

CHECKPOINT: EL ALEPH

"O God, I could be bounded in a nutshell
and count myself a king of infinite space."
- Shakespeare: Hamlet

By: Dan Jönsson

Reality surpasses fantasy, they say.

Well, of course it does.

In the winter of 2005 southern Sweden is hit by a hurricane, which in a few hours destroys a great part of its woodlands. Nature takes us by surprise - leaving mankind powerless, caught in its wrecked electric networks, deserted by its foresighted plans of emergency. About a week after the storm I'm travelling north through the country on one of the first trains able to use the southern main line again. Of the carefully planted fir forests only a fringed warp remains; all is unravelled by the storm, beneath a thin cover of powder snow the uprooted trees are lying like remainders in a matchstick landscape some child got tired of plying with. Reality surpasses fantasy - of course: who would ever have expected this? You don't expect the unlikely; if so it wouldn't be unlikely. Only in a country that believes itself to have done away with the surprises of nature it is possible to demand an "emergency plan" for the unthinkable. Only there you could possibly be surprised by the fact that reality surpasses fantasy.

It should be the other way around, of course. It's when fantasy some time surpasses reality we should be astonished for real. It's when man shows his ability to imagine something greater than, and different from the already known - to think of the unthinkable, you may say - that you might speak of something remarkable. In his essay "Game of Burning Stones" Ibrahim Rashid describes his view of art as, basically, a dialogue between man and his environment. This thought takes its point of departure in a memory that Maha Mustafa told from when she as a child was visiting relatives in Kirkuk in northern Iraq. The children used to play with stones, throwing them onto the ground - the hard, oily character of which made the stones catch fire and sent many coloured flames across the earth. This game, Ibrahim Rashid writes, was without doubt above all a "spontaneous" creation of nature - but from the perspective of the children it could also be seen as a "creative" act similar to the ritual features in prehistoric art or, for that part, in modern land art. Would we therefore call this game "art"?

A similar thought strikes me on the train through the wasted woodlands of southern Småland. The papers these days are filled with images trying to make understandable the ravages of the hurricane. Photos showing huge trunks lying overturned on top of houses, photos where families squat by candles at the kitchen table. Those images are at the human level - and precisely therefore, I think, therefore, I think don't make the catastrophe conceivable. A tree can turn over for many reasons; power can get cut when a fuse goes out. It's not until I set my eyes on some remarkable air pictures that I get a glimpse of what kind of powers have been operating here: pictures showing vast forests laid down, with their trunks all in one and the same direction, as if combed by a gigantic comb. It is, quite simply, neat in an almost uncanny manner - there is a, literally, "higher" beauty in this chaos you never could expect to grasp from a human perspective. Would we therefore be prepared in this hurricane - which actually has a name:

Gudrun - to see an artistic subject? Something in these pictures makes me suspect such a view to already be there, tacit and yet strongly present. In these pictures we see the work of Gudrun with her own eyes.

Maha Mustafa's "*Horizon*" achieves an effect reminding of - or, should we rather say: mirroring - this experience. The thin line of red light projected through the smoke of a smoke machine propels, standing in the midst of it, the feeling of surveying a vast meteorological phenomenon. The smoke seems to "freeze" the light, to literally stem it into something graspable: you might well be able to cup your hands and eat it, like ice cream. "*Horizon*" thus turns light into matter, a kind of fluid into which you step "down" as into a pool. But not just that. Diving down under the surface you perceive a shimmering celestial phenomenon, like standing before a romantic sunset - a cloud landscape you now realize is just the underside of "the real". "*Horizon*" recreates romantic notions of the "sublime" in a kind of strange peepshow version, like a model of the incomprehensible. A horizon you break through with your own body: there's a remarkable power in this paradox.

When Maha Mustafa and Ibrahim Rashid entitle their new art project "Checkpoint X" it arouses different associations - military, geographic, intellectual and existential. What they have in common is a notion of survey - but a survey, which in every single moment remains temporary, makeshift, and thus subject to constant revision. This idea corresponds to a post modern, "globalized" conception of the world, which has given up the modern (or if you wish: colonial) picture of the world as something possible to grasp in its entirety. In the popular version of this cosmology the world is rather understood as a net of outlooks, each with its own special perspective yet linked together in a changing and unforeseeable totality.

How to describe this totality is one of the big challenges of our time. What's important - the connections or the outlooks? Does this map at all correspond to any real landscape - or are these "nets" after all a way of weaving an alluring cocoon around a world where distances in many ways rather increase than diminish? In the light installation "*Hanging Landscape*" Maha Mustafa develops the theme from "*Horizon*" in a way that brings it in touch with questions like these. Three layers of light in different green nuances are flooded through the smoke from the machine: three "*Horizons*" so to speak, three layers of reality that never get in touch with each other. The constantly streaming flows of colour make you think of heavenly phenomenon but also of movements underneath the surface of the earth. They point towards something unfinished, something in the making - a seductive flow making it possible to look away from the overall structure, which of course remains static. In the same way the word "hanging" arouses double associations to a condition that could be both "undecided" and "remaining". You might say it points in two directions at the same time.

These questions about how the world is connected could basically be seen as varieties of "eternal" philosophical problems considering appearance and reality, idea and form, matter and spirit. In the art of Maha Mustafa they appear physically as a tension between what you might call a "meteorological" and a "geological" perspective. They often confront each other within the same work - as in "*Hanging Landscape*", or as in "*Landscape Minus 37°C*", where the ice appearing on the ribs of a gigantic freezing unit arouses the illusion of a frosty mountain scenery. The cold - a meteorological and therefore changing phenomenon - thus creates strata of a geological, that is, remaining nature, which of course is a pretty accurate description of how it actually happens. This, however, does not make the problem less acute. Survey at the same time demands a notion of the changeable - and an ability to look beyond it. Could this be possible?

You might say that art, as long as man has devoted himself to it, has been trying to show that this possibility exists. Yes - which it even is for this reason that man, since the beginning of history, has been creating art. In her book "Det umuliges kunst" (The Art of the Impossible) from 2005 the Danish author Solvej Balle expresses a view of art you might call anthropological, based on an understanding of art as a basically existential practice, where man is treating

certain conditions consequential upon moving around “with body, identity and mind in a world of time, space and materiality”. In the restrictions implied by this, artistic practice gives the opportunity of transgressions that provoke a feeling of totality, of survey: of, for a moment, being able to perceive the world in a way that suits our senses. The works of Maha Mustafa seem to me to be rooted in a similar basic outlook. Swinging between a human and a superhuman view, between the transitory and the remaining they seem constantly to seek new outlooks: new ways of accomplishing this “impossible” mission.

In this quest they engage the whole arsenal of opposite concepts of modern art - illusion and abstraction, the expressive and the reductive, configuration and storytelling. To this end, light is a rewarding material, suiting itself with simple means to severe, effective abstractions as well as to poetic, scenographic environments. Maha Mustafa plays deliberately with these possibilities. A good example is the installation “*Deadline*”, executed in several versions, all with a red line apparently pointing to the fact that the world is limited not only by horizons - but also by borders. Especially some versions executed with electric heaters underline the danger, the taboo. They become some kind of natural counterparts to the frozen beauty of “*Landscape Minus 37°C*”, with the glowing radiator threads pointing towards a kind of resting, volcanic activity. Heat, which makes light, which makes an image: the simplicity of this formula makes the ambivalent condition between the abstract and the scenographic stand out as an exceptionally energetic field. In the same way a work like “*Lenses*” - a sort of big, glass fibre forms, lit from the inside - can easily appear as either one or the other depending on the way it is installed. Normally they're put up as an austere, minimalist series of forms giving the work a strong, sculptural effect. In the version shown at the Staffanstorp Konsthall and Landskrona Konstahall in 2005, however, they lay scattered on the floor in a dimly lit room, almost as if they wanted to tell about an extraterrestrial visit to this prosaic, Swedish suburb.

In such a work, as in the “*Field*” which has been shown in some different versions, and which consists of thousands of small light bulbs hidden underneath a surface of half-transparent paper, Maha Mustafa comes close to a scenographic method. Precisely “*Field*” is probably the clearest example of this trait in her artistic practice. With its warm, glowing light it creates the illusion of a lava field, of ground in the process of melting and transforming under your feet. You might interpret it as the framework of an individual, even personal story - we might be back among the burning stones of Kirkuk. But just as well as you could see it as a severe configuration of the exile experience - the feeling of living on a ground always threatening to flow away or sink; the experience of in the warm and inviting always to be forced to identify the burning danger. Or, to take it to another level: it could be a primeval geologic vision, an “impossible” try to penetrate beyond time and space.

Or, to settle for the most likely: it is all these things at the same time. A sight beyond humanity, a basic human experience and a personal memory - it is in the merging of such various meanings that a work of art comes alive. Maha Mustafa practices what you could describe as an “inverted geology”. Her art makes use of basic natural forces to create large, universal metaphors: meteorology and geology lending their forms to human life. But also the other way around - from the basic human conditions she collects the concepts that make the totality of the world understandable. How could we be able to see the natural in the glowing of the earth's interior if we didn't feel the same warmth from inside ourselves? How could we ever accept the capriciousness of a winter storm if we didn't always feel the same unpredictable shifts in our own inner meteorology? A world is every man, Gunnar Ekelöf wrote: during a lifetime each human being is pervaded, time and again, by hot lava streams that unexpectedly are dislocating continents and lead to both dramatic fissures and to slower folding. Creating context and survey in this world of worlds is an “impossible”, yet necessary project. What else are we doing here? Life in itself is not an answer.

When something happens that fundamentally changes the direction of our lives we cling to rational explanations. Logically an effect is corresponding to a cause; processes are leading chronologically from one thing to the other. In the idea of inevitability we find the power of reconciliation. What must be must be.

In his essay "Game of Burning Stones" Ibrahim Rashid describes his last days in Baghdad before the years in exile. The atmosphere after the Gulf war is described as an apocalyptic state of twilight. From a heaven darkened by the smoke from burning oil fields a black rain is falling, full of black dust. "The black smoke from the oil wells set the tone for this environmental a contemporary artistic scenery, as we said farewell to this century..." - now wait: this century?

A surprising turn, indeed. By leaving Iraq Ibrahim Rashid and Maha Mustafa thus imagined themselves taking leave not only of a country, but also of a "century" - of a chronology. The almost biblical, primeval scene evoked by the description of Baghdad after the war - it could make you think of the flight of the righteous from the burning cities of Sodom and Gomorra - marks an existential and intellectual zero. From this devastation there is no continuation. Here the world has to start over. Here time itself has to start over. Nothing happening from this moment on can find its explanation in the past. Exile is to Ibrahim Rashid a break with the past, the beginning of a new era.

In such a "broken" chronology you might be forced entirely to do without concepts such as "centuries" - I don't know. Maybe, to avoid the thought of an inevitable destiny, you have to think of other relations between effect and cause, than those offered by logic? Maybe time no longer appears so absolute to one who was once forced out of it? Exile - I imagine - does precisely this: casts time out of its orbit. Throws the body out of time. It is liberation - but a loss as well. In a series of dark paintings entitled "[What About My Garden...](#)" Ibrahim Rashid is dealing with the memories of his and Maha's garden in Baghdad - a flowering oasis that he after some time in exile understood was dried out, devastated and poisoned by the acid rain. Was the garden destroyed because they abandoned it or did they have to abandon it because it was to die? How do you know? In these austere, dark diptychs a fragmentary text is confronted by images apparently collected from the underside of consciousness. The dark silhouette of a tree seemingly scraped out from a layer of dust. A cloud of white spots in a black space - like a rain of sparks, like the reflections in a water surface at night. Or - like the spots you see if you press hardy with the fingers at your eyelids. Like the image of an inner world.

Could it be that exile, in a sense, is turning the world inside out? When outer geography turns into stages in a personal story, outer time as well must be replaced by an inner time. Ibrahim Rashid conjures the memories of his lost "Eden" by exercising this necessary translation - perhaps in order not to let nostalgia, and thus bitterness, get hold. Just as Maha Mustafa's works can be described as an "inverted geology", his paintings can make you think of a kind of inverted archaeology. Instead of seeking the traces of the past he produces them himself. You might say he cultivates his past like a garden. In these images memory becomes a sort of undergrowth of consciousness, threatening to choke its own roots if it's not watered and pruned. From this practice arouse unexpected, spontaneous connections - an overlooked detail can turn out to be the beginning of a pattern. You might as well, of course, compare with a photographic developing process - even if it makes you think of a more linear relationship between activity and traces. The closest you get is probably if you try to imagine such a darkroom process executed backwards. That the traces not are something derived from a certain activity - but, on the contrary, are what's setting it in motion.

In the images of Ibrahim Rashid there is always this uncertainty about the direction, this obvious unwillingness to lead the eye from one thing to the other. You may even suggest they sabotage every such attempt: the way of working with the diptych as a form does point this way, as well as the interplay of text and image where the references never get to be more than fragmentary.

Yet, this is not really what's important. No: in the paintings of Ibrahim Rashid these consistent turnings-inside-out only appear as a necessary background in the quest of an, after all, essential context. Paradoxical, of course: Ibrahim Rashid appears as a romantic in defiance – “against better knowing” you might say if it was not for the fact that this “knowing” in no way could be said to be “better”. The fragmentation and the splintering, this whole post modern world of broken pieces, appears in the work of Ibrahim Rashid not so much as an intellectual attitude, but as a painful, realistic attempt to give shape to life in exile. The traces he uncovers in his pictures may not bear witness of any outer activity - but of an inner one. In some of these pictures I think it could be fruitful to identify a connection with the “frottages” of the surrealists; just as Max Ernst and his circle in such pictures meant to pave the way for an automatic, subconscious imaging, Ibrahim Rashid, in his scraped impressions, seems to try to reconnect memory from personal consciousness, in order to achieve a greater universality.

Otherwise connected to these pictures are the shadow-pictures of Andy Warhol from the seventies - Ibrahim Rashid seems in a similar way trying to collect the messages of these the most passing of all traces. In this eye for the elementary interplay between light and shadow lies one of the strongest connections between the works of Ibrahim Rashid and Maha Mustafa. In his essay Ibrahim Rashid mentions a phenomenon in traditional Islamic architecture, Mukarnassat, as an important reference. Mukarnassat (or moqarnas) is an ornamental unit which appeared historically as a way of solving the transition between the circular dome and the rectangular room, and which in the form of “piled” half-domes reflects the incoming daylight in a constantly changing way. “Through a simple displacement in architecture,” he writes – “caused by something just between practical necessity and beauty - we see nature performing its illuminating art, an addition to architecture, streaming through the room in a continuous flow of time.”

I suspect it's precisely in this kind of flow that both Ibrahim Rashid and Maha Mustafa try to locate themselves with their art: somewhere between the material and the immaterial, between environment and humanity, between caprice and necessity. They seek for strongholds, for an emotional and intellectual balance in this never-ending stream.

A title such as *“Landscape in Process”* becomes another clue. If the paintings of Ibrahim Rashid generally seem to understand man's encounter with nature as a process of interpretation - and thus connect to the magic notion of the world as a “text”, a code you only have to break to be able to read and understand it - then a title such as this seems to indicate that this process could be a double-sided one. It is not just a question of interpretation from the side of the human subject: the landscape too (that is, the environment) is involved in a process of change - or reinterpretation, if you wish. “The process” thus becomes a concept of nearly metaphysical dimensions: a primeval force constantly shaping and reshaping, an energy constantly forcing man to direct his attention in different directions. To understand what something means you first have to understand its changes.

Most accurately, I would like to describe this view as a kind of “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. In his three-part video installation *“Landscape”* from 2004 Ibrahim Rashid is expressing this thought with almost pedagogic clarity. The installation consists of three films each projected onto its own wall in a room. In the centre we see the artist's own body, turning its back to the camera - slowly we follow the chest heaving and sinking with the breath. To the left is the lid of a teapot just about to boil; to the right stream the bubbles from a water pump in an aquarium. Together they basically depict an everyday scene from Ibrahim Rashid's kitchen in Malmö - but that is not really what you think you see. Rather you perceive the context, the correspondences: you note that the pressure from the steam inside the teapot is reminding of the movements of the breath, and the bubbles rising inside the aquarium. In all of these cases there is a confined pressure

seeking its outlet. In the end it's all about a quest for balance, towards entropy. We know the final aim of this quest, which is the end, death. We may not have the time to think of it, but we know.

And so every point in our life is pervaded by ideas and memories we only are aware of to a very small extent. Reconstructing these flows is the task of "inverted" archaeology. At its most utopian - let us say in a classic work of art - this flow is condensed into one single point, a single gesture comprising it all. Jorge Luis Borges develops this idea in his famous tale "El Aleph", where a spot enclosing every spot in universe – "without being mixed up and seen from every angle" - is found in the cellar of a house in Buenos Aires. The discovery fills the author with horror: "In the street, on the stairs of Constitución, in the metro, all faces seemed familiar. I feared there would be no more left that could surprise me. I feared the feeling of recognition would never leave me. Luckily, after a few sleepless nights I was again filled with oblivion."

This notion of the artwork as a kind of alchemistic "microcosm" usually is understood to have been sent to history by postmodernism. Yet, it doesn't really want to leave us. Ibrahim Rashid seems to conjure up the idea in his "*Burnt Books*" (which by the way arouses associations to another Borges story, that of "The Library in Babylon"). These secluded, mysterious book objects are basically, I think, nothing else than images of such a secret spot - at the same time absolute and individual. Perhaps a way of describing the mystery of an artwork? Likewise, the "Aleph" in the tale of Borges never appears as something definite. In the story's epilogue the author puts forth the suspicion that the spot he has seen actually is a "false Aleph" - and takes the great tradition of magic mirrors as an argument for believing that the world could really be full of spots like this. (The original and real one, he writes, is however to be found in one of the columns in the outer yard of the Amr mosque in Cairo.)

The "checkpoints" hinted at by Maha Mustafa and Ibrahim Rashid in the title of their new art project (alif) is the first letter - without a sound value of its own but functioning as a "bearer" of other sounds. In much the same way you might view these "checkpoints" - like the "Aleph" of Borges - as a kind of media: bearers of what we know and what we have seen, but also, in a sense, of something still not known, something connecting us to the world. At each moment in life, at every instant, we are standing on a spot like this - almost always without noticing. In art I think we try to make these spots visible.