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We Make the Road By Walking
Mizel Museum Catalogue Essay

Forging Cultural Rites/Rights
By Doris Bittar

Through seemingly solemn approaches and subtle wit, Sama Alshaibi and Beth Krensky metaphorically travel to their respective ancestral wells and pluck out what is most relevant to them. What they find varies, from stories and objects to images and personas. From the perch of their exilic American perspectives they reinvent their respective cultural and ethnic milieus. Their aesthetic choices reveal anxieties by showing how displaced cultures negotiate loss as they forge ahead in their adopted lands. Eventually the things or detritus they have collected conjure up parables/stories that become infused with icon-like gravitas. These icons in new contexts create a space for teaching and learning. Through different approaches Alshaibi's and Krensky's pedagogic repertoire segues into formal strategies that create templates for survival, if and when the ground underneath shifts yet again.

In ***We Make the Road by Walking*** we witness a chosen dialogue between an American Iraqi-Palestinian and an American Jew of Russian and Hungarian descent. We cannot divorce the individual artists from the larger context of their shared space. They examine the unwanted baggage from their cultures: the predetermined roles they may have been assigned. They command a 360-degree view of their respective cultures where they deconstruct and reconstruct the various markers of cultural authenticity.

Beth Krensky creates artifact-like objects from Judaica that invite a tactile experience, one to which a child would be attracted. Because the objects are twisted and dented they look like they are from an archeological dig. Krensky describes her connection to the

materials that she uses, "Copper has been used in religious ceremonies for millennia and is considered a medium between the spirit and physical worlds. Olive wood comes from Bethlehem and represents both ancestral roots and the contested land." The piece "*Finials*," is made up of several simple iconic objects based on decorative fragments that sit on top of elaborate torah scrolls. The finials of the scrolls are removed from the long roll that they perch as though a child has removed them to create a fantasy world of narratives. Krensky's forms speak to the multi-faceted roles of ritual, not as dreary ceremony, but as playful objects to be recontextualized and reconsidered. Grouped randomly or in a line they look both like toys and tools for learning basic principles. Through Krensky's ordering of forms and images, the home and home building become the central locations where these objects, routines and stories are offered to children as a way to learn about the structure of a culture or religion.

By placing the objects in random configurations, rather than ones based on decorative balance or functional arrangements, Krensky asks us to examine them as evidence or remains without forcing an explanation. Specifically, the exteriors of the incantation bowls are dark and stained while the interiors are illuminated with gold, appearing lit and ethereal. The two textures/types of metal that occupy the same space are contrasted and offer an invitation. The lit and smooth interiors may speak to an intangible epiphany as they hover within the coarse exteriors that may signify the unchangeable characteristics of her culture.

The simplicity of the objects places Krensky between two traditions that appear to be at odds with each other. One tradition stems from her identification with a religious/cultural legacy tied to the narrative of origins already mentioned. The other tradition stems from Modernism's stance after World War 2 that humanity and its realm can no longer be represented as whole and complete. Twentieth century Western art arguably can be defined as fragmented and alienated.

Being a Jewish artist and making Judaica in the 21st century, Krensky answers the post 20th century dilemma. This is best seen in “Bridge III” where branches and twigs cast in bronze materials are gathered for possible use, perhaps for the construction of a *huppah*. Krensky does not direct us except through the title of “Bridge.” We are forced to configure them through our own filters. Through an unencumbered formalism, Krensky creates an opening for dialogue and learning. Krensky writes: “The idea of ‘re-membering,’ or putting back together something, is a theme woven through some of the work. ‘Bridge III’ can represent fragments of something disparate, or perhaps fragments that can be connected in some way to create a bridge. It is my intent that the work ... move us across real or imagined divides to common ground.” Krensky reveals the ambiguity of these objects and creates for the possibility that a bridge could span an unforgiving chasm.

In her first person photo narratives Sama Alshaibi expresses the impermanence of exile. Like Krensky she holds on to her cultural baggage, *even* the stereotypes of Arab exotic culture, as semblances of a more stable past. Often the images are the trappings from the colonial harem, her experience of her own body as it transforms, and of course, the stories of her family’s exile. Sama Alshaibi was born in Basra, Iraq to an Iraqi father and a Palestinian mother displaced from Palestine 60 years ago. Currently Alshaibi resides in the United States. Living in America has become an opportunity to reflect on her immigration and how her culture is affected and transformed by that experience.

There is something fundamentally literary in Alshaibi’s sequencing choices as she integrates her body into the landscape. In the photo pieces *Road Side Ruins* and *Red Sea Hilal*, Alshaibi’s persona is that of a scribe recording a narrative with pictures. She is both inside and outside of the narratives. The sequenced images strongly suggest words or phrases. They almost function as hieroglyphs or pictographs in their symmetry and

singularity. In *Red Sea Hilal's* first panel "the narrator" (Alshaibi) literally points us back to the beginning. The second panel is the moon, low on the horizon, acting as an anchor point drifting us back to the first image. It acts as a pause. The panel with reflected water is a new phrase and the final panel is punctuation like the periods at the end of a *sura* in a highly decorated Koran. In the piece *Road Side Ruins* our eyes begin to follow a narrative, but get caught in the central two panels that create a visual eddy. The last panel on the far right unexpectedly changes the direction of our gaze by bringing us back to the central eddy. We discover that the narrative begins again but this time from the right side. The shifting path turns and twists, bringing us back to a central focus that urges us on to the next "phrase."

Our expectations are undermined as we notice that we may be going in circles. Alshaibi has commented, "My creative research also extends into areas of collective trauma and how the role of memory containers (such as art) and memorials are used as vehicles to resist the effacement and obliteration of that history. As a Palestinian-Iraqi, my identity is rooted in a violent and traumatic past that is still being afflicted; to situate that history...connects me from my safety zone in the US back into the red zone of Iraq or the Occupied territories of Palestine...there are only circles, no lines to a path out." However, there is a path out: it is not the expected path but one that leads us toward other considerations previously not available to us.

Alshaibi explores the "disinherited" from various roles, such as an Orientalist muse from the Ottoman/European Imperial period and a sage tour guide. "Wanderlust," "Passage" and "Habitat, Budrus Tuscon" display halting stops and mini symmetries as our eyes rush to the central figure of Alshaibi miming a curve in the landscape. In these photos the land and Alshaibi's body are tied together by a metaphoric umbilicus. These highly orchestrated "connections" are disquietingly witty and playful, especially in the piece "Habitat, Budrus

Tucson.” Here the incongruity between a semi-veiled Alshaibi and the archetypal Arizona landscape with its authentic Saguaro cacti is both hilarious and poignant. Alshaibi’s use of jarring and smooth visual directives draws us into her struggle between adaptation and reinvention.

We Make the Road by Walking is a conversation where archetypal roles and the stuff of life, the detritus are carefully examined without offering hardened conclusions. Journeying to their various themes whether they are metaphorical, erroneous, mysterious or precise, Sama Alshaibi and Beth Krensky embrace their inheritances, always as starting points, starting points that their varied audiences may want to borrow. Alshaibi and Krensky are scribes for their respective cultures, writing and rewriting their cultures. The art works create an ironic space that sits beside the dusty artifacts of the past, the unmitigated violence of the present, and the fear of a dismal future. A new clearing is found where the familiar images, objects and stereotypes of their respective cultures are seen as if for the first time. Perhaps ***We Make the Road by Walking*** clears a psychic space for the possibility of a shared future.