



DIASPORAS AND DREAMS

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Bowman~Penelec~Megahan Art Galleries
at ALLEGHENY COLLEGE
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Curated by Jacqueline Gehring, PhD; Shanna Kirschner, PhD; and Darren Lee Miller, Gallery Director

Allegheny College's 2010-2011 annual theme is "Global Citizenship," but there is no agreement about what might constitute a notion of citizenship that exists beyond political borders and cultural boundaries. In this exhibition we propose that diasporic peoples, whatever their reason for leaving "home," are as close as one gets to finding a "global citizen." As a field of study, diasporas and migrants of which they are constituted have garnered increased attention, due in part to the unfortunate proliferation of armed conflicts, environmental disasters and economic catastrophes around the world. This interest is reflected in the growing number of conferences, courses and graduate programs, and an increasing number of scholars who define themselves as specialists. But while diasporas certainly refer to a people abroad, away from their ancestral lands, could people living within their homeland also be part of a diaspora?

We believe humans migrated across the globe from an ancestral African habitat about 100,000 years ago.¹ People may have crossed the Bering Strait and settled

in the Americas about 10,000 years ago. The concept of a Diaspora is not confined to any particular peoples or geographic areas, although it has been traditionally used to refer to the Jewish community scattered outside of what is today Israel/Palestine. The two thousand year old Jewish Diaspora is perhaps the most widely studied, but Islamic and Christian peoples, engaging in multi-century imperial projects, exported their religions and cultures around the world, sometimes creating new, multiracial polyglot communities in the process and, other times, reducing the influence of certain societies and replacing them with their own. These diasporas were quite different in their motivations and manifestations, but the net effects were the scattering of populations, fracturing established cultures and creating new ones. Diasporas have been crucibles of both destruction and invention. The five artists invited to be a part of this show prompt us to examine the personal and political dimensions of human displacement, including in diasporas.

Bonnie Donohue, a multi-media artist based in Boston, creates stunning photographic panoramas of abandoned military installations in Vieques, Puerto Rico - shown with Navy aerial surveillance photographs - to recount the displacement of peoples, fishermen and tenant sugar-cane farmers who lived on and worked the land before the United States' military turned the eastern third of the island into a bombing range, and the western third into munitions storage. Donohue's images imply the silence and heartbreak that are likely outcomes of such expropriation.

Rebecca Heyl is an artist and human rights activist based in Boston and Perugia, Italy. While living in Israel from 2001 - 2004, Heyl worked with the Israeli/Palestinian non-profit organization, Windows: Channels for Communication. In her 2008 book, *Windows in the Wall* (Skira), Heyl explores the false notion of "Land without People for a People without Land." She focuses on the consequences of containment, conducting photographic interviews with Jews and Muslims who live on both sides of the separation barrier being constructed by Israel that divides Palestinian territories from Israel, and creates multiple non-contiguous fingers of land.

Pittsburgh artist **Andrew Ellis Johnson** draws lines of inquiry into continued construction of Israeli settlements in Palestinian territories and encourages viewers to consider how the constant pressing of such settlements affects the very survival of Palestinian populations.

Vasia Markides is a painter and filmmaker living in New York City and Cyprus. Her 2008 documentary, *Hidden in the Sand*, chronicles the story of Famagusta, the idyllic home city of the artist's refugee mother, that was evacuated of its Greek Cypriot population by the Turkish army during the 1974 military invasion. Markides says, "The media institutions, the educational system, and the government all foster a general attitude of victimization amongst the Greek-Cypriots. Very little in the society encourages people to take responsibility for their current situation, and this creates a sense of powerlessness. The perpetual feeling that we've been wronged... which of course we have - but the full story is much more complicated... keeps us point-

ing fingers while we gaze over the rigid demarcation line between us and a solution. Making this film woke me up to this by allowing me permission to form valuable relationships with incredibly intelligent people whose stories helped me shape a new history for myself and to break down restrictive barriers of ethnic and national identity. It made me completely reevaluate the meaning of being "Cypriot." I wanted the film to convey this idea and to encourage people to question the institutions and social structures around them, which keep them tethered to a painful past and a grim future."

Susanne Slavick, named Artist of the Year by the Pittsburgh Center for the Arts in 2008, creates paintings and works on paper by digitally and manually transforming photographic images of the wreckage created by American military actions in the Middle East. Using hand-painted elements and motifs from the very cultures under attack, she reminds us of what is being eradicated and supplants what has been lost in a project of empathic restitution.

Each of the artists offers creative pathways for communication in the midst of conflict. Their work helps us to see gaps in understanding, and allows us to question how privilege and unequal divisions of power contribute to injustice. *Al-Salam, Shalom, Eirene, Baris, Paz, Peace* in 2011 and beyond. May we all become citizens of a just world.

Darren Lee Miller, Assistant Professor of Art
Director, Bowman~Penelec~Megahan Art Galleries

¹*Becoming Human, Part 2: The Birth of Humanity*, NOVA. Written Produced, and Directed by Graham Townsley. Narrator, Lance Lewman. PBS, November 10, 2009.

Cover Image:
© **Susanne Slavick**, *Road Repair (Halat)*, 2006
goauche on archival digital print

All images have been provided courtesy of the artists.

Interviews in this catalogue have been modified to fit the format of the publication. To see the full texts, please visit:
<http://webpub.alleggheny.edu/dept/art/artsite/diaspora.html>



"We'll be back!"

© Andrew Ellis Johnson, *Pressed: When Words Were Earth*, 2005
detail image from installation

CONFLICTS, DIASPORAS AND GLOBAL CITIZENS

Diasporas are ancient experiences that take on new meaning where the forces of globalization are in tension with nation-state boundaries, both physical and cultural. Individuals who flee their native lands are often now referred to as being part of a diaspora when a large number of their fellow people also migrate, although historically the term had a more specific use. In contemporary usage, the word "diaspora" is often used to describe major migrations from an ancestral homeland, whether the forces pushing the migrants away from their territory of origin are war, politics, or economic factors.

Scholars of international relations often view diasporas as integral players in conflicts. They are particularly important agents in the relationship between civil and interstate wars. There are several reasons for this. Civil wars often generate massive population displacements, both within the country and outside its borders. These refugee populations become diasporas as they spread further abroad and their new homes become more permanent.

Diasporic peoples may be especially likely to intervene

in conflicts on behalf of their co-ethnics, or ethnic kin who remain in the home country. The reasons range from sympathy, to guilt over having escaped the conflict, to dense networks of information that keep those in the diaspora informed about events in the home country. In some conflicts, combatants use these ethnic networks to coerce "donations" from those who are abroad to help fund the struggle.

The active involvement of diasporic peoples in wars and other conflicts takes several forms. Perhaps the most common is through lobbying and other political action on behalf of their kin. For instance, the East Timorese diaspora played a central role in publicizing Indonesian atrocities in East Timor in the 1990s. The Jewish diaspora also is well known for its political engagement in the Arab-Israeli conflict. The peoples of diasporas often provide combatants with weapons or financial support, as well. This was one important tool employed by Irish-Americans to support the IRA during the 1970s and 1980s. The Tamil Tigers (LTTE), a rebel group in Sri Lanka, drew most of their funding from

the many Tamils living in Europe and Canada.

Finally, diasporas in neighboring states can offer training sites, bases, safe havens, and escape and smuggling routes. Kurds in Turkey, Iran, and Iraq have sometimes benefited from this type of support, and this aid is part of what has fueled conflicts in Kashmir and the former Yugoslavia. When co-ethnics in neighboring states intervene in this manner, the war itself often spreads. Militarized refugee populations can help to spread conflict to weak neighboring states. Neighboring governments also are especially likely to join a conflict as a result of “hot pursuit” operations to curtail this cross-border assistance. Although the conflict is complex, this is one reason that the Great Lakes region of Africa -- including the Democratic Republic of Congo, Uganda, Angola, Rwanda, Burundi, Namibia, Zimbabwe, Chad, Libya, and Sudan -- spiraled into “Africa’s World War” during the late 1990s and early 2000s.

Ironically, diasporic peoples who intervene often simply prolong conflict and suffering in the “home” country. This is because the support they offer is rarely enough to allow their co-ethnics to triumph, but instead merely staves off the combatants’ defeat. In many cases, intervention also complicates negotiation and bargaining attempts by adding interests that need to be resolved in order to end the conflict. For instance, the conflict in Nagorno-Karabakh between Azerbaijan and Armenians became seemingly impossible to resolve when the Republic of Armenia and both Azeri and Armenian refugee populations became involved. Such interventions sometimes leave their kin in a better bargaining position for peace negotiations by bolstering the combatants’ strength, but only after tremendous cost.

Diasporic peoples are often heavily invested in their country of origin aside from their involvement in conflicts, and even more so in maintaining a traditional cultural identity in their new surroundings. Their children become important bridges between old and new not only because they can usually speak both languages more easily than their parents, but also because they are often more able to understand the cultural traditions of the new country. This ability to communicate on behalf of their parents also

gives them a strange, and often unwanted, power of their parents’ experiences. These children grow up within both the new and old cultures and bear the burden of having to navigate contradictory expectations. Often they feel torn between their parents’ cultural traditions and the search for an identity in their new land. It is often their children, the third generation, that will both be most assimilated into the new country’s culture and also most interested in re-discovering, often in a very romanticized way, their “ancestral homeland.”

Jacqueline Gehring, PhD
Assistant Professor of Political Science

Shanna A Kirschner, PhD
Assistant Professor of Political Science



“I left my soul inside. Open up!”
© Vasia Markides, *Hidden in the Sand*, 2008
video still image



© **Bonnie Donohue**, *Bunkers in Storm*, 2005
from *Vieques: A Long Way Home*

During and after World War II, the United States expropriated two-thirds of the island of Vieques, off the eastern coast of Puerto Rico's main island, displacing thousands of sugar laborers to the center of the island. The Navy used this area as a firing range and a missile and bomb testing ground between 1948 and 2003 when, following years of protests, the Navy withdrew from the island.

Interview with Bonnie Donohue

Shanna Kirschner: This exhibition is part of Allegheny's Year of Global Citizenship, but that means different things to different people. What do you think "Global Citizenship" means?

Bonnie Donohue: It's a good question, in an era when citizenship itself is contested in so many places. To me, "global citizenship" means trying to understand what's happening in different parts of the world in ways that one cannot understand from following conventional media coverage. And, of course, I try to unpack this through my art practice, which requires me to engage in various ways with various sectors of communities. Global citizenship is about developing empathy and trying to understand issues from an empathetic view, rather than just a sympathetic view. In other words, it involves engaging in a discourse

with individuals and their wider communities about their experiences. I visit places on an extended basis and often return time after time, interviewing people on the ground about how their lives have changed as a result of larger events. I'm a tactile learner, and it is an interesting proposition to comprehend how ordinary people's lives are altered by larger political developments.

SK: To me, your work conveys some clear political messages. Do you see your work as commentary or description, or more advocacy?

BD: I've tried different strategies, but I look for contrasts. Often, there are multiple interpretations of what it means to be a citizen or a resident of a place. These debates exist in all the places of conflict where I've worked. I try to present both sides, but I don't pretend to be neutral. I'm usually on the side of the ordinary citizen. I will insert the dominant voice into my work, and I insert the voice of the ordinary citizen. I don't think I can solve these problems, but I think I can expose problems: pose questions, expose power structures and ideas of resistance, ask good questions about what is wrong with an existing power structure. I advocate

for individual empathy or awareness, in order to nudge a less passive view of world events.

SK: Much of your work seems to be about juxtaposing images – either those from the past and the present, or images of concrete military installations with natural reclamation of those spaces. How do you think those juxtapositions affect viewers' perception of the Navy's activities in Vieques?

BD: I think of the residual architecture, history, memory, and landscape as layers of events, and of vastly different narratives that occur in the same place at different times. For example, I've been exploring an emblematic story of a local bartender who was murdered in 1953 by some sailors he had earlier served at his bar. I am unpacking all of the characters, actually tracking them down, and writing a play about it, based on a Rashoman-like structure, and re-photographing the new structure that was built around his bar. When the sailors went to courts-martial, they were acquitted. I am exploring questions like how we get to the truth, when the dominant forces cover for each other. What kinds of truths do different subjectivities bring to eyewitness accounts? How do I bring a 57-year-old story, of what was supposed to be a long-forgotten murder, to life and keep it interesting? These are complicated interactions and complicated questions; I'm trying now to unearth the story, bit by bit, and put it together in an empathetic way.

If I just illustrate how bad the military is or how wonderful the people are, it's skewed to sympathize with one side or another. There are a variety of perspectives – pro-military, anti-military, and opinions in between – among the citizens of Vieques. When you put the elements together, you have a more problematic and nuanced story. I don't want to just make the Navy people into cartoons of evil and make Vieques citizens into cartoons of noble suffering. I would rather humanize both sides and think about the colonial relationship between the United States and Puerto Rico.

SK: What do you see as the role of individuals in conflicts or social movements, such as that over the disposition of Vieques?

BD: Vieques is really interesting because people from all

over the world united to help end the Navy bombing and occupation on the island. An individual can't really effect major change on her own; one needs to have allies. I could stand alone, shouting about injustice for days on end. No one would care, and they might think I was unhinged. But if there are 200,000 people in the streets of San Juan demanding change, it makes a real difference.

Even bolder than the peace marches, there were thousands of people who risked their own lives by occupying the Vieques bombing range for over a year. They built a town, with a church, a supply depot, and even a house with a poured-concrete foundation. They found abandoned Navy vehicles and made them run. The fisherman brought in supplies and took out waste by boat. They united to halt the bombing exercises. It was an incredibly inspiring non-violent movement that brought the Navy era on Vieques to an end, after 60 years of unpopular occupation.

I went on a fact-finding mission to Vieques with The Fellowship of Reconciliation in 2001. My roommate was Jane Kava, the Inuit mayor of the Yupik village of Savoonga, on the Alaskan island of St. Lawrence. St. Lawrence Island had been a military outpost that was abandoned after the Cold War. The Army left a tremendous amount of toxic waste, introducing a very high cancer rate on the island. Jane traveled nearly 6,000 miles from St. Lawrence to Puerto Rico in order to form a sister island relationship between Savoonga and Vieques, which has a very high cancer rate as well, as a result of thousands of tons of ordnance dropped over the decades. This island is so remote – it's closer to Siberia than to the US, and it is the actual location in Alaska where one can "see Russia" – and it is small, just under 2,000 square miles. Vieques is even smaller – only 135 square miles – but when the mayors unite and share information, and share, in turn, with Okinawa and with islands in Hawaii, they can do big things. The issues in each place are unique, of course, but they're also incredibly similar to what's going on 10,000 miles away. When individuals are willing to care, they can collaborate and make a big difference.

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© Rebecca Heyl, *Tanji family home, Tulkarem refugee camp*, 2002
archival inkjet print

Interview with Rebecca Heyl

Jacqueline Gehring: How did you become interested in Israel as a topic for your art?

Rebecca Heyl: I lived in Italy for about five years before I went to Israel. That's where I actually started identifying myself more as a Jewish person and I became interested in what the Italian Jewish traditions were there. When you're in a foreign place you seek out things that are familiar to you. During that time, I was exposed to the Palestinian cause and criticism of Israel for the first time. People would say to me, you are Jewish, what do you think about Israel? I came to understand that being Jewish directly connected me to that land that I've never seen.

JG: How did you respond to those questions?

RH: I didn't really have a view. I didn't have a pro-Israeli view that some might have, but I didn't have a pro-Palestinian view either. I hadn't really given it much thought.

JG: Did the European media play a role how you came to understand the conflict? I know from my experiences there, they talk a lot more about the rest of the world, and especially the experiences of the Palestinians.

RH: Yes, the American press highlights pro-Israeli stories while in Europe the pro-Palestinian view is more common. Also, a lot of young people wear the Palestinian shawl in Italy as a social statement. It was all around me; the Palestinian cause was a part of the environment. Whereas in the US all I heard were pro-Israeli viewpoints.

In America the average person, certainly the average Jewish person, has a certain attitude about Israel (these are generalizations of course), but we don't hear much about the average Palestinian. We hear about the bombings, terrorists cells, or whatever, but not the common folks. In Italy, people seem to pay more attention to the news and talk about what is going on there and abroad; however, I felt like there wasn't anything in Italian political discourse about the average Israeli.

My book of photos was published in Italy in English, for an English audience. But, I thought about how it could be relevant for both sides of the debate. In the end the story that it tells, about the peace activists on both sides (Israeli and Palestinian), is relevant to both Americans and Europeans, because in Italy you never hear about the Israeli peace activist going to meet the Palestinian farmer. In the U.S. people asked me, "what is a Palestinian peace activist?"

JG: So living in Italy first raised your interest in the Israeli-Palestinian situation. How did you end up going there and getting more involved?

RH: My husband and I went to Israeli in 2001 because he had a post-doctoral fellowship there. We lived at the Weizmann Institute, a very peaceful and secure campus. It was over a year before I actually went to the occupied territories. The period I was there was 2001-2004. Even the average Israeli would say that was a pretty tough time with lots of

bombings. It was before the wall was built, or the security barrier, or whatever you want to call it. I wanted to do a project about this moment, so I started doing research on different organizations. I wanted to find Israelis and Palestinians who maintained a dialogue.

JG: How did you find groups to work with?

RH: I contacted them on the Internet. They would have meetings to go to the West Bank and collect olives with the Palestinians. My first trip was with a group of Israelis and internationals into the West Bank to help farmers collect their olives. The Palestinian village was located near an Israeli settlement. The previous year they were not able to harvest olives due to frequent attacks by the settlers. So, the farmers called on an Israeli organization to help them collect the olives, but more importantly to act as a buffer between the settlers and the farmers. We were 100 meters from the gates of the settlement. Settlers get more and more land by scaring off the Palestinian farmers, sometimes by physically attacking or shooting at them.

JG: How did you identify with the Palestinians since their experience is so very different than our own, as Americans?

RH: I eventually traveled with a Palestinian group of kids to bring them to Italy for a workshop. That was the real first time, even though I had been back and forth into the West Bank and Gaza... Once I traveled "as a Palestinian" I realized how oppressive it was, the challenges that a Palestinian faces everyday to get to work or school. The number of barricades, physical and psychological, to get out of their local area. And then to get to Jordan, and the Jordanians don't want you there either. That was when it really clicked for me, that's where I really began to understand. Understanding is gradual--picking olives next to a settlement and seeing the tension. Understanding the proximity of space and then going to a refugee camp and understanding that these people have been living there for over 60 years! Why haven't they been settled? And then traveling

with the Palestinian kids. If you have all the documents, it should be easy. One might expect bureaucratic hold-ups, but things should work. When you're a Palestinian, an 18 year-old Israeli soldier at a checkpoint can detain you at the checkpoint for hours because he wants to. It's not just about security. All these terms that are used, like "closed military zone," imply security concerns, but often it's a teenager making an arbitrary decision. Palestinians don't have any recourse in that situation, and even at the Hague (International Court of Justice) they can't represent themselves because they don't have citizenship to any nation.

JG: In your work you use maps. Why are they so important?

RH: The first key to understanding the conflict, for me, was understanding how close everything is. The proximity. To see how small the piece of land is. Once you see how small Israel and the Palestinian Territories are you can better understand why they're fighting over it. I want to show the viewer where the borders are, where the walls are, where the settlements are, where the refugee camps are, etc... showing the proximity of it all. What does it actually look like? Another way of understanding is to look at the history. By layering maps to see what it looked like at different moments in history, how this land has become smaller and smaller and smaller. The maps give you a perspective of how Palestinian land has shrunk. I think maps might reach a person for whom the photography isn't immediate. I want you to be able to hold the maps in your hands and combine them as you choose. I want the viewer to be active and to see the facts on the ground. If enough American Jewish people came out and said, "I'm Jewish and I don't support what Israel is doing," that could make a difference.

More information about Rebecca Heyl's Book, *Windows in the Wall*, can be found here: <http://www.windowsonthewall.com>

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© Andrew Ellis Johnson, *Pressed: When Words Were Earth*, 2005
mixed media installation

Interview with Andrew Ellis Johnson

Andrew Johnson: I'm presenting the central image from my installation *Pressed: When Words Were Earth*. It is a full-scale digitally manipulated photographic image of the back of a D-9 Caterpillar Bulldozer, that extends from the floor to the ceiling, and its tracks that extend from the wall fifty feet across the gallery floor. The images are printed onto mirrored acrylic that is then cut into thousands of patterned tiles. Light reflects off both the printed ink surface

and the mirror beneath the clear acrylic – so you get this double reflection. What you see changes dramatically depending on where you're standing. As you change your position, the color shifts radically, literally highlighting different parts of the image and obscuring others. I want the viewer to actively explore what they perceive and become aware that their physical vantage alters what is represented.

I want to provide a magical realm of illusion that entices the viewer to enter just as King Solomon's palace seduced the Queen of Sheba to lift up her skirt before crossing what she thought was a pool of water. Reputedly it was the high polish of the marble floor that she mistook for the pool. I want to also create a palace where a visitor can confuse the factual and illusory and be conscious that they are in such an environment.

Each piece of tile is cut into a shape that can be recognized in and of itself just as a single puzzle piece makes us aware of the larger whole and how it must interlock with it. We must shift our modes of recognition and understand that we are continually looking through layers of filters.

Jacqueline Gehring: This makes me think of Saïd's *Orientalism*, and how we see the East through this Western filter. Is that what you were thinking?

AJ: Yes, exactly, the mirrors are representative of the three prophetic religions, with interlocking hexagonal Stars of David, octagonal stars of Islam and what can be read as Christian crosses. There are symbolic levels of identification, physical and perspectival distortions and one's own shadow and reflections that get in the way, that implicate us in the image we perceive. We feel culpable.

JG: We experience culpability? In what way?

AJ: The bulldozer in the exhibit was photographed in a Pittsburgh construction site, but it's the same model that has been sent to Israel and used to destroy Palestinian homes and orchards to make room for Israeli settlements in the West Bank and Gaza. I think it is important that we can't extricate ourselves from such an image.

JG: So you are trying to remind your viewer of responsibility, but what is their responsibility?

AJ: There are myriad difficulties in the world but much of my work is focused on turmoil that U.S. citizens support, if only through our taxes, and therefore have the ability to change if we have the will. Lately I've been addressing issues in Haiti, Iraq and Afghanistan. In Palestine we perpetuate the apartheid regime and we needn't.

JG: How do you imagine your role as an artist? Is it to educate? To shock?

AJ: To seduce. Then incite. You suck someone in through beauty, through humor, through pleasure. Lure a viewer in, offer delight, and then the realization that all is not well, but still malleable.

Art is very much about aesthetics, whether or not we use the word beauty. There is no distinction, the political is the use of something, the aesthetic is the form of it. As form and content are inseparable, aesthetics and politics are inseparable.

JG: What is the goal of raising the consciousness of the viewer?

AJ: Action as well as contemplation. At the most concrete level I had hoped that people would boycott Caterpillar until it divests from Israel or Israel ceases utilizing its equipment for illegal ends. In February, 2003, when I first exhibited *Pressed: When Words Were Earth*, it was in response to the ongoing killing of Palestinians during demolitions of villages. Within weeks of the opening, 23 year-old US peace activist Rachel Corrie was murdered by the same Caterpillar bulldozer model that I depict. Her family has been fighting in the courts since then. Last October, through the Corries' perseverance, Caterpillar began delaying its delivery of D9 bulldozers — valued at \$50 million — to the Israeli military. While only .6 % of Caterpillar's business is in Israel, this delay is a symbolic gesture that is an iconic victory.

JG: What about people who don't think what they do matters or are just apathetic?

AJ: In my teaching I point out that one's apathy leads to a restriction of one's own rights. With the G-20 in Pittsburgh last year, some of my students were roughly treated

and arrested for being in certain areas, not because they were protesting, but just because they were "swept up in an atmosphere of de facto marshal law," as another beaten bystander and arrested student, Second Lt. Ryan Kingston has said. My students were really surprised by the police round ups. They thought the police were there to protect them and told me, "I wasn't even doing anything." I reminded them that one needs to take a stand, because our rights are being eroded constantly. For example, we need to realize that not voting and not doing anything has enormous weight and consequences.

JG: You said you do much of your research on the internet. How do you filter the information you find?

AJ: You do have to cross check your sources and it's very important to be looking at bias ahead of time, asking yourself 'In whose interest is this?' and 'How much credence do I want to give this?' Not all arguments are sound, claims relevant or warranted, or opinions valid. When I worked on *Pressed*, I met with Palestinians and talked with them about my ideas and how I wished to realize the work. I got first hand information that went directly into the exhibit. For example, the idea of the fruit spilled on the ground came from those discussions as did the fact that the orange is symbolic for both Israeli and Palestinian nationalism. Haim Gouri, the Israeli poet, sees it as a pride of Jewish agricultural power while Palestinians view it as emblematic of 'a world destroyed' during the first Arab-Israeli war. In the bulldozer treads in the exhibit you can see squashed oranges and other detritus that I scattered in the mud of the construction site that I photographed. They refer to Palestinian farmers, 90 percent of whom live below the poverty level, whose fruit rots at Israeli checkpoints because they are not able to bring it to market. The barriers prevent movement within Palestine and into Israel and there are often deliberate delays so the fruit will spoil. The rotting oranges can also represent the current state of peace, prosperity and progress, as can the strewn olives. In Palestine, home to world's most ancient olive groves, a million trees have been uprooted for Israeli settlements.

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© Vasia Markides, *Hidden in the Sand*, 2008
video still image

The Mediterranean island of Cyprus' population is primarily ethnically Greek and Turkish. Inter-communal tensions escalated to violence by the 1960s. In 1974, Turkey invaded the island following a Greek coup. After hundreds of thousands of Cypriots were displaced, the island was effectively partitioned. Despite several negotiation attempts and easing tensions, Cyprus remains divided.

Interview with Vasia Markides

Shanna Kirschner: How did your upbringing affect your view of nationality, and of the Cypriot civil war and its ongoing effects?

Vasia Markides: I was partially raised in Cyprus, and was there from kindergarten to fourth grade. The history of Cyprus that was taught in our schools was very limited. It only told the Greek-Cypriot version of the story. We learned of our struggle for independence against the British in the 1950s, and then we learned about the 1974 invasion by Turkey and subsequent suffering of our community. There was so much in between that wasn't covered.

For instance, about how the Greek-Cypriot fundamentalist groups who wanted Enosis (union with Greece) began staging attacks against Turkish-Cypriots, who were eventually forced into enclaves. The Turkish-Cypriots suffered a lot, and the history fails to tell their version of the story.

So we grew up with a picture of all Turks as “barbarians” who came and stole our homes for no reason. In fact, Turkey decided to intervene after seeing these atrocities and this fervent movement for Enosis. Of course, their intervention went slightly above and beyond just protecting the Turkish-Cypriot minority. So I grew up with only a partial story, and images on TV showing elderly Greek-Cypriot women holding photos of their missing husbands and sons with the words *Then Xebno* or “I won't forget” under it. That's bound to affect your psyche in the long term.

Luckily I was raised in a very open-minded family – my mom initiated the Peace Studies department at the University of Maine – so ideas of conflict resolution were not foreign to me. As soon as the checkpoints between the Greek and Turkish-controlled areas opened and I met my first Turkish-Cypriot, any preconceptions immediately dissolved.

SK: You've said in other interviews that making this film led you to reevaluate the meaning of being Cypriot. How did you see this identity before making the film, and what do you now believe it means to be a member of this community? Do you see that transformation as part of what the larger communities need to undergo?

VM: The more we identify with our “Greek-ness” in Cyprus, the more we continue to exclude people, and the further away we move from a solution. When Greek flags are waved, this agitates an already fragile situation. We are an independent country. We have our own flag. We're the only country who uses another nation's national anthem (Greece's). A little pride in being “Cypriot” could be a good step towards reconciliation. There's such a rich cultural heritage to the island, which is an amalgamation of all the countries that once colonized us - Persians, Assyrians, Phoenicians, Venetians, Ottomans... There are so many shared

foods and words between Greek and Turkish-Cypriots. Everyone knows that we used to all live in the same villages and that culture and language intermixed as a result. Maybe that's one area where we all agree. The only thing the two communities share at the moment on a structural level are the sewage pipes in Nicosia. The system was never redesigned following 1974. So the sewage all merges beneath the ground. Everything else is separate. Quite ironic, no?

If we celebrate some of our similarities, rather than emphasizing our differences, there's a greater chance for reconciliation. Of course, it's perfectly fine to embrace our roots and respect those differences. The history of Cyprus is too loaded for us to be stamping ourselves merely as "Greeks" or "Turks." In fact, I had a Turkish-Cypriot once tell me that she felt more Greek than Turkish because she lived on an island and in a culture that has been majority Greek in the past. I think I always made the distinction when people introduced me as their "Greek friend" to say that I'm "Cypriot," but now I'm even more of a stickler about it. I think Greek culture and heritage are absolutely amazing. Sometimes, though, I'd like to do away with all national identity. Even Cypriot.

SK: This is, among other things, a show about diasporas. What do you see as the current role of the Greek and Turkish diasporas in the conflict, and how would you like that role to change (if at all)?

VM: I'd like to see both communities return to Cyprus and work towards a solution. They're more likely to return now, after Cyprus' entrance into the EU. It's important for people who have been away from the island to return not only with fresh energy and hope but also with different perspectives as people who have existed outside of that sphere for a while. At the same time, we are often criticized as naïve or arrogant when we go back and try to present new ideas. It works both for and against us. I feel that we should all go back there and play a role in the process of reconciliation. I was there this summer working for a UN community media center, and I'm trying to do that with this film.

SK: I am also interested in how you create films, and about this film in particular.

VM: This was my first film, and my process was a little convoluted. That is somewhat evident in the lack of structure or storyline in the film. I didn't start out with a story or structure already in place. I had no prior filmmaking experience when I started shooting. I just bought a small camera when the checkpoints loosened in 2003 and started shooting everything I encountered when I traveled to the North [the Turkish-controlled area].

Throughout the years, I kept upgrading cameras as I learned more about video-production, and began to construct different segments of the film while in graduate school. I didn't know what the final piece would look like, and it went through many, many manifestations, which was both thrilling and slightly tortuous at times. This film was my initiation into filmmaking. I learned how to make films because I had to make this one.

SK: Your work conveys some clear political messages. Do you see your work as commentary or description, or more advocacy?

VM: I see it as a humanistic experimental documentary. I'm trying to emotionally move people, in whatever way possible, more than anything. For the Cypriots, the Greek and Turks in the audience, I'm trying to motivate them to think outside the box, to move beyond what's comfortable and to act in whatever capacity they can. For the other viewers, I'm trying to inform them of what's happening in Cyprus and motivate them to do their own part within their own communities, to question their own biases and break down their own walls.

Interviews in this catalogue have been modified to fit the format of the publication. To see the full texts, please visit:

<http://webpub.alleggheny.edu/dept/art/artsite/diaspora.html>



© Susanne Slavick, *Reassure: Beirut Birds*, 2008
goauche on archival digital print

The September 11, 2001 attacks on the United States, led by al-Qaeda, prompted American military retaliation in Afghanistan and the toppling of the Taliban government there in 2002, and an American invasion of Iraq in 2003. A NATO coalition, led by the USA, has worked to secure Afghanistan against insurgency ever since. Despite being the longest war in US history, there are no current plans for ending the American-led occupation of Afghanistan. There are plans for a "complete" withdrawal of American military forces from Iraq at the end of 2011.

Interview with Susanne Slavick

Darren Lee Miller: When I described your work to a friend on the phone, I said you were combining contemporary photographs of bombed-out places with found illustrations and paintings primarily from historical Persian art. I can describe the forms, but I wonder about your appropriation of middle-eastern images. In some cases it looks like mending or rebuilding is going on. The images convey hope.

Susanne Slavick: I approach cultural appropriation as an act of empathic unsettlement (to use Dominick LaCapra's term) or empathic restitution. But I am also well aware of Leo Bersani's skepticism of art's hubris in its claim to salvage damaged experience and thereby redeem life. Adopting existing representations from cultures other than my own is problematic and complicated. I do so acknowledging my outsider status and as an admittedly tentative gesture at bridging cultural divides that are both real and constructed. In my case, replicating and incorporating imagery from the former Islamic Empire is one way of dispelling prevalent stereotypical notions of its regions and religions as proponents of malignant fundamentalism. My re-worked representations counter the endless images of invasion and insult, militancy and martyrdom, juxtaposing the highest aspirations of a culture with evidence of its eradication.

Some of the images are suggestive of nesting, whether in new or transformed territories or upon returning home. In any of these scenarios, I don't mean to suggest that one can just stamp Persian art onto anything and then have viewers read it as vaguely "middle eastern," but I do think the images and patterns represent the former Islamic empire, not in the religious sense, but as a political power and culture that once stretched all the way from the India to Spain. Architectural motifs from the former Islamic empire play out in new ways in my images, creating new possibilities.

When possible, the origins of the appropriated imagery are linked to the locations of contemporary sites. For example, in *Regenerate (Gardening the Robber Hole, 2008)*, the figure of a gardener, from the 12th century Book of Antidotes of the Pseudo Galen (in the style of the first school of Baghdad), is painted over a scene of “surface scatter” in Iraq, a field of remnants from raids on unsecured archaeological sites. The gardener begins shoveling in the desert, cultivating anew. It is another kind of antidote, a visual metaphor of restoration.

DLM: In other images, we see birds being released from cages, and you talk of nesting and return. To what extent do you consider diaspora — or more generally, displacement — when making the work?

SS: I wasn’t thinking directly of diaspora when I made these pieces, though displacement is certainly a consequence of any war. I’m looking at the birdcage as both a prison and also as a symbol for longing, yearning. The cage is open and the birds are fluttering around — what do they do with their freedom? What is life like in Iran or Iraq or Afghanistan, and how will it be in the future? Will the “freedom” supposedly gained during these wars really flourish or will their societies deteriorate or regress? Can the people who have been displaced actually return or resume their prior lives? The nests in *Regenerate* and *Refuge* are settled in ruins, and we know that there are plenty of Iraqis who have stayed behind in their blasted neighborhoods. Do they stay of their own free will or out of necessity? Do they have a choice? Birds have traditionally symbolized rebirth/regeneration and peace. A single bird means something different than a flock. Separated or with family intact, can life begin anew? People can start over, but their beginnings are fraught with both joy and sorrow.

DLM: What opportunities have recently come your way? I notice that both you and your partner (Andrew Ellis Johnson) like to play with words in your work. Do you ever work collaboratively?

SS: Last May, Andrew and I did a residency at Blue Mountain Center in upstate NY. The theme of the session was “The Costs of War.” Together with a small group of

other resident artists, writers, activists, and public health professionals and therapists, we worked to launch a website to raise awareness of the length of our involvement in “The War on Terror,” particularly in Afghanistan: <http://10yearsandcounting.com/>. I’m pretty much a studio artist, and while I sometimes work on collaborative projects, like the website and my book, I usually work alone in my studio on drawings and paintings. My partner and I bounce ideas off each other, and we work through concepts together, but we still consider our work our own and not a team effort.

DLM: Do you think your work simply points out problems or offers paths toward solutions?

SS: I have no illusions that art alone will change the world; however, art does act on consciousness. Marcuse argued that art can remind us that life can be different. Art cannot reproduce life or reality; it inevitably offers us an altered reality, and so reminds us of the possibility of change. I’m trying to help us imagine an alternative to self-destruction.

Some people may charge that my work — or any figurative work dealing with war — aestheticizes violence and compartmentalizes conflict for easy digestion or dismissal. In his essay *The Documentary Debate: Aesthetic or Anaesthetic?*, David Levi Strauss counters this charge: “The idea that the more transformed or aestheticized an image is, the less authentic or politically valuable it becomes, is one that needs to be seriously questioned. Why can’t beauty be a call to action?” I think all art is about aestheticizing and transforming. It allows people from different cultures to recognize each other in one another.

Art is basically a generative force. Creativity is inherently iterative and redemptive. These works — these gestures of debt and discovery — are attempts at renewal among the rubble and undoing some of the damage. Confronting and considering the cultural heritage of peoples and places under attack reminds us of what we stand to lose — the humanity of those we revere or are urged to revile. Ignoring this would leave us with no culture at all.

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www.allegcheny.edu/artgalleries

DIASPORAS AND DREAMS

January 25 - March 13, 2011

- **Tuesday, January 25, 7:00 - 9:00 PM:** Opening Reception and Artists' Panel Discussion with Bonnie Donohue, Rebecca Heyl, Andrew Ellis Johnson and Susanne Slavick
- **Tuesday, January 25, 9:00 - 10:30 PM:** Concert with Oakland, CA rap artist, Ise Lyfe
- **Wednesday, February 9, 7:00 - 9:00 PM:** Artist's Talk with 2010 Pulitzer Prize winning photojournalist, Craig F. Walker
- **Friday, March 11, 7:00 - 9:00PM:** Closing Reception and Artist's Talk with film maker, Vasia Markides (part of the academic conference on Global Citizenship)

GALLERY HOURS:

12:30 - 5:00 Tuesday through Friday
1:30 - 5:00 Saturday
2:00 - 4:00 Sunday
Closed Monday



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