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THE ENVIRONMENT REPRESENTATIONS IN CONTEMPORARY ARAB ART FROM THE RURAL TO THE URBAN

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Abstract

This article located three artists from three different Arab countries, who represented environment by producing different art production. They portrayed, installed, and composed images that belong to rural or urban environments where they selected landscapes that represent certain places. They portrayed certain objects that symbolize rural or urban environments. The investigated artworks are made by artists who had different collective and cultural backgrounds as well as different social realities. Therefore, this article investigates the concepts of representing places and environments in the Arab Contemporary Arts, where the artists analysed and installed the urban and rural images in their current social situations. The images as well as the belongings of the Arab contemporary urban and rural places appear in visual arts strongly through different forms of art such as installation art, abstraction, realism, or semi-realism; those artworks can be viewed in galleries, art fairs, and biennales.

Keywords

Contemporary Arab Art, Social Reality, Environment Representations, Rural Art, Urban Art

1. Introduction on the Symbolic Representation of Environment

Environment representations appear in different art forms ranging from photography to installation art. The investigated artworks combined two elements, which are the artist's own social background as well as visual elements that belong to this background. The environment may appear as a landscape or as a symbolic connotation represented by one of the visual elements in the artwork. The artwork may symbolize the current social reality by portraying identical objects or places. Contemporary Arab artists are generally bonded with their social realities which differ strongly from one Arab country to another, where local cultures, fashions, and social issues appear in symbols or forms in the artworks. Different environments are significant dynamics in the artists' lives, where they subsequently represent in their arts. The contemporary practices of representing environment may seem similar to the traditional practices of landscape painting and photography since they refer to reality; however the productions of the social reality in the 21st century's is different than the reality of the 19th century when artists used to go plain-air and paint.

Fortunately humans still have trees and greeneries around them, which artists represent in their artworks. This fact applies on other props such as furniture, accessories, fashions, cars and buildings, which appear in the contemporary production of photography, video, installation as well as painting and sculpture. Artists tend to represent these belongings because they are very observable in their everyday life, they cannot ignore and abstract all those surroundings because they symbolize significant meanings in the artwork signifying rural or urban environments.

Contemporary Arab artists produce new artworks that represent the current situations in their local societies and reveal the true facts regarding their urban and rural life aspects. They create a matrix of social representations to establish social phenomenon that reflects the real situation on ground through art avoiding the media stereotypes. The main contribution of social art appears when contemporary artists highlight the difference between the mainstream reality and the intellectual reality. The intellectual reality is creative because it avoids using the main stream images, when artists criticize the mainstream media and refute its meanings. The concept of mainstream reality refers to the images created by media, photographers, mobile users, and social networks users that produce a matrix of images that may establish false facts (Preziosi & Farago, 2012).

Representing rural and urban environments became a symbolic practice conducted by contemporary artists where they portray realistic elements to symbolize social and political issues through art. The realistic object that appears in a visual artwork is not represented because of its beautiful appearance but because of its significant meaning that may lead into certain connotations. Arab artists refer to the rural and urban landscapes or belongings to establish a full image that illustrates their social reality which may differ from the images represented through the media. The contemporary realism is excessively real because of the massive production of images caused by the growing numbers of mobile cameras and smart phones in every single human hand. Therefore, social reality is extensively detailed where every single life aspect could be portrayed.

2. Analyzing the Symbolic Representations of Environment

The massive production of images in the second decade of the 21st century is examining the established concepts of art. Art critics such as Ernst Gombrich who died in the beginnings of the 21st century would think twice before making any theory about art perception, the Making and Matching process in art would take different explanations in the light of such massive productions of images, photographs and videos. It is significant to know that artists tend to refer to reality as well as art critics or historians, they also may refer to established concepts or schools or movements that appeared in art history. Nevertheless, they cannot avoid referring to the current situation to explain the significance of symbolic reality in art. The critical circulation should start from the artist's social reality rather than our established perception of art because in academia scholars investigate established concepts of art such as neoclassicism, impressionism, expressionism, cubism, abstraction as well as postmodernism. However, they shall think twice before they perceive the contemporary artists according to the same concepts because artists live different social realities across times and places.

Artists use visual elements that refer to cultural meanings. This cultural meaning has particular foundations in the local culture, where the objects in the artwork have particular cultural identity and refer to significant issues. Mona Hatoum represented her Palestinian environment when she collected 2400 rectangular soaps on the floor of Anadiel Gallery in Jerusalem (Schulenberg, 2014), this soap is traditional Palestinian product made of olive oil. The majority of Palestinians call it Nabulsi soap referring the city of Nabules as the main city of

producing this soap; however, people produce it in all Palestinian cities calling it the original Palestinian soap because they make with Palestinian olive oil.



Figure 1: *Mona Hatoum, Present Tense, 1996, soap and glass beads, 4.5x241x299*



Figure 2 (Detail): *Mona Hatoum, Present Tense, 1996, soap and glass beads, 4.5x241x299*

In Mona Hatoum's artwork the use of soap is significant because she represented an important issue from her personal environment which is real because it is full of social and

political meanings (Schulenberg, 2014). The Palestinian issue is represented by drawing the maps of urban and rural Palestinian lands that are occupied by the Israeli forces; this map was drawn by installing small pieces of glass on the surface of the 2400 rectangular soaps. Contemporary artists use codes in their art such as the soap in Mona's artwork under the title "Present Tense", where she illustrated cultural symbols that signify aesthetic values. The symbol of the soap is Palestinian but she also added new political meanings to this symbol by drawing the map of the occupied lands.

The artist represented the experience of growing up in Diaspora. As Palestinian she spent her life outside Palestine where she does not have real memories of that place, however she reflected through this artwork a part of her cultural identity which belongs to Palestinian nostalgia. Physically, this installation contains 2400 pieces of Palestinian made soaps, which are installed on the ground in a closed space. However, this artwork inspired other performance artists to make a performance and presentation under the title Nabulus Soap, Jack Persekian and Tarek Atoui made a short performance in Emirates Palace Auditorium in the year 2010 to represent the concepts of Mona's installation with video and sound effects.

Focusing on the issue of the urban and rural environment reveals layers of meanings as we go to the through the subject. Contemporary artists investigated the concepts of the place, and represented its identity in different media. Some artists reconstructed the place, and added some symbols to narrate what they want to say. These geographies have names, narratives, and memories because we believe in them. There are relations between people and places, as well as layers of meanings, which are associated with different stories existed in these places (Fichner- Rathus, 2013).



Figure 3: *Mohammed Al Ameri (2014-2015), 2 Paintings and 2 Photographs*

Those artworks document the experience of growing up in a rural environment where the water streams appear in spring and winter times. The occasion of water flows represent certain temporalities in that environment, which reflect narratives from the artist's own life. Mohammed AlAmeri recorded the place and time in his rural environment; his artwork produced a new concept of the place in contemporary arts, by recording the action of water flows as well as any object that belongs to the water movement. His artworks reflect the feeling of water; the settings of the photos and paintings simulated the real experience of the artist nostalgia.

Giving names as well as social values to geographic places is a social phenomenon. Names in different cultures express different symbolic meanings; Al-Ameri's artwork investigates the place from social and cultural point of view. The artist signifies the value of the people who lived in this place before it became an abstract location; he focuses on the cultural identity that exists in that rural environment, which became the source of his representations in painting and photography. This cultural investigation reveals different social layers associated

with rural and urban places, which may represent different cultural, political, and social values. Therefore, people classify places according to such cultural values, they establish through time and accessions nostalgic relation with their environment (Tinkler, 2013).

Mohammed Al-Atiq is another artist who represented the belongings of his environment, such as the screw, the can opener and the button which can be found in any place. However Rababa is a musical instrument that only found in Arabian rural and urban environments because it is associated with Arabian music, as a musical instrument it is used in contemporary music despite its association with folkloric music. Such musical instrument is used as a symbol in visual arts to represent the Arabic cultural identity, where different artists represented Rababa to symbolize rural Arabian environment. Mohammed Al-Atiq in this artwork represented different objects from his daily life; those objects represent cultural narratives as well as symbolic meanings that relate to the artist's current social reality.

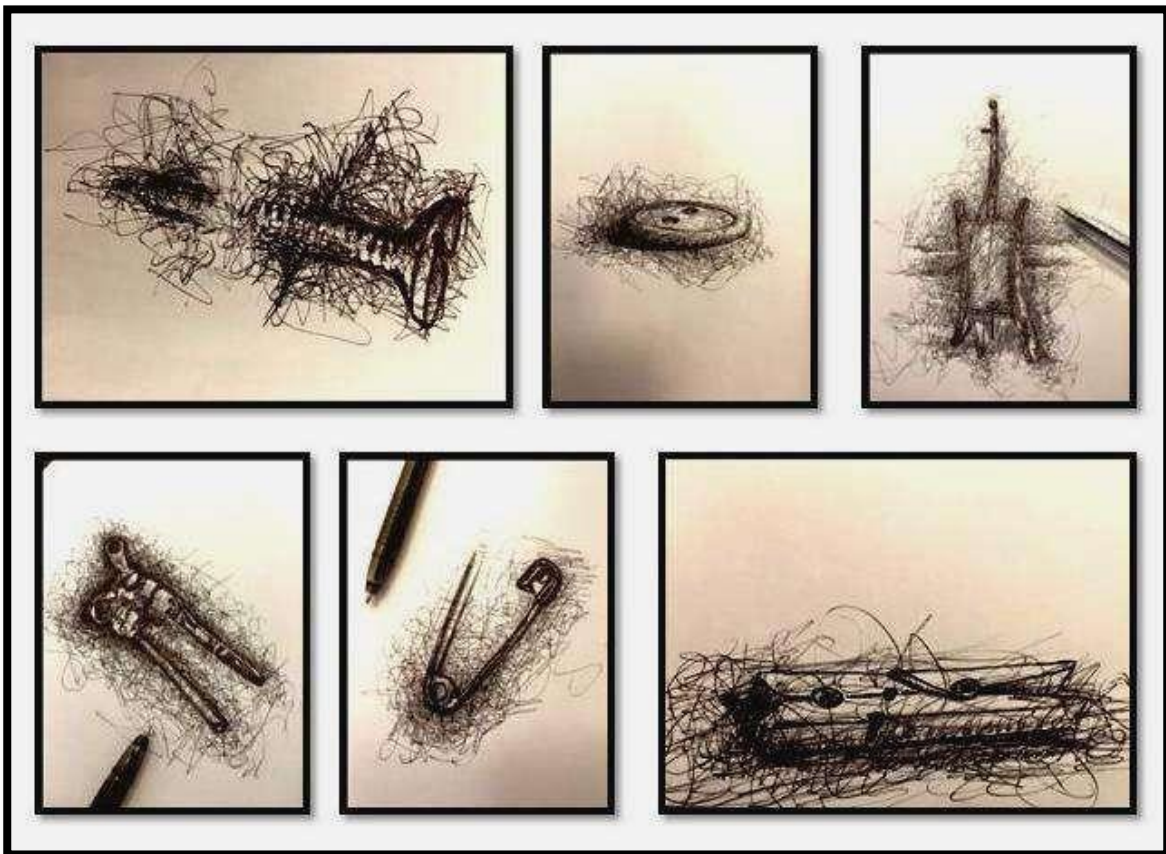


Figure 4: *Mohammed Al Atiq, Shakhbatat Alsabah (Morning doodling), drawing on paper*

His artwork is a visual diary that conceptualizes the place, and represents it in a realistic form; it reconstructs the symbolic meanings with the objects that appear in daily life. These black

and white sketches represent the temporality of the moment, when the artist visualizes his status. The role of the artist is significant because his cultural background is represented in the artwork; such artwork cannot be analyzed without taking the artist's own social reality into consideration. The artwork reconstructs itself in front of the viewer collecting the narratives of the artist as well as the narratives of the environment where he lived.

The duality of cultural symbolism and temporality is significant in such simple and direct compositions. Such sketches evoke the sense of the rural place and time because the artist represented an object that has a meaning in his environment. This is another significant representation of the environment, when the artist evokes the value of the place itself, and brings to our view objects with cultural identities. The visual experience that helps us to understand art is somehow associated with names, facts, people, events, historical accounts, as well as our perception of the current situations that we deal with every day. This is our daily knowledge that helps us to interpret everything around us (Searle, 1995).

3. Conclusion

Personal belongings in the artwork may symbolise certain issues and identities. This article analysed the symbolic meanings of the objects represented in number of artwork, which refer to social reality and characterize rural and urban environments. Contemporary Arab artists are bonded with their social reality therefore they represent their environment in several occasions in photography, painting as well as installation art. Landscape is not the only method to represent environment, in fact there are other approaches in contemporary art that may represent rural and urban environment. Furthermore, representing environment is a part of the artist's social reality. The early humans decorated their walls with hunting scene because it was their life style back then, where the images of animals and humans appeared in action. They lived in different environments where they designed their houses through human history to create the sense of belonging. The significant concept in this article would emphasize the appearance of representing environments in the contemporary Arab art. This article examined the logics of people's perception of rural and urban environments in arts. It is not only a visual impact; it is a logical impact because our minds cannot accept the place without belongings. In other words, we construct a relationship between objects and cultural values that exist in particular environments or social realities.

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