

Joyce Dallal

Doris Bittar 10/25/11 11:13 AM  
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Joyce Dallal's multimedia installations take large geohistorical backdrops from the last century and "float" them into domestic spheres that reverberate with international issues. Books, videos, and architecturally contextualized sculptural settings distill private stories of her Iraqi immigrant family and suspend them within altered spaces. These stories overlap and resonate with American visions of multiculturalism and egalitarianism.

Born to Jewish parents from Baghdad who immigrated to the United States during the cataclysmic events of the late 1940s, Dallal is especially drawn to events from the mid-twentieth century to the present. Responding to the pervasive ignorance about the Middle East, her magical projects have a pedagogical mission. For example, Americans do not imagine that sizable minorities with political, economic, and cultural clout, such as the Jews of Baghdad, could ever have existed or could ever relate to American culture.

Could the megalopolitan Baghdad of the 1940s and 1950s—with its microdialects, subcultures, and expansive horizons enjoyed by Dallal's ancestors—be a parallel city to another megaLopolis like Los Angeles? By etching Baghdadi life onto the psychic and metaphorical realm of Los Angeles, Dallal unites the two cities as spaces that are erased and reinvented. In the case of Baghdad, of course, these words are euphemisms for war, that more unsettling tie to the United States.

Letters from her grandmother in Baghdad written in Judeo-Arabic (a dialect of Baghdadi Jews) may have given Dallal permission to switch back and forth naturally between her life and the stories of her parents. The arenas in which “switching” takes place are experienced in a series of text-based pieces. The video installation Small Stories in a Language I Don’t Understand logs Dallal’s life, including strolls around the Los Angeles River and walking toward her front door, but the voiceover and story are those of her mother speaking in Arabic about the Tigris River and the family house in Baghdad. The video is projected onto an elegant screen made of rice paper and imprinted with a translation of the Pledge of Allegiance into Judeo-Arabic. Metaphorically and literally, we find ourselves navigating among ancient familial dialects, Dallal’s Southern California environment, and the process of becoming American.

Dallal’s other art projects explore a similar territory, intertwining American and immigrant iconography. In The Conjunction of 500 Wishes, a public art piece at the Los Feliz Library, ancient celestial-themed patterns from all parts of the world are overwritten with wishes for the future gathered from the people who use the library, a clear reference to a Disney-influenced childhood in which stars are made for wishes. The enormous and billowing tornado of headlines titled Media Storm forces the intrusion of a political drama into a physical and personal space, acting as both a cartoon and a burden as it presses down on our collective consciousness. The Promised Land in Pieces, made from enlarged texts of United Nations resolutions and peace initiatives regarding Israel and Palestine, forms a nebulous landscape of words turning treaties into the territories of dispute. In her COLA installation piece, “Descent” 1000 airplanes made out of Japanese rice paper and whose

numbers loosely refer to the 1000 Cranes for Peace made by many people. Local Los Angelinos are engaged in folding the planes create a collective sense of responsibility and struggle for peace. The texts are from the third and fourth Geneva Conventions written in 1949 and focus on the treatment of prisoners of war. The planes are tautly suspended between ceiling and floor. They form a sharp pointed cloud ambiguously suggesting the oppositional interpretations of menacing military formations or playful doves of peace. "Descent" combines Dallah's sensibility to negotiate awkward billowing forms by suspending the planes with wire from the ceiling and at the same time anchoring the planes to the floor with rods stuck into concrete rubble. The title and its references are visual puns that are at odds with their intrinsic purposes.. The planes/cranes struggle to create a lift but are pinned in an irreconcilable suspension capturing a moment of paralysis. .

Joyce Dallah literally and metaphorically floats texts for us to witness and ponder as part of the undercurrents of our own national anxiety. She gathers family stories, patriotic oaths, structures from popular culture, and broken treaties to reflect upon her American hyphenated identity within the international spectrum. Coaxed toward previously unimagined understandings, we may begin to feel the yearning that pairs justice with reconciliation.

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