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Rendering the Forms of Displacement

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Abstract

Kuwaiti sculptor Sami Mohammed in his reflective show ‘Displacement’ moves from creating monochrome bronze sculptures that display specific regional catastrophes, toward offering thirty multi-hued contemporary paintings based on the notion of displacement in a global setting. He images the effects of globalization. Sami transitions his work to this “polyglot” culture in which his consciousness links the dissimilarities to synthesize the immigrant, the exile, the tourist, and the urban wanderer - the dominant figures of contemporary culture. He reflects on aspects such as “altermodernity,” constituting a “translation-oriented” modernity. His intervention, in kaleidoscopic styles and techniques, defines fragments of “medium-space-time.” He maps these as he wanders through continents and locations while he positions himself in translatable moving and affected environments. The global stage turns into a platform for an interchange of multitude portrayals of the world, in which Sami’s translation of ideas and imageries play a crucial role in dialogue that will give rise to a new shared intelligibility.

Keywords: Displacement; migration; dislocation; otherness; exile; tourist

Introduction

Kuwaiti sculptor Sami Mohammed, in his reflective show “Displacement,” moves from creating monochrome bronze sculptures that display specific regional catastrophes, toward offering thirty multi-hued contemporary paintings based on the notion of displacement in a global setting. He recreates the effects of globalization. Sami transitions his work to this “polyglot” culture in which his consciousness links the dissimilarities (Baudelaire, 2007: 6-12) to synthesise “the immigrant, the exile, the tourist, and the urban wanderer...the dominant figures of contemporary culture” (51). He reflects on aspects such as “altermodernity,” constituting a ‘translation-oriented’ modernity (Bourriaud, 2007: 43). His intervention, in kaleidoscopic styles and techniques, defines fragments of ‘medium-space-time.’ He maps these as he wanders through continents and locations while he positions himself in translatable, moving, and affected environments. The global stage turns into a platform for an interchange of multitudes of portrayals of the world, in which Sami’s translation of ideas

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and imageries plays a crucial role in “discussions that will give rise to a new common intelligibility” (Tunncliffe, 2011: 188).

Figure 1. Sami Mohammed, ‘Displacement’, 2019, Contemporary Art Platform, Kuwait. Courtesy of the artist, Kuwait.



Figure 2. Sami Mohammed, *Displacement Agony*, Acrylic on Canvas, 150 x 180 cm, 2018. Courtesy of the artist, Kuwait.



Set on the left of the entrance to the chosen space, *Displacement Agony* (2018) directly meets the spectator's eye; the subject's form is set in striking red, bleeding out of the meter-tall and metre and-a-half-wide canvas. Sami's subject's contemporary three-dimensional brawny corpus seems to transcode and translate (Bourriaud: 132) the expression of

Figure 4. Jacopo Carucci, *The Deposition from the Cross* (Pontormo) (1925-1928), *Statue of Sabra and Shatila* (1982), Oil on Wood, 313 cm × 192 cm.



connotation of parallels between ever-changing artistic methodologies of bodily staging and

Figure 3. Sami Mohammed, *Statue of Sabra and Shatila* (1982), Bronze, 58 x 25 x 68 cm



'Displacement' from his original heavy-weighted life-size polysemous bronze sculpture, *Statue of Sabra and Shatila* (1982). As a heavily textured disfiguration of a tormented human subject, the painting immediately becomes a narrative epic (conceptual art in ancestral leitmotifs). He assumes a pose much like Jesus's in Pontormo's wood painting, *The Disposition from the Cross* (1525-1528). The commonality amongst these works can be seen in the translation of elements that belonged to a local, conformist-world visual culture, which were firmly collated and positioned under the gaze of an analytical assessment. They are decoded into a "signifying chain," onto a two-dimensional spaced-out canvas that can pageant "the passage of signs from one format to another" (138) across a global setting (Bourriaud: 140). Through his paintings, Sami explores the

innovative conceptualizations of human nature. At the turn of the twentieth century (1900s), artists purposefully broke with the traditional archetypes of “figural mimesis” (Butterfield-Rosen, 2015). This led to a formal division that went against the most common visual codes, which showed the existence of a human subject’s inner life. Within this changed relationship to figuration in painting, Sami’s work continues to translate the inherited codes, to simultaneously strengthen and subvert their being. Sami embodies the role of an artist who facilitates decoding and meaning-making through the art of translating and re-creating, since “human existence is seen to depend... on the capacity to let meaning emerge through the shaping of that which is given” (Knill et al., 2005: 31).²

As an artist-activist, Sami employs the conventional pose of a displaced human body as a vehicle for the universal narrative of displacement. He creates awareness of its negative social, ethical, and cultural effects in the global domain. In association with Christian iconography and a rendering of Jesus’s pose, he portrays a lifeless body, orphaned of hope-giving power. In alignment with the hard-hitting realism of Jesus’s lonely body, abandoned both by authoritarians and humankind, Sami’s subject is displaced into an oppressive, desolate, fiery space. In her book, *Contemporary Polish Women’s Writing*, Chowanec (2015: 98) describes embodied experiences of a traumatic past. Likewise, in Sami’s work, death is unclothed of all self-worth and caring; the human being is uplifted into a new dimension; he is detached from the transcendental dimension. Through a multicoloured prism, he presents a displaced subject as a vertically-active, long-lasting line form. In a lower dark black and a superior brilliant white, it inhabits an immersive, translatable blood-red space. Even though black and white are non-colors, they are symbolic of lightness and darkness and even depict life and death rituals in various cultures. Sami’s bright white-light fluorescent lines depict a resurgence of power and vigor, a desire to rise and recover, re-salvage and reclaim. They could even symbolise mourning and death in many African, Asian, and European cultures. In abstract works like Elke Lutgerink’s installation *Bellow* (2017) and Lam de Wolf’s *Photo of Lamb for Work* (1949), black and white appear as each other’s contraries as well as a seamless band of values. They portray the global intermingling of diverse symbolism within the cohesion and unevenness of diverse cultures, locations, and times in a seemingly smooth world order.

Sami displaces Pontormo’s disposition corpus with a burly bodied form, his grieving carters with a black and white line shape. And his colourless backdrop with an amalgamation of red earth, blazing scarlet, scorching orange, and fiery crimsons of bloodshed and war, as well as possibly global retribution. His perplexing “medium-space-time” compositions, inclusive of distraught human figure(s), metaphoric animal(s), emblematic object(s), and non-descript space(s) (Shammas, 2019), “materiali[z]es trajectories rather than destinations” expressing “a course, a wandering, rather than a fixed space-time” (Tate Modern, 2009). They redefine modernity in an era of globalization. He does not follow a specific style or movement or illustrate a theory, but adopts the role of a “semionaut,” who navigates the virtual seas of global images to produce “original pathways through signs” (Bourriaud, 2002: 19). His altermodern work therefore involves a geopolitical aspect based on the understanding that “the great liberal utopia of globalization, an ordering of the earth and its beings...claims to

² Phenomenology is a philosophical tradition launched in the first half of the 20th century. The two main proponents were philosophers, Martin Heidegger and Edmund Husserl. Phenomenology analyses the organisation of human experiences and consciousness and the meanings associated with these experiences (Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, 2003. Sv ‘phenomenology’).



do away with our orientation” (Dean, 2010: 20). As a contemporary artist, Sami’s novel interaction with the trauma of displacement in the form of global art is based on the judiciousness of globalization. Globalization presages an overcoming of space and time in an apparently smooth circulation of capital, materials, knowledge, images, and people around the world (Potts, 2012; Dean, 2010). Nevertheless, like most current art shows, his work is concerned with contesting this liberal-utopian imagery to reveal displacement within the contraption of universal stability.

The violence enacted on the subject’s body is Sami’s endeavour to embody the physical ordeal and inhumaneness of dogmas that overlook the agony and incarceration of the displaced, a reaction against standardisation and commercialism. He captures the moments and feelings of the displaced to describe the scope, extent, and pain of human displacement. He questions the edifices of authority that control, manipulate, and treat humans as ‘others’ while they display global harmony. Sami’s emphasis on the nomadic and his combination of disparate cultural elements can be ‘dislocated’ and ‘translated’ between geographical contexts, in alignment with the theme of displacement within a globalised economy. He refers to the global influence of the capitalist structure, including its multiple discriminations and abuses. In the words of Butler’s (2010) words, Sami’s artwork “draw[s] attention to racial and economic inequities by replaying them.” His new, powerful journey-form and palette evoke inconsistent societal and political play, identity formation and destruction, penalties of resettlement or enforced transposition, and pageants deliberate acts of cultural disregard across the global setting. His canvases’ subjects and settings—the unwanted and unemployed, exiles and evacuees, refugees and asylum seekers, underpaid and illegal laborers, marginalised people, and prostitutes—make the economic and political realities of the globalised economy visible. They reveal the paths of meaning making by reminding the viewer of the subject’s stolen past and uncertain future, all while resonating with emotional power. Sami’s spectator stands in the midst of vividly coloured paintings in the heightened artifice of a non-naturalist gallery setting, through which he unfolds the multifaceted layers of stories packed with passionate connections, identity formations, and racial stratums in a seemingly suave world order to understand the culmination of pre-modernism and the materialisation of a global altermodernity.

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