

Ahlam Shibli: Uncovering the Signs of Invisibility

Triggering ideas of the past, present and the impending future

As the acclaimed late Palestinian artist and writer Kamal Boullata wrote on Shibli's work in 2003: *"Ahlam is her given name. "Dreams" is what it means in Arabic. The state of dreaming may be a product of past experiences. The word "dreams," however, points to the future. Ahlam Shibli captures a present moment that is the product of what may look like a distant past when her eye is set on the future. To see in what way the photographs of Ahlam Shibli are constructed in a syntax familiar to her mother tongue, and how the memories they capture addresses itself to a future in which a moment in time photographed may mirror another, one has to forget how we are used to seeing photographs. Having been all used to seeing photographs as a record by which we fix the present instant to keep a memory alive, or to substantiate evidence for future retrieval, we cannot believe that a photograph could be an image that interchanges a past moment with a future one."*

— Kamal Boullata, *Cassandra and the Photography of the Invisible* (2003)

Palestinian artist Ahlam Shibli uses photography to narrate a rich, complex and developed language documenting generic moments found within marginalized communities who struggle with a sense of belonging and home for themselves. Beginning her work in 1996, Shibli has reviewed her material in groups of images, compiling nearly thirty photographic series that have been exhibited internationally at Documenta 14, the São Paulo Biennial and numerous shows in Spain, Portugal, France, Canada, Austria, Jordan, Italy, Poland and others. Her series are carefully chosen

35mm photographs in both colour and black and white that relate to universal human notions of existence and belonging, mostly in Middle Eastern and European communities. Within Palestinian photography, pioneers like Khalil Raad in 1890, followed by others such as Issa Sawabini, Dad Sabounji and Karema Abood, documented everyday lives in Jaffa and developed the basis for a national photographic discourse. However with Ahlam Shibli (born in Palestine in 1970), we consider complex discontinuities through a multitude of signs, viewing her works as visual texts within a larger context. These images encourage the viewer to contemplate and search for specific signifiers to trigger ideas of the past, present and the impending future, and find subjective recognition or familiarity within the visuals. Her hyper-visual images draw deeper attention to everyday life, and shift our understanding of non-represented communities as they are depicted in media images, closing the distance between documentary and spontaneous intimacy, and between critical detachment and compassionate engagement.

Shibli's works highlight the contradictory and under-appreciated. The artist regularly collects research, resulting in a deep understanding of the nature of people, both within Palestine and in marginalized communities in Eastern and Western Europe. Shibli's images are extremely moving yet entirely undramatic. Viewers feel a certain proximity to the subjects, amplified by close compositions as the artist literally places herself within the daily activities and lives of these people. Her research relates to particular communities in Palestine, Jordan, Poland,

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Spain, France and Germany, as she explores the diverse social dynamics of the family and provides a visual analysis of the landscapes they occupy. Her photographs feature carefully chosen arrangements of interior and exterior scenes, of landscapes and houses; we pay attention to the people and the objects inhabiting the compositions, and notice the deliberate staging and framing choices.



Raised in Palestine from a family of farmers, at a young age Shibli had a keen observance of people and places. Considering the artist's 'Self-Portrait' series, completed in 2000 in Palestine, none of the images are of Shibli herself. A young girl is seen in the distance in a field. She is exploring her surroundings with curiosity, wandering and finding her way underneath a bridge and in between the bushes. Her back is turned towards us or we are confronted with a cropped image of her feet. Shibli balances between the invisible and the visible. The images of the girl blend with the landscape and the distance between the camera and the subject acts as a visual tool for merging past with present. The series is a narration between time present and time past and gives materiality to contrasting concepts of memory and prediction, the seen and the unseen, and interior and exterior.

Within Palestinian communities, Shibli captures the diversity of living situations found both in private and public spaces, and aims to illustrate a sense of belonging to and intimacy with the location. This is manifested within a mosaic of human gestures, language and archival documents and objects. The *Arab al-Sbaih* (Jordan, 2007) series has been photographed at four different places, the Irbid Refugee Camp, Irbid City, the al-Baq'a Refugee Camp and Amman, documenting three generations of Palestinian refugees who have been living there since the 1948 Nakba. The refugees in Jordan depicted in the series attempt to preserve the memory of their homeland while physically being absent from it. They do so by naming their shops after places in Palestine and reproducing the social structure of their original villages. The images are of run-down streets and sidewalks, writings and drawings on walls, and of tombstones at the Cemetery of Martyrs. Improvised houses are shown, filled with family photographs and precious keepsakes. A sense of intimacy registers within these photographs, highlighted by the fact that the individual communities have come to make these places their home, and carry on in their drive to preserve their collective identity. We notice this in the faces of the people who populate the streets and it is apparent in the carefully chosen interior decor of their homes, and the new spaces they have created to pay their respects to the deceased.



Untitled from the series *Arab al-Sbaih* no.22, Jordan (2007)
Chromogenic print,
38 x 57.7 cm

Untitled from the series *Arab al-Sbaih* no. 5, Jordan (2007)
Gelatin silver print,
57.7 x 38 cm





Occupation (al-Khalil/Hebron, Palestine, 2016-17) explores the social fabric of al-Khalil/Hebron, most notably in its urban areas. Shibli's images leave no doubt in their viewers mind: Palestinians are bound to a limited space in the Old Town and to an environment defined by borders. However, her images do not force the viewer to focus on this destruction. Shibli's goal is not to concentrate on oppression or abuse. Instead she uses her camera from a distance, segmenting the space and creating within it a moment of serenity. There is a sense of peace, a tranquil aftermath. Shibli fixes her spaces in time, after they've been affected by the passing of time. Rarely do people appear, save for children. Instead, life and presence is suggested with bold colours, found in the playgrounds, plants, windows and roofs, and in subtle clues that point to how a community is internalizing its experience in both public and private space. Shibli is able to maintain a perfect distance which allows her to record what surrounds her while being completely immersed in it. In the

series *Horse Race in Jericho* (Jericho, Palestine, 1997), we again notice a spatial distance, and the absence and presence of community. This horse race was captured in the wake of the Oslo Agreement which stipulated Jericho and Gaza to be placed under the control of a Palestinian authority. Instead of focusing on the horses, the work creates an analogy between the excitement of the spectators who are unaware of the horse racing rules and the unfounded expectations connected to the Oslo Agreement. Considering the black and white images, the viewer feels both distant and close—the monochrome colour creates a sense of temporal detachment, while the spectators appear on different spatial planes, confusing our interpretation of what is close and what is far. We are unable to make sense of what the spectators are looking at. There is a juxtaposition of playfulness and seriousness, and collectivism and isolation, mirroring the overwhelming expectation of Palestinians to begin a normal life, and the illusion of an end of the occupation.

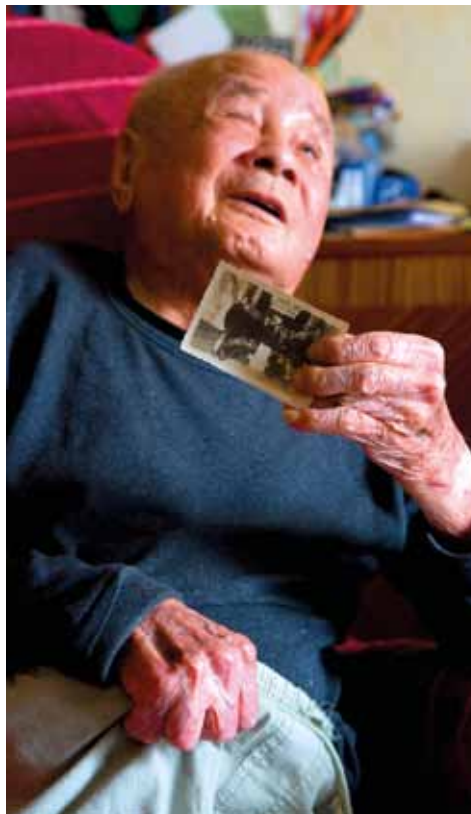
Clockwise: *Untitled* (Occupation no. 19), Hebron, Palestine (2016 - 2017) Chromogenic print, 40 x 26,7 cm. House of Masarra al-Swaity, al-Ja'abari neighborhood, Old Town, al-Khalil, December 14, 2016. In order to protect themselves the family installed metal sheets around their house.

Untitled (Occupation no. 6), al-Khalil/Hebron, Palestine, (2016 - 2017) chromogenic print, 40 x 60 cm. Playground, Souq al-Haddadeen, Hay al-Yahud/Avraham Avinu settlement, Old Town, al-Khalil, December 21, 2016. The wall behind the playground of the settlement is the backside of Palestinian blacksmith's shops. Palestinians are absolutely prohibited from entering the area of Souq al-Haddadeen (blacksmith's shops).

Untitled (Occupation no. 30), al-Khalil/Hebron, Palestine, (2016–2017) Chromogenic print, 100 x 150 cm. Al-Sahleh Street, al-Qaitoun neighborhood, Old Town, al-Khalil, October 20, 2016. The Abu al-Rish checkpoint located in al-Sahleh Street, south of al-Haram al-Ibrahimi (Abraham's Mosque/Cave of the Patriarchs), is named after the Abu al-Rish mosque and shrine next to it. The checkpoint separates the Abu Sunaina and al-Qaitoun neighborhoods from the Old Town. It also separates the neighborhood from the oldest school in al-Khalil, the al-Ibrahimeyeh School, and from al-Hajariya Girls School. Palestinians are allowed to pass only on foot. Palestinians between the ages of 16 and 34 are and prohibited from passing.

Untitled (Trauma no. 33), Corrèze, France, (2008–2009)

Chromogenic print, 38 x 57.7 cm. Naves, 11th June, 2009. Guy Piron served on a submarine in Indochina and North Africa and is the president of the Corrèze chapter of the Union française des anciens combattants et victimes de guerre (UFAC),



Untitled (Trauma no. 25), Corrèze, France, (2008–2009)

Chromogenic print, 38 x 57.7 cm. Tulle, 14th June, 2009. Thin Kieu showing a photo from 1946 depicting, according to the inscription on its back, the inauguration of a memorial honouring Ngi Muge Thai Hoc who died as a war hero for France which he considered his country.



Untitled (Trauma no. 26), Corrèze, France, (2008–2009)

Chromogenic print, 38 x 57.7 cm. Tulle, 2nd June, 2009. Michel Trésallet presenting a photo of the lady next to him, Pierrette Barrat-Arnal, which shows her as a nurse at the Manufacture d'armes de Tulle (MAT), during the Occupation.

Shibli has taken her photography outside of Palestine to explore other regions, marginalised communities, and buried memories. Her work often focuses on individuals who relate to her own personal experience – people who confront the oppressive authority of history and its contemporary repercussions. In *Trauma* (Corrèze, France, 2008-2009) Shibli questions the authority of history to legitimize a nation or homeland. The artist reveals connections between victim and perpetrator, freedom fighter and colonizer, and the oppressor and the oppressed. Photographs include portraits of French veterans who experienced Nazi persecution during World War II as a result of their resistance to German occupation, culminating in a commemoration on June 9th to honour the French martyrs. Other photographs are of maps of North Africa and draw our attention to the fact that some survivors of the German occupation went on to join the colonial French forces in Indochina and Algeria in the 1950s to 60s. Together, the images chronicle and interweave two distinct histories without resolution.





Untitled (Heimat no. 1), Nordhessen, Germany (2016–2017) Chromogenic print, 100 × 66.7 cm. Gedenkstätte und Museum Trutzhain, 13.11.2016. Housed in a former barracks, the Trutzhain Museum documents the history of the prisoner of war camp STALAG IX A Ziegenhain and the expellees who were resettled there in 1948. The partially depicted display board presents an aerial view of the site and photos of the construction of the barracks, as well as a light bulb and a piece of barbed wire from the camp.

Similarly, *Heimat* (Nordhessen, Germany, 2016-17) documents expellees and refugees (*Heimatvertriebene* and *Flüchtlinge*) of German descent forced to leave territories east of the Oder-Neisse line in 1945/46, as well as guest workers (*Gastarbeiter*) from the Mediterranean region who were recruited in the mid-1950s to facilitate the German “economic miracle.” Both were forced to seek a new home in the city of Kassel, home of Documenta, the world’s most ambitious exhibition of contemporary art. Shibli explores the many ways in which these different groups attempted to create a new home in a place that was not of their choosing. Capturing monuments, documents and personal effects, family photographs and letters, Shibli questions notions of history, memory, and belonging, and emphasises the challenge of rebuilding the concept of home. She investigates, through images, the process of social integration and identification of people who find themselves in an unfamiliar place or context.

Seeking a place unscarred by the trauma of war or catastrophe, Shibli shifted her lens to capture children in orphanages. In the series *Dom Dziecka. The house starves when you are away* (Poland, 2008) the artist visited children in orphanages in Poland, keen to explore how children are affected by the absence or the loss of home. However, she soon became aware of a kind of ‘childrens’ society’ which led one boy to say, ‘*It’s not dom dziecka* [childrens’ home—the name of the institution], *it is dom* [home].’ The images depict both a sense of community and isolation, in both black and white and colour photographs. The children are captured in their own spaces, and it is apparent that they share a sense of belonging. Their spaces are personalized and bright, decorated with posters and scattered in stuffed animals. However, paired with harsh exteriors and dilapidated walls, the scenes also suggest a sadness in the children’s effort to mask the harsh reality of their circumstances.

Ahlam Shibli, *Untitled (Dom Dziecka. The house starves when you are away no. 5)* Poland (2008) Chromogenic print, 38 x 57.7 cm. *Dom Dziecka Na Zielonym Wzgórzu*, Kisielany-Żmichy, May 19, 2008, early Monday morning. Stanisław Trochimiak waking up for school.





*Untitled (Horse Race in Jericho no. 5) Jericho, Palestine,
(1997) Gelatin silver print, 37.8 x 57.6 cm*



*Untitled (Horse Race in Jericho no. 4) Jericho, Palestine,
(1997) Gelatin silver print, 37.8 x 57.6 cm*

Reviewing each of Shibli's series, we are reminded of the competing forces of absence and presence captured in the objects, people and settings she photographs. Shibli is interested in the unrecognized or uncounted, and her work thus engages in a never-ending narrative of temporality and memory. Her images are reflective, apparent in her non-judgmental and natural gaze. Shibli's images allow the viewer to notice and feel without intervention. Drawing parallels between past and present and fiction and reality, Shibli's work compares the individual and collective conditions of different groups and communities, and explores the universality of the human experience of home and belonging. Reflected across generations, ethnicities and disparate histories, the works of Shibli analyse and appreciate how these communities are facing life, from both an inside and outside perspective, and how their experiences have been internalized in their individual and collective identities.