

Retracing a Disappearing Landscape: On Libyan Cultural Memory

WHAT DOES IT MEAN TO SPEAK OF LIBYAN CULTURAL MEMORY? What museums should we visit, what archives should we consult, what oral histories and material artefacts should we gather, to begin to tell the stories of Libya? The exhibition “Retracing A Disappearing Landscape,” held at the P21 Gallery in London, and running for six weeks between March and May 2018, was a rare opportunity to explore these questions. The exhibition, curated by Najlaa Elageli, set out to showcase “people’s direct experience of and fascination with memory and personal history as well as the collective narratives that arise in connection with modern day Libya.” Alongside the exhibition, there was a parallel programme of talks by artists, writers and academics, including novelist Najwa Bin Shatwan, poets Khaled Mattawa and Farrah Fray, and director Jihan Kikhia, as well as academics Adam Benkato and Barbara Spadaro, and Adam Styp-Rekowski and Guy Martin discussing their photographs of Tripoli and Benghazi respectively.

More than a century ago, Maurice Halbwachs defined memory as a social phenomenon. In recent years, the interest in cultural memory and in heritage has been described as a memory industry, often critiqued as an over-personalizing of history, interlinked with centering trauma and victimization. Kerwin Lee Klein has argued that “one of the reasons for memory’s sudden rise is that it promises to let us have our essentialism and deconstruct it, too.” To speak of cultural memory is to speak of history that belongs to us, as Jan Assman puts it, memory as knowledge with “an identity index.” Essentialism is entangled in the questions we ask and the stories we tell ourselves about where we come from and who we are. Who do we include, and who do we exclude, when we draw the boundaries around our ethnic, national, cultural and religious identities?

During the Qaddafi regime, billboards across Libya were plastered with a ubiquitous map of a dark jagged territory shining a benevolent light down onto the African continent. This image seemed curiously apropos, representing the country as a missing puzzle piece, spotlighting its own absence in narratives outside of itself. In the regime

narrative, Libya was the beacon of enlightened thought extending its rays across the global south, but in reality it seemed to figure as the blank, an enigma, a hyphen between the swathe of countries that had been consolidated as the Maghrib and the Mashriq. In the last years of the regime, Libya was hardly mentioned on the Arabic-speaking news, while mention of the country would only rarely appear on the Western media, mostly in relation to Lockerbie reparations, to migration routes, or, after the Iraq invasion, to surrendering weapons, to the rapprochement, Tony Blair earnestly shaking hands with Qaddafi under the patterned tent.

Since the 2011 revolution and the subsequent years of conflict, we have entered an age in which we are confronted on a daily basis with a cascade of images and narratives through social media, new narratives that sediment and press down what happened only days before in what feels like an ever-accelerating process. In this time of civil strife, the notion of cultural memory might seem a luxury, a nostalgic yearning. Yet Astrid Erll argues that it is precisely at times of crisis that “we cannot afford the luxury of not studying memory,” since we need to examine “paradigms that were formed in long historical processes [...] to understand the different ways in which people handle time, and this refers not only to their ‘working through the past’, but also includes their understanding of the present and visions for the future.” As Edward Said also puts it, “[m]emory and its representations touch very significantly upon questions of identity, of nationalism, of power and authority.” The fragmentations and the faultlines within Libyan society today speak to the urgency of grappling with the historical processes that have led us here, not least in order to imagine how alternative visions of a national identity might be formulated for the future.

The *Retracing A Disappearing Landscape* exhibition gathered work by over twenty artists, related in various ways to preserving and reflecting on cultural and national memory, ranging from oral narratives and projects drawing on and responding to family photo albums, to paintings and contemporary pieces reacting to the post-2011 context. The title of the exhibition was well-chosen: the concept of the trace suggests something whose presence marks an absence, while to retrace what is disappearing, fading from view, suggests an effort at guessing, following back, which is recurrent and repeated and never resolved. The relatively small exhibition space meant that the various installations jostled against each other, a mixing of visual and aural and

tactile, tapestries hanging over paintings, archival photographs next to physical objects, installations in conversation and juxtaposition.

Perhaps the most immediate sense of the disappearance of heritage was represented in the woven patterns of tapestry and folkloric arts, standing in the exhibition space as a testament to fading artforms and local traditions. More literal disappearances were explored in other instances, including work on the missing, those who disappeared during the revolution, in work by Guy Martin entitled *The Missing: Re-Photographed*; the “re” signifying that these are photographs of posters with the missings’ names and faces. Amidst the artistic and cultural production, to see this installation brought back sharply the disorienting realization that Libya had become a place to which journalists come from afar to photograph violence. No matter how normal this fact becomes, it will never be normal. The installation brought into focus too the fragmentary nature of the news discourse: the photographs of posters were stories on pause, moments in time. Where do we go to find the rest of the story? Who has kept the records?

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Another disappearance appeared in an installation by Marcella Mameli-Badi, Alla Budabbus, and Taqwa Barnosa centered on the Ghazala statue in Tripoli. This statue of a woman and a gazelle, a landmark of the city and a marker of the colonial past, “disappeared” in 2014. In the installation, a triptych of images reimagine this disappearance, with words on the images reflecting on its loss. Do we read this disappearance as a sign of the puritanical forces that seek to selectively form cultural experience? Should we mourn the disappearance of the statue, and if we do mourn it, how do we reconcile that sense of loss with the pervasive, problematic nostalgia for colonialism against the melancholy of a seemingly never-ending postcolonial hangover?

The nostalgic object was a common theme in the exhibition, from Laila Sharif’s *Dearest To Me*, which incorporated archives with family photographs, to the nostalgically familiar embroidered pillowcases in Reem Gibriel’s work, *In Sense of Remembrance*, which were intended to “highlights the sense of smell as part of many shared memories that linger in the consciousness.” Gibriel describes the “self-deception” of nostalgia, but also the way in which it “allows us to draw strength from memory,” and relates the power of “[long[ing] for something that no longer exists but that defines our sense of belonging.” While Gibriel’s work focused on smell, Malak Elghwel’s video collage *Mendar*

brought aspects of cultural memory to life, including snippets of the popular show *Besbasi*. These are works which spoke to the theme of reinterpreting what is disappearing and making sense of what remains. According to Erll, again, this is the “critical potential to nostalgia” which “keeps constructions of a ‘past future’ alive and measures them against the present.” The memory is less about the past than the active and constant reconstruction of the past in the present and for the future.

Svetlana Boym describes nostalgia as working through the “superimposition of two images – of home and abroad, past and present, dream and everyday life,” a superimposition Boym describes through the “cinematic image” of a “double exposure.” This method shaped Jihan Kikhia’s moving documentary film, *Finding Kikhia*, on the disappearance of the director’s father, which interwove family video of Mansur Kikhia with news footage, capturing the need to return again and again to the images that remain, and which carry the emotional weight of an inability to mourn. Kikhia’s exploration of disappearance and its psychological shadow connects with the work of the novelist Hisham Matar, who has explored his own father’s disappearance in literary form in *The Return: Fathers, Sons and the Land In Between* (2016). Both Kikhia and Matar interweave life in the shadow of this unresolved personal tragedy with the 2011 revolution, an ending of the regime which does not provide a resolution for the lingering effects of what the regime inflicted over its forty years.

In *The Return*, Hisham Matar writes about the fact that there are few modern histories of Libya, and those that are available are often written by outsiders. Matar concludes that this dearth of historical accounts means that “to be Libyan is to live with questions.” *Retracing A Disappearing Landscape* sought not to bring resolution to these questions, but to explore what it means to grapple with the absence of answers, now and into the future.