

IBRAHIM RASHID LANDSCAPE

Recovering the Fragile Absolute in the Landscape of Ibrahim Rashid

When I sent an inquiry about what had happened to my once so flourishing garden in Baghdad, I received a letter telling me that trees had withered away and the fruits had shrunk. Such things make lasting impressions and maybe art can be a way of handling these feelings as it can help to investigate the past.

(artist statement, 2005)

Contemporary art might be considered a phenomenological framework that includes various practices—making, looking, interrogating our relationship to actuality. Often human curiosity leads to forming fragile absolutes of poetic spaces and unexpected conditions of the medium materialized in a dialogue between the artist and his/her cultural environment. In the last two decades, the dialogue between artist and his/her culture has been tempered by digital technology, and its ability to chronicle and reformat familiar temporal and pictorial conventions of art experience, as well as to facilitate and problematize human perception. In the case of an artist like Ibrahim Rashid, dialogue with culture cannot be separated from an exploration of history and desire in order to rediscover personal mythology in the most overlooked phenomena of everyday life. In this context, perhaps, technology might find a way to re-humanize itself as much as the viewer might inhabit the border zones between contemporary art and poetry; art might be seen as a process of self-making outside the politicized systems of representation.

The idea of time and landscape is interesting in that while a place is physical actuality it doesn't exist as such independently of how we treat it, how we view it or how we understand it. This quality of time and space was recognized by Gaston Bachelard in his book "The Poetics of Space". Every time and place is highly evocative! It is a look at the relationship between the present and the most significant past. (artist statement, 2005)

Born in Baghdad in 1957, and a graduate of the Baghdad's Academy of Fine Arts, Ibrahim Rashid has been living in exile since 1991 in Malmö, Sweden, with his wife Maha Mustafa, who is also an accomplished multimedia artist. Rashid's practice crosses the disciplines of painting, drawing, photography, printmaking, video art, as well as art writing and teaching. Generally speaking, his work tests the disciplinary boundaries of art, both perceptible and imperceptible, and points to an ensemble of poetic sensibilities that emerge in the processes of constant resettlement and change. Over the past twenty years, Rashid has exhibited art in many art museums and galleries in Europe, Asia and US, and worked on many public art projects in Sweden. Last year, he moved to Toronto, where he now lives with his family. I must say that I was very fortunate to meet Rashid, and collaborate on this project. In fact, this project is Ibrahim Rashid's debut in Canadian artworld.

Rosalind Krauss (2006) reminds us that "a contemporary avant-garde has organized itself to reject Conceptual art, which it views as the most recent form of kitsch. As it had been in the past, the cultural ambition of such avant-garde artists is vested in making their own medium into the subject of their art...Accordingly, they reach for modern, technological mechanisms as the "supports" for their own work" (p. 58). Krauss identifies this "new" sensibility of contemporary art in the work of Ed Ruscha, James Coleman and Sophie Calle¹. We might see this "new" sensibility at work in Ibrahim Rashid. In his three-channel video installation Landscape, Rashid

turns to the medium of video art to explore the poetics of space in our world of hyper-aestheticized images, entertainment, and human dependence on digital technology.

Landscape is a time-based triptych that comprises the three short DVD files that Rashid made between 2002 and 2003 in the kitchen of his house in Malmo. The installation was exhibited last year at the Landskrona Konsthall in Sweden and at the Darat Al Funun, The Khalid Shoman Foundation in Jordan. Looped and projected on the three adjacent walls, Landscape engages the viewer not only in interpreting the relationship among the three projections, but also in the process of readjusting his/her sensory apparatus to the installation as a whole—a technological self-portrait of the artist encamped within the space of the gallery. This encampment might be seen as a contemporary inscription of Hamlet's soul forever caught in between his wonderment and predicament, "O God, I could be bounded in a nutshell and count myself a king of infinite space". As Landscape expands into a unique phenomenological and cinematic event, we are urged to reconsider the meaning of self-portraiture in contemporary art.

However, the meaning of Landscape is not simply a matter of the hermeneutics of multiple projections. In fact, such an interpretation is problematized by the suspension of time and narrative as a linear sequence of sensory information. In other words, the time duration of the piece is collapsed through the looping of three films, and converted into a poetic equilibrium of the three disparate and immaterial images of water and pressure, including a figure of the artist. Balanced through asymmetry, Rashid's triptych also evokes the motto of the late Canadian abstract painter Yves Gaucher, "Asymmetry is the affirmation of an independent spirit".

KVARLUM: The projection on the left wall features a close up of the bubbling aquarium water pump filmed against the green wall of the kitchen. As water streams through it, the image of the pump is deterritorialized and reterritorialized into a rhizome of breathing and pressure, the sustainable life system of the aquarium. But can poetry and art ever be reduced to words and images, and philosophical concepts without accepting first that such activities entail non-knowing, the unthought, a form of visual amnesia?

...Knowing must therefore be accompanied by an equal capacity to forget knowing.

Non-knowing is not a form of ignorance but a difficult transcendence of knowledge. This is the price that must be paid for an oeuvre to be, at all time, a sort of pure beginning, which makes its creation an exercise in freedom". (Jung, 1928, in Bachelard)

In his seminal work *The Poetics of Space*, which Rashid finds particularly influential on his understanding of art, the French philosopher Gaston Bachelard interprets the lines above as symptomatic of one's desire to transpose the subject into a phenomenology of the poetic, into the humanity of daydreaming—the dazzling splendor of images that transcend all the premises of one's sensibility. The puzzling close-up of Rashid's aquarium pump distills the metaphorical wit of the artist, his longing for happiness and simplicity of life, as much as it may be interpreted as an afterthought on the Emil Kusturica's film *Arizona Dream* in which 'only the fish is capable of non-knowing because the fish knows everything'³.

WATER: In his essay *Water and Dreams*, Bachelard associates the materiality of imagination to a dream of fresh water, a symbol of renewal of life and death. "Hence, it is not surprising that water surrounds the Rashid in his triptych. "Water can be a symbol of death and oblivion but is also a symbol of life. Sometimes it represents regeneration and at other times the impulse to change" (Altgard, 2005, p. 81). The reference to water is also made in the film projected on the right wall. This film features a close-up of the lid on a pressure-cooker, or more specifically, its capacity to contain and sustain the pressure. First, we see the bubbles and drops of water escaping the cooker, and as it reaches the boiling point, we see the water

transformed into steam, and the lid forced into spinning, while the steam transforms itself into shrill sound. This liminal space between the image-sound signalization on the one hand, and the containment of pressure on the other, points to both the caprice of the artist and his persistence in investigating the materiality and immateriality of art.⁴

THE ARTIST: The central projection is the largest of the three. It features a close up of the artist's back-torso dressed in a sweater, and seated in his chair. The artist is filmed breathing, his chest heaving and sinking. In fact, Rashid sees the pressure in the aquarium and pressure-cooker as poetic equivalents of the pressure in his chest. However, this film features more than the breathing of the artist. It focuses on the artist's gaze, which is fixed on the hopping bird in a cage in front of him. But how else can one forget the images of the trees that had withered away and the fruits that had shrunk in what was once the flourishing garden, if not through art? Here lies a very fine line between the Bachelard's concept of daydreaming that he sees as pivotal to the poetics of space, and the aesthetics of disengagement and the reenactments of depression in art. Christine Ross (2006) writes, "The regeneration of perception is engendered by a screen that is explored as a weary matrix that generates dream more than as a locus of dream to be interpreted" (p. 178). Thus, in this central projection, the gaze of the viewer reenacts the locus of the camera, turning the site of artist's dreaming into a subject of surveillance. How else can an artist prevent his perception from becoming anesthetized and his memories lost to mass entertainment, as Walter Benjamin noted in his seminal essay on the work of art in the age of mechanical reproduction, if not by turning his/her attention and the medium to images of candor?

The concept of the Islamic garden should not be omitted as it has been of a particular interest to Rashid in the series of paintings and prints that he produced over the years. It is also important to note that many Western art historians interpret Islamic garden as self-contained aesthetic entity, and as the space of spiritual transcendence. Petruccioli (1994) points out that "garden and landscape interrelate through the intermediary form of the encampment. In this way they establish a fundamental relationship bound to affect, either consciously or unconsciously, the other acts of appropriation and settlement in the same territory" (p. 350)⁵. Rashid's *Landscape* illuminates the capacity of the technological medium to document those subtle forms of affect, conscious and unconscious settlements of self beyond the time and space, memory and desire.

The literary critic and poet, Clemens Altgard, who has followed closely the work of Rashid in Sweden, associates *Landscape*, with "magic realism". "Magic – because it seems to be founded on ancient ideas of the world as an organism, as one living, changing continuum. Realism – because it is about perceiving how this continuum is expressed in its details, which is to say, in the most overlooked phenomena of everyday life" (p. 80). This idea of finding magic in the ordinary spaces—a kitchen, a fish tank, or a bird cage cannot be materialized without poetics of art, in which the ordinariness of things can be transcended and the stream of imagination united with the endless continuum of unconscious. Bachelard (1962), writes that "the poetic image is not subject to an inner thrust. On the contrary: through the brilliance of an image, the distant past resounds with echoes, and it is hard to know at what depth these echoes will reverberate and die away" (p. xvi).

At its best, *Landscape* reminds us of often overlooked proximity between art and poetry in our contemporary world. It represents a self-portrait of the artist as filmed in his quest for emotional and intellectual balance. But let us for a moment reconsider the idea of art as the fragile absolute in its environment that is on the brink of collapse; its sacred on the verge of turning into ideology; and its power of the medium to document the affects of candor. Like a hanging garden anticipating its Lazarus, *Landscape* reverberates in its magic, as pressure's dream of escape, as water's breath, and as a well-kept secret in the artist's mind.

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