The Memory Material of Jananne Al-Ani and Stéphanie Saadé

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Memories are deeply subjective. Whether individual or collective, they are incomplete by definition, haunted by inaccuracies, forgetfulness and erasures. Perhaps nothing is as tainted, pliable and personal as memory, an ambiguity that is not always resolved when memory becomes history. There are many grey zones here, and it is within these grey zones that the practice of Jananne Al-Ani and Stéphanie Saadé is situated. Both Al-Ani and Saadé not only deal with the implications of how history and memory are chronicled and reproduced, but also with how it endures or disappears in materials and through technologies such as film and photography. They do so in radically different ways, yet both engage with the limitations imposed by these materials and media and how these offer possibilities to reformulate conceptions of history, politics and form.

Jananne Al-Ani was born in 1966 in Kirkuk, Iraq to an Irish mother and an Iraqi father. In her earlier video and photographic work she addresses issues of memory, intimacy, narrative and loss, often by casting herself, her mother and three sisters as the main protagonists. The later and current work of Al-Ani moves out of the studio and into the landscape, and probes how orientalist depictions of the Middle Eastern landscape, through literature, photography and film, continue to dominate our view of the region to this day.

For the exhibition at Akinci Gallery, Al-Ani presents work that is part of *The Aesthetics of Disappearance: A Land Without People*, an ongoing project that she started in 2007. In it the artist explores the disappearance of the body in the real and imagined landscapes of the contested and highly charged geographies of the Middle East. Al-Ani shows how perception of the Middle Eastern landscape is fraught with preconceptions and orientalist clichés that portray this region as a vast and barren desert, devoid of human presence or of traces of civilization. However, landscapes, even apparently desolate and abandoned ones, can contain clues of the past. For example, mass graves in Kosovo or Bosnia that are hidden under the soil, the destruction and subsequent erasure of the many Palestinian villages during and after the foundation of the State of Israel in 1948, or the many disappeared during Saddam Hussein's brutal reign in Iraq show up in subtle variations in the landscape. It is almost as if these vistas are black boxes that need to be unlocked so we can decode the data. Al-Ani offers us entries into these open, yet very opaque settings.

Drawing on the aesthetics, history and politics of aerial military surveillance technologies, in particular photography and drone technology, Al-Ani shows the series of photographs ***Aerial I, Aerial II*** and ***Aerial V*** **(2011)**. From a plane, Al-Ani took sepia-toned images that almost appear abstract. It is unclear whether we are looking at ancient ruins or contemporary traces, man-made or natural. All images were taken in Jordan, yet the location and the nature of the site, military, archeological, agricultural or other, are of no real consequence. Seen from the air, the distance turns the territory into beautiful

painterly images with intriguing patterns that provoke questions rather than give us answers.

Shown in conjunction with the *Aerial* series is the video **Excavators (2010)** featuring ants building a nest in the sand. Here scale is confused and the close focus on the ants' nest echoes imagery taken from a distance. To a combat pilot in a plane or soldier operating a military drone, humans probably resemble exactly that, ants.

Beirut-based artist **Stéphanie Saadé** was born in Lebanon in 1983 in the midst of Lebanon's Civil War (1975-1990). Like many artists of her generation and the generation preceding her, a pre-occupation with memory, individual and collective experience of history and place is central. What sets Saadé apart is that unlike many of her peers and her more senior colleagues, she does not deal with the topic of the civil war in a direct way. Saadé's work is not about the politics of visual representation after disaster or about a coming to terms with the aftermath of the civil war, a recurring theme in much of contemporary Lebanese art. Saadé subtly explores issues of memory, violence, displacement, scarring, reparation and resilience through the materials and objects she finds and then copies or (re)constructs.

For example, in **Scarred Object (2013)** she cuts a metal bar into equal parts that she then welds back together again. The bar never goes back to its original shape and its "scars" after reparation always remain visible. In other words, the violence done to the object always shows, no matter the effort made to repair it. It is a poignant metaphor for Lebanon's divided society.

For **Strange Parts (2013)** she cut discarded everyday objects like chairs, bicycles and tables into pieces that show off the welded joints of the original. The joints simultaneously form a point of weakness – the object might fall apart - and one of strength – it is here where the two, originally separate, parts are bound to each other.

In other projects Saadé explores the residual qualities of memory, whether this is lodged in the material she uses or based on her own personal experience. In **Logic Remains (2013)**, premiering at Akinci Gallery, the artist recuperates forgotten and discarded everyday materials such as pieces of string, cables, knots, and adhesive tape. Their origin and purpose are lost, but not the process and logic of how they were made. Saadé reproduces these leftovers, copying their shapes, and exhibits them next to the original. Together they form delicate examples of artistry.

For the project **Underlines (2013)** she reproduces a book she read and has underlined passages in, but erases all the text and just keeps the page numbers and her own marks. Here the prior existence of text is suggested, yet the content of the book is irrelevant. What remains are the abstract drawings that trace the reading process of the artist.

In **Nostalgic Geography (2013)** the artist transposes the route of a familiar trip she used to take from her former apartment in Paris, onto an old city map of Beirut. The point of departure on the Beirut map is her current apartment in the city. Made to scale, the

Parisian path is an impossibility in Beirut as it is interrupted by a river, buildings, and the absence of roads. The displacement of the route reflects her own displacement as a Beiruti exile in Paris but also renders routines undertaken in her place of exile strange in her own country.