

## Bashar Horoub

Bashar Horoub makes observations.

Observation is widely accepted as one of the things that artists *do*. Observational drawing, for instance, is a standard artist's tool. But *an observation*, perhaps not simply by a quirk of English language, is something that you *make*. Indeed, an effective observation is very often very carefully constructed. An observation is a matter not just of experience, but of selection from it; a selection made sometimes in all neutral innocence, but more often than not to imply or invite an interpretation, to imply or invite response. And so it is with the observations of Bashar Horoub. He notices how something is, and he seeks out an appropriate method to state as much: this works this way; how most tellingly to point it out? This feels like this; how best to communicate it? The chosen method is then implemented with the utmost care, the observation constructed.

This is not a conceptual practice full of ideas about itself; it is fully and firmly rooted in the world around us. And the approach is not tied to a particular medium or technique; there is sculpture here, and photography, and printmaking, and video; whatever is needed. This reflects a pragmatism that makes for simple means and ready understanding.

In the installation called *Balance*, the main object looks like a hanging torpedo. It looks heavy, a bright red metal cylinder, a found object, in fact, recycled sculpture, adjusted and repainted. Its careful suspension is somehow suggestive of the weaponry you see in movies, being loaded onto planes, into submarines, the white-gloved sterility of businesslike preparation for modern warfare. Heavy, yes; rugged, yes; but also somehow delicate, fraught with thoughts of detonation. On first seeing the whole setup, you mainly notice its improvised nature; there is little of the high-tech military about the wooden frame that two long mirrors are propped on, beneath this trapped and hanging missile. Approach and look down into the mirrors, and the thing reveals its secret: that trace of symmetry you might have noticed multiplies, propagates itself in the mirrors, into the fully rounded rotational variety. You are suddenly at the centre of a hexagonal arrangement of red tubes, a perfectly poised equilibrium that keeps them just millimetres away from the fragility of the glass. Suddenly, the makeshift nature of the frame has significance: it renders the glass so very vulnerable, and conspicuously so; the unsupported mirror-ends ready to shatter catastrophically at the slightest touch, were the metal to swing. And you know, you are certain, that inertia would do it, with the slightest input of energy, and that the catastrophe would be repeated on the return swing of this deadly pendulum. For a moment, you imagine this fragmentation cascading around the whole hexagonal array, until you realise that the very instant the first mirror breaks, it's all over; everything will be gone. The piece is less about the power of the frightening object than about the fragility of the context, the vital importance of the *balance* of the title.

So a simple explanation, but there's no way to pin down the effect of the simple fact of it. The mirror *really could* very easily break; *both* mirrors could very easily break; it is unlikely that one would go and the other survive. A simple explanation, because it's a simple observation: Bashar sets its up, and there it is; that's how it is. We decide for ourselves whether this is just about a heavy object and delicate glass, or something more human, something more global.

A similarly structural, non-specific observation is conveyed by the video *Binary*, an endless dance of complex, abstract forms, engaged, we might say, in the conflict of co-existence: contained entities with their own internal turmoils, subject to occasional impacts and crises, in a process ultimately characterised by its resistance to resolution.

Elsewhere, Bashar's work is far more personal, overtly autobiographical. The evanescent child of twin screenprints is the son who deserves more, is promised more, and in the image at least, is granted more in the light that envelopes him. The photograph burns to white, the old situation consumed to give rise to the new, full of hope.

And staying with the very specific, Bashar describes a uniquely Palestinian approach to stairwells and staircases in high-rise blocks in territories where space is at a premium. His photograph, a souvenir of the architecture of home, squares off a section of staircase, embedded in the building yet exposed to the outside world. He chooses screenprinting for near-seamless repetition of the image. The sense of the physical printing process, unique to the screenprint, analogous to the very physical building process, suggests the possibility that the repetitions could go on and on. The section of staircase is like the module of Brancusi's *Endless Column*, with the potential to take us ever upwards; a gesture of expansion, growth, and escape. It seems a simple enough statement, that this could go on forever; but is this the pragmatism of land shortage, or a metaphorical aspiration somehow to go skyward?

Once again, there is an echo in the video works, and it emphasizes the importance of upwards and the sky. It is uncomfortably clichéd to describe something as *achingly* beautiful, but it is the right phrase for the movie called *Heavenly*, which is full of yearning, yearning for the freedom of the sky. The movie is a forbidden document of the marketplace in the artist's native Hebron on the West Bank, shot from a camcorder inside a jacket, the lens pointing consistently upwards through the improvised mesh roof between the market stalls. The netting provides some protection from objects dropped from the overlooking buildings inhabited by Jewish settlers. The movie journeys through the market, its upward gaze cataloguing the objects trapped on the roof, expressions seemingly of careless disdain. Yet that gaze is truly fixed, one senses, on the endless blue beyond, the reference to heaven in the title only half ironic.

This body of work as a whole is an experiment in displacement, productions devised and completed against the background of personal detachment and self-awareness only achievable when away from home. Inevitably, some of the work, in particular the photographic series *Here and Now*, addresses displacement itself, one's enduring

connection with one's place of origin, and the establishment of new connections with new places. The title of the video *No Time No Place*, seems to set up an opposite speculation, about severed connection and personal confusion, from which one glimpses unrecognisable companions on an indeterminate journey.

In *Here and Now*, the artist himself appears in the images, though how we recognise him is hard to say. For in each picture he wears a mirrored helmet, a square, eyeless, wholly reflective head-box. In its featurelessness and brutal geometry the mask is reminiscent of Sidney Nolan's stylized renderings of the Australian outlaw Ned Kelly's improvised face armour. And it imparts to the images something of the same romance of the outsider. Once again, the hard part is pinning down the straightforwardness of the images; their matter-of-fact approach; why they, with their faceless faces, are neither frightening nor sinister.

It works in several ways: the foreigner abroad, his features replaced by the objects of an unfamiliar landscape, traffic lights or public statuary, takes on an aspect which is as much comic as poignant, and this clearly undermines the possibility of fear; but sometimes, particularly where the artist is lying down, in touch with the soil, the identity of this visitor in a foreign land is all but subsumed by the landscape which supplants his head in the optical setup of the shot. Again, it is not as frightening as it might sound, for the metaphor is a gentle one, representing a process of absorption and assimilation rather than excision and obliteration. But back home, on his native ground, the consumption of self by the landscape gives way to a definition of it, a personal identity suddenly couched wholly in terms of location and familial and cultural roots. I am the sunlit soil of my birthplace; the village of my ancestors; the olive trees that have grown on its land for thousand of years.

One final thought, an observation on these constructed observations: these images are not montages, they are documents of live setups. We may assume that Bashar has an accomplice for each shot, a person who takes the picture but never appears in them. We may imagine being that person, or at least being there, coming face to face with this figure in the landscape, in his ritualistically neutral uniform, barefoot at home, or booted abroad. What then does he look like? What face does he have? Who is he? And the answer must be that he looks like us; he has our face; he is us.

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