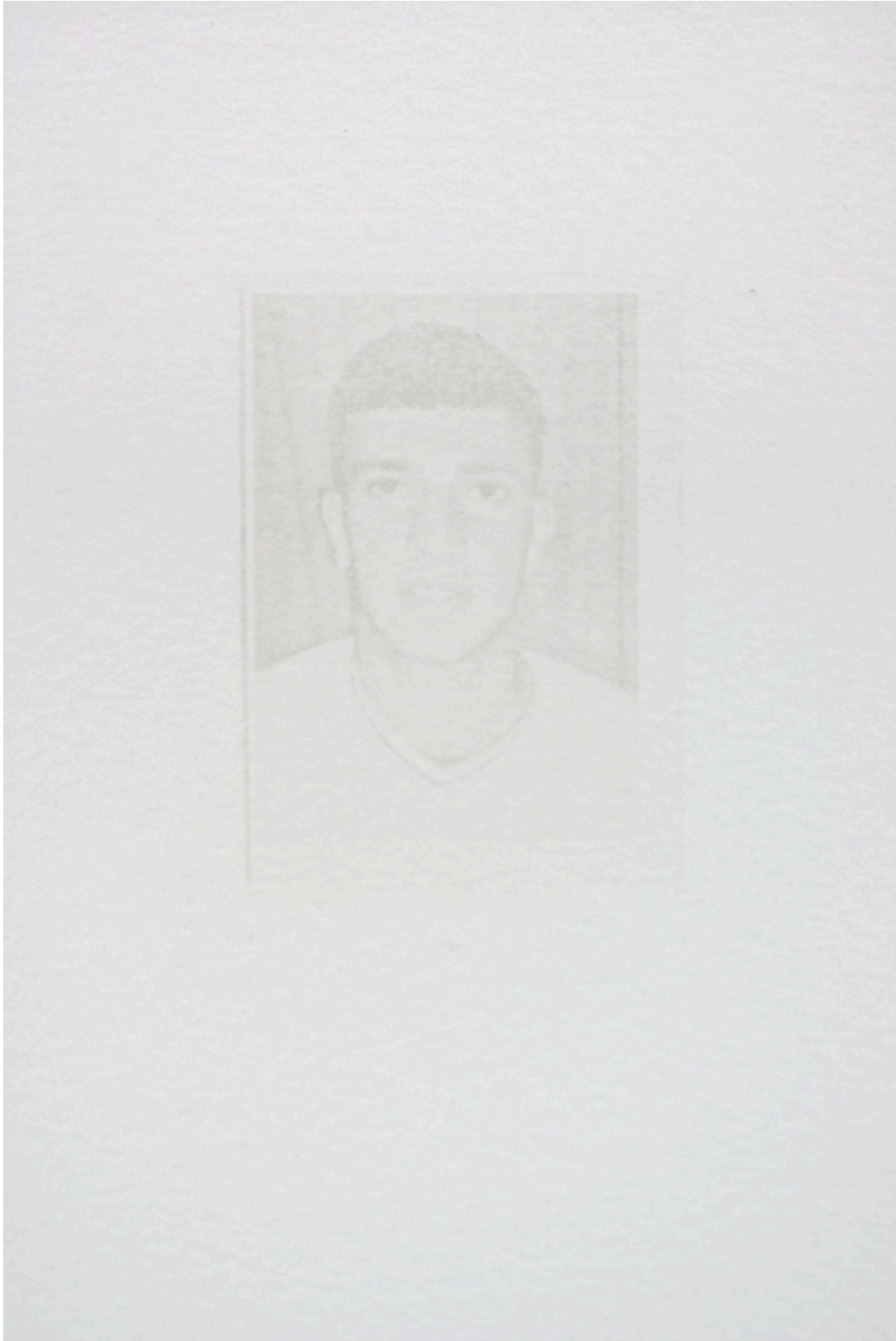
Millman. *Mahmoud's father* [detail], incised paper and ink, 15"x 22" 2006



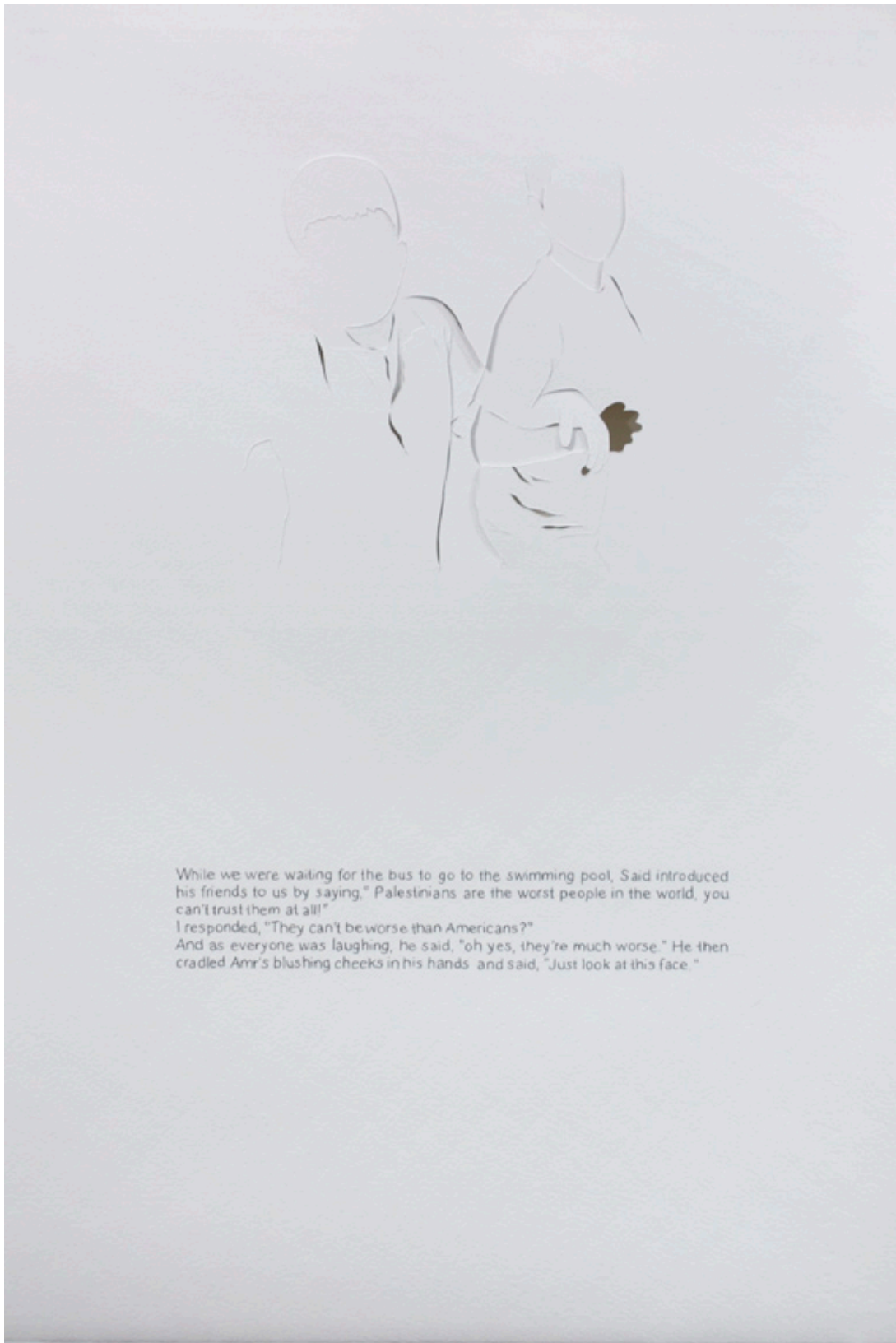
After shoveling gravel and sand into the truck all morning, Amr, Yusef, a few others, and I rested in the shade of the wall. As we were all sitting around, I asked Yusef what his full name was. It turns out, he has four: his, his father's, his grandfather's and his family name. As I tried to memorize all these names I threw a pebble at his ankle for each one. Then I tried to memorize Amr's names and threw four pebbles his way too. After Amr asked me what my full name was, and after I started to play this game with the others, I heard Yusef whisper to Amr that I was a "ye/udi," (Jew) Amr looked at me, shook his head and clicked his tongue in disagreement. When I turned closer to them and asked, "shu?" (what?) Yusef politely told me that he was talking not to me, but to Amr. I ignored this and kept talking to someone else. Later that afternoon, as Yusef was walking us home, he told me about his classmate who was shot and killed by Israeli soldiers in their village a year before. That evening, he gave me a picture of himself so that I shouldn't forget him.

Yusef's full name is Yusef Zaki Yusef Khabb, he is 18 years old and lives in Farisha, Gaza.

Millman. *Yusef's picture*, lithograph and ink, 15"x 22" 2006



Millman. *Yusef's picture* [detail], lithograph and ink, 15"x 22" 2006



Millman. *Said & Amr*, incised paper and ink, 15"x 22" 2006



Millman. *Said & Amr* [detail], incised paper and ink, 15"x 22" 2006



After changing into my swimsuit, I returned to the beach to find Salim lying on my towel. I said to him, "Just because my grandparents took your grandparents' land doesn't mean you can take my towel." He said, "Why is it always the same thing with you Toby?"

Millman. *Salim*, incised paper and ink, 15"x 22" 2006



Millman. *Salim* [detail], incised paper and ink, 15"x 22" 2006



A guy buzzed past us through the metal gate, but not before giving us a big smile and an "Ahlan WaSahlan." It took a minute to recognize him without his uniform, but we soon realized that he was the guy who served shawarma and falafel at the 24-hour place outside *Bab al Amoud*. As the air got colder and our wait grew longer, Musa's restaurant sent over a car to pick us all up. Without his contacts, we probably would have waited at Qalandia til morning.

As of October 2006 there were 526 checkpoints and roadblocks in the West Bank. Qalandia is one of the largest and it now resembles an international border crossing.

Millman. *Mousa*, incised paper and ink, 15"x 22" 2006

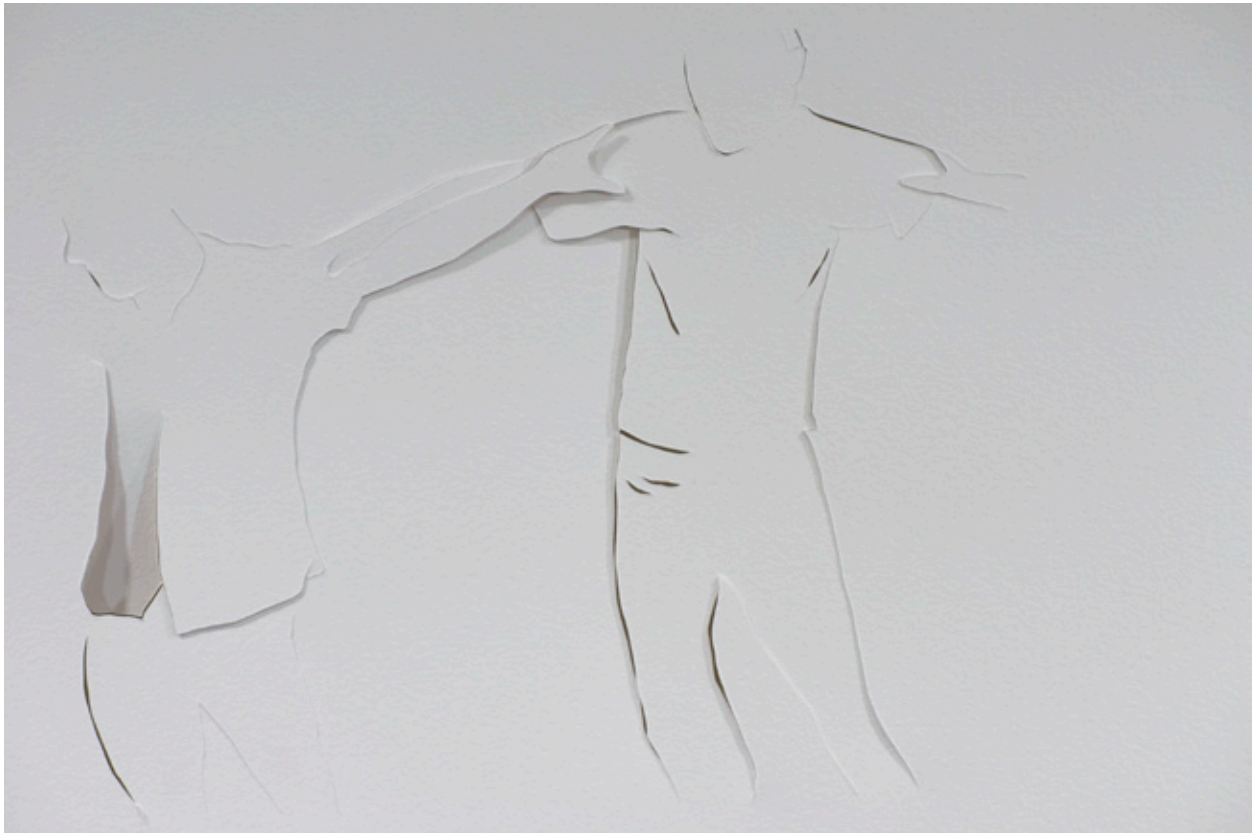


Millman. *Mousa* [detail], incised paper and ink, 15"x 22" 2006



Diyya invited me to see the men's side of the wedding party, but I wasn't about to follow this teenage heartthrob all alone at night. But after failing to answer the question, "fesh?" (why) several times over, I finally succumbed and said, "yallah, let's go." After stumbling in the dark up to the roof of his home, I got to see all the wedding guests dancing *dabka* down below. I also met his mother, some sisters, aunts and grandmothers, who kissed me on both cheeks about three times apiece.

Millman. *Diyya*, incised paper and ink, 15"x 22" 2006



Millman. *Diyya* [detail], incised paper and ink, 15"x 22" 2006



We all formed a chain to move the rocks from one end of the road to the other. Each time Ashraf handed Kann a rock he would turn to both of us to expand our vocabulary. One rock was "Ahlan" the next one was "WaSahlan."** Five or six rocks would be enough to form a complete sentence. By the end of the morning, he was telling us what each rock was shaped like, one was shaped like Farkha, the other was shaped like Filistin,** the next was shaped like his friend Ibrahim.

*Ahlan WaSahlan is a common greeting.
**Palestine

Millman. *Ashraf & Ibrahim*, incised paper and ink, 15"x 22" 2006



Millman. *Ashraf & Ibrahim* [detail], incised paper and ink, 15"x 22" 2006



As we were on our way out, I thought I would snap one last picture, but Hussein's older sister accidentally walked into my photograph with her hair uncovered. I told her not to worry, and showed her that I was deleting it off my memory card. She indicated that I should take another one as soon as she arranges her headscarf, but then she paused, took it off and said, no no, it's ok, put her arm around her sister and smiled for me and my camera.

Millman. *Hussein's Sisters*, incised paper and ink, 15"x 22" 2006



Millman. *Hussein's Sisters* [detail], incised paper and ink, 15"x 22" 2006



Millman. *Planned & Constructed*, incised paper, 42"x92" 2006



Millman. *Planned & Constructed* [detail],
incised paper, 42"x92" 2006



Millman. *Planned & Constructed* [detail],
incised paper, 42"x92" 2006



Millman. *Restricted & Prohibited*, incised paper, 42"x92" 2006



Millman. *Restricted & Prohibited* [detail], incised paper, 42"x92" 2006



Millman. *Restricted & Prohibited* [detail], incised paper, 42"x92" 2006



Millman. *Areas A & B*, incised paper, 42"x92" 2006



Millman. *Areas A & B* [detail], incised paper, 42"x92" 2006



Millman. *Areas A & B* [detail], incised paper, 42"x92" 2006.



Millman. *Ayman Ratib, Ramallah*, embossed paper, 7"x11" 2006



Millman. *Husam Ayoub Abu Ateyya, Ramallah*, embossed paper, 7"x11" 2006



Millman. *Daniel Abu-Hamamah, Bethlehem*, embossed paper, 7"x11" 2006

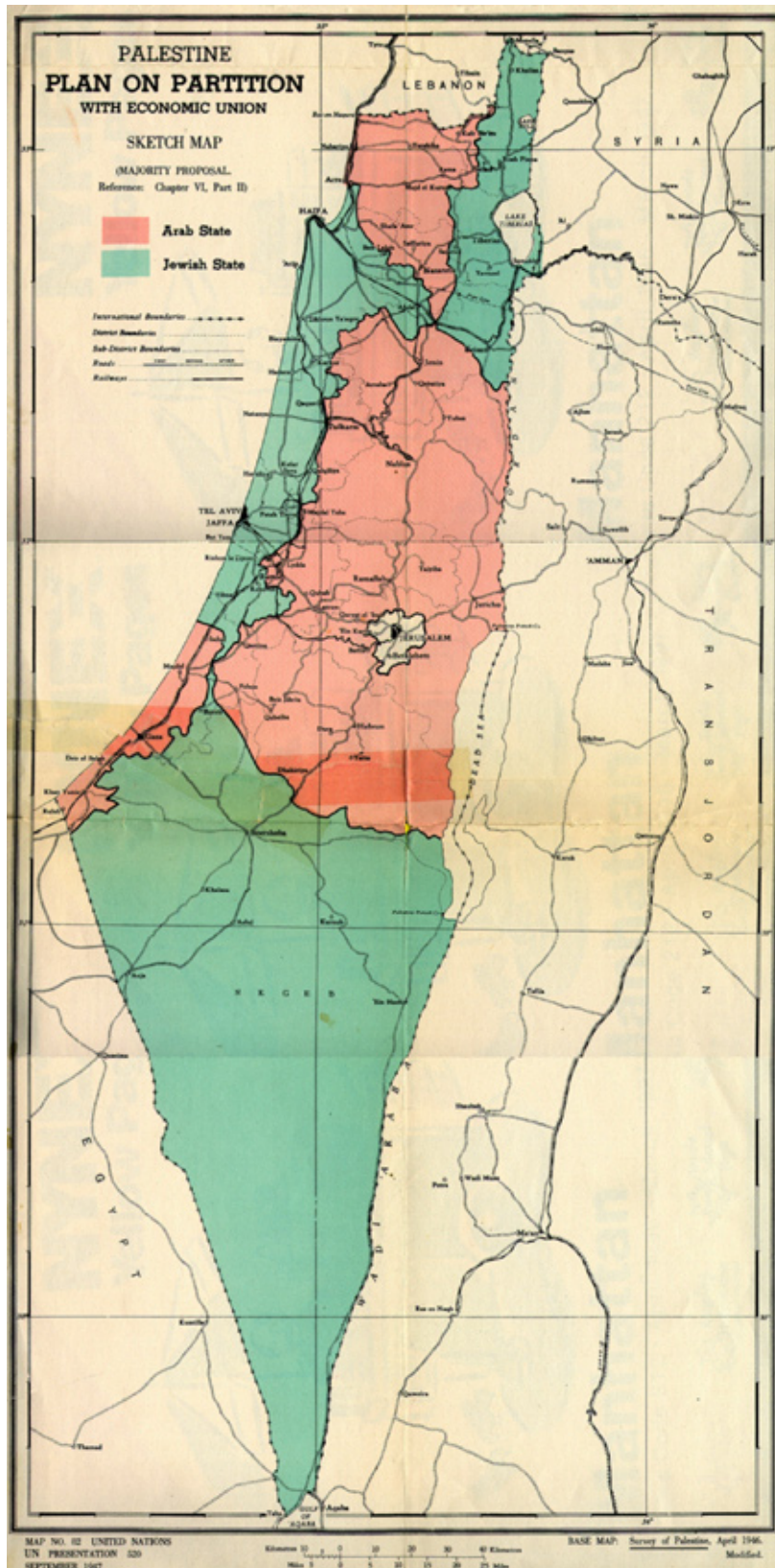


Millman. *Jabr Fawaz al Akhras, Bethlehem*, embossed paper, 7"x11" 2006

Appendix



Palestine at the time of Saul (c. 1020 B.C.)



Palestine Plan on Partition, 1947



Map No. 3584 Rev. 2 UNITED NATIONS
January 2004

Department of Peacekeeping Operations
Cartographic Section

Israel (according to UN, 2004)

The Gaza Strip and West Bank



Gaza Strip and the West Bank (Selected Natural Resources in January 1994)



UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs / West Bank: Access & Closure (June 2006)

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