On the Corrupt in Art (a reading of Hannan Abu-Hussein's artworks)

The musician, artist, and poet Wisam Gibran suggests a socio-cultural reading of four works by the Palestinian artist Hannan Abu-Hussein's - *Agina* (*Dough*), *Pouring the Oil*, *Bukjia* (*Bundle*), *In Between the Destruction of the Father* - as representatives of inner worlds reflecting art's association with the cycle of life and death, movement and stillness, the sacred and the forbidden, the presence and the absence.

Essay / Wisam Gibran September 14, 2020

A life's process: a Continuous Past Contained Within the Acts of Daily Life
"Ajina (Dough)" (video, 6 min., 2019)

Ajina (*Dough*), the video work by Palestinian artist Hannan Abu-Hussein (Born in Umm al-Fahem, lives and works in Jerusalem), cannot be viewed as a single plot line, but rather as a web of intertwining paths and layers that seek both to silence and expose.

wisam 2020-02-28 at 11.42.22.jpeg



[1]
Hannan Abu-Hussein, Ajina (Dough), video, 6 min., 2019
Photography: Hadas Golan
Courtesy of Hannan Abu-Hussein

Wisam 2020-02-28 at 11.42.23.jpeg **[2]**



[3]
Hannan Abu-Hussein, Ajina (Dough), video, 6 min., 2019
Photography: Hadas Golan
Courtesy of Hannan Abu-Hussein

In this work, Abu-Hussein is wearing a white, shroud-like robe (*Gallabieh*), as she makes dough from flour and olive oil. The flour is an existential anchor, being a substance for everyday, processive making, which neither begins with the wheat nor ends with the bread, representing a mechanism of life and work: the act of kneading dough and making bread in any imaginable way is equal to immersion in life. Here the person turns into both the maker and the instrument. In the video, we barely see the face through the lens. It focuses for long minutes on the limbs – arms and legs – that is, the human functional organs rather than the face, which denotes identity.

In a moist, sticky scene, like the moment of birth, the flour mixes with the oil. The oil ceases to exist as separate material, and, along with the flour, creates the dough that constitutes the substance and the language of the work. Next is a scene where dryness overshadows the fluid, sticky mass – a dryness consciously created to deal with the living matter by "purifying" and "polluting" it, simultaneously pressing, tightening and pulling it out. The dough, representing life, is also associated with the experience of death, to shrouding, death containing unrelenting life.

The woman and the flour (mixed with oil) are one and the same in this work: the flour, no longer an objective and functional material, merges with the body, which in turn loses its role as a tool and a consumerist target. Together they become a space of "ego," immersed in the dialectics of life and death, between the moment of interaction and the fetal moistness, filth (the fall from the womb), birth, the corruption of the body when life is created, and the moment of degradation, decay, dehydration, foulness, and the final corruption, oriented toward death and the return to the starting point.

Abu-Hussein's "dough/language" technique shows that the accumulated, scattered, fragmented, dry, moist, white, pure, filthy dough does not leave the recipients (the viewers) with the sense of

shyness/shame that rises from our revulsion with death, from the decay of the body and its last corruption, or the repulsion from the birth process, its initial corruption. It turns life into an extending temporary moment, devoid of past, present, and future, a moment of unifying oneness free of timidity, between the membrane of the uterus and that of death (the shroud). Here, we are preoccupied with reducing the hidden violence: in every moment in which a person works and creates his 'bread' he is actually making his own shroud. And yet, the dough here is not locked inside the single beginning and the single ending in a person's life; it is also a shell preserving his warmth, a blanket providing shelter after the day's labors. Thus the dough equals the process of life as a representation of a continuous past in everyday life, complete with its inherent violence, gender issues, and desires. It is also life's process as a representation of the future, which is being constantly molded as it soaks in its continuous past. The dough does not exist outside of a person's being; it becomes a representation of cosmic time strewn over past, present and future.

There is an essential statement in Abu-Hussein's artistic idiom - the language of kneading, with its energy and thriving as it applies violence on the material and its gender characteristics. Non-violent human activity is not hard to realize; there's a push to the outer limits of violence. Certain death becomes the highest expression of desire as the main engine of life's full dynamic. Between the recovery from the first corruption, which passes through the dough and its quotidian representation, and the craving lies a fascination with death that leads to draping life in a shroud and the dismantling of human existence in its final corruption.

The artist Hannan Abu-Hussein (the woman) has performed the role of the human in this recorded work. Would it have been different had a man played the part? The answer to this question defines the paths of comprehension of a marvelous, profound, and complex work of art: is it gender-oriented, about woman only as a woman, or is it about humanity in general?

A new aspect might cast a shadow on the sociological facet of the work when we learn that the robe the artist is wearing used to belong to her late father. Their relationship had been a complicated one.

The Sanctity and the Desecration of the Body
"Pouring the Oil" [video, 6 min., 2019]

The title of the video *Pouring the Oil* is self-explanatory. The spoken language becomes an introduction to the world of this artwork. It expresses itself through its clear statements, which seek or command (the woman) to perform an act that corresponds with multifaceted life situations, without being limited to a single meaning. It refers to popular sayings that speak directly to the sensibility of the Arab reader, such as "pouring oil [on the fire]," that is, fanning the flame, in a metaphorical sense. Does the 'fire' here incarnate the woman's body, or her presence, with its numerous implications in Abu-Hussein's vicinity and complicated life (from the feminine point of view)?

Wisam 2020-02-28 at 11.42.24.jpeg **[4]**



[5]
Hannan Abu-Hussein, Pouring the Oil (subbi al zeit), video, 6 min., 2019
Photography: Hadas Golan
Courtesy of Hannan Abu-Hussein

WhatsApp Image 2020-02-28 at 11.42.25.jpeg **[6]**



[7]
Hannan Abu-Hussein, Pouring the Oil (subbi al zeit), video, 6 min., 2019
Photography: Hadas Golan
Courtesy of Hannan Abu-Hussein

Oil, and in particular olive oil, is one of the materials in Abu-Hussein's artistic lexicon, as are flour and fabrics. It is a staple in the life not only of the people surrounding the artist but also for humanity in general. It positions her works, again, in the universally human category.

Here, unlike in *Adjina*, the woman's face is visible right from the beginning, revealing the artist's identity while exposing the prohibited and the taboo, which are represented by human, female, naked flesh.

The act appears to be ritualistic, and the substance is oil (especially olive oil, which is very present in the life of the Palestinian). The woman is judged by the oil, with her naked living flesh and her exposed, dead hair.

The woman's body, flesh, and uncovered hair all fall within the realm of the prohibited in the culture the artist is coming from. The act of washing becomes a blatant flouting of its representation in its reality. But flouting necessarily addresses the question, what can be flouted? When does it occur? What are the conditions for its incidence?

There is, in the act of flouting, a desecration of all that is considered holy. Thus the sacred intersects with the forbidden in the feminine presence, in particular its physical aspect.

There are two conflicting emotions in the way human societies regard the idea of sanctity: on the one hand, there's the defiling, denying, and repulsing fear, and on the other is the lure - blinding, yearning, desiring. Uncleanness and repulsion contain disgrace and a call for prohibition, desire, and the sublime; excitement, a cry for flouting. And thus, the prohibition and the flouting merge in the feminine presence.

Flouting conceals violence.

In the society where the artist had grown up, this violence is perceived as something that can be tamed only by taming the thing which provokes it: the woman's body. Violence (taming the woman's body) is used to subjugate the violence of the flouting, and the woman falls victim to the violence of both her taming and her flouting!

The violation of the sacred, represented by the woman's body and essence, flouts the rules and laws societies have set down to create that same sacredness. It's a paradox - the implied bathing in oil, a (Christian) anointing element, and the (Palestinian) stuff of life, and the ingrained and concealed uncleanness and filth pointed to by the act of bathing. Those reach their climax in the female during her time of virulence. The uncleanness can be countered only by washing and bringing the woman's body back from the realm of impurity back to purity, from the world of intimidation and menace into the sphere of honor and sublimation.

The washing of the naked feminine body in oil, a sacred ritual that connects the woman's body to the divine, exposes the magical pull of prohibition.

Abu-Hussein's inversive and wise work, *Pouring the Oil*, acts as a "breaker" in its relationship with the recipient. With rhythm and ceremony, it leads us in a dance, in which our retreat becomes a willingness to leap forward, suggesting an uncanny sense that might save us from ourselves – through its process – and from the first corruption to the last: a sense of reviving timidity/shame.

Migration, Displacement, and Exile
"Bukjia (Bundle)" [installation, 2019]

In Al-Shaykh Muwannis, the Palestinian village whose residents were uprooted in 1948, Hannan Abu-Hussein hung 300 cloth bundles filled with dried bread on the roof of a flour mill.

jpg.بقجة **[8]**



[9]
Hannan Abu-Hussein, Bukjia (Bundle), mixed technique, 2019
Photography: Laura Lachman
Courtesy of Hannan Abu-Hussein

jpg.2 بقجة **[10]**



[11]
Hannan Abu-Hussein, Bukjia (Bundle), mixed technique, 2019
Photography: Laura Lachman
Courtesy of Hannan Abu-Hussein

In times past, people used to bury bread in the ground in anticipation of dangers and hunger. The earth had become a bundle of cloth that saves dried bread for times of migration or loss of the home.

The residents of Al-Shaykh Muwannis were driven from their land in 1948, returning as a homeless people in the symbolism of the bundles suspended between roof and floor, neither here nor there. They had gone to the displaced, itinerant place, not to the safe and stable one, they themselves being the "geographical exile" that the Palestinian poet Reem Ghanayem has spoken of in her poetry collection *Mag - a Life of Exiles*, Page 11, in so-called 'heterotopia.'

Abu-Hussein uses materials (the flour in *Dough* as well as the dried bread in *Bundle*) that carry notions of mobility and a haven for meanings, pictures, and functional applications, by way of an indispensable substance. This use encompasses the displaced Palestinian and the exile living in refugee camps that are neither a "place" nor a "non-place;" it contains as well the exile of the Jew throughout the generations and his gaining control of this region. Here the haven is someone else's displacement, and the absence of the 300 refugees or dispossessed becomes a weighty presence on the horizon of the installation's chosen location.

The Father: an Image of Imagined Structures

"In Between the Destruction of the Father"

I cannot set the personal father, who had played a problematic role in the artist's life, apart from the symbolic father. In this work, there are two close and contradicting roles regarding the father: the preventer and the forbidder. The work also notes the temporary social regression in the image of the father (as the absent father and the shameful one). It is not easy to comprehend the complex implications in the daughter-father relationship unless we view the father as symbolically representing the social system.

هدم الأب 1.jpg **[12]**



[13]
Hannan Abu-Hussein, In Between the Destruction of the Father, installation, pipes and olive oil, 2019
Photography: Laura Lachman
Courtesy of Hannan Abu-Hussein

هدم الأب 2.jpg **[14]**



[15]
Hannan Abu-Hussein, In Between the Destruction of the Father, installation, pipes and olive oil, 2019
Photography: Laura Lachman
Courtesy of Hannan Abu-Hussein

The symbolic father is not a real being but a kind of intertwined situation and a complicated function similar to the maze of pipes in the installation. This function is a form of laying down the law and regulating desire within the space of mental issues: the actual role of the father is to unite the desire and the law (and not raise conflict between them). Although the symbolic father is not real but rather a position in the symbolic order, the son (the male) will occupy this position by taking on the parental role. He is still incapable of performing it fully, but the symbolic father usually interferes only covertly, like the oil seeping into the dark pipes or the fluid, maternal speech that penetrates life's processes.

The symbolic father is a crucial part of the symbolic order's structure. What separated the symbolic order of cultures from the imaginary order of nature is the drawn dynastic, patriarchal line that goes through the static installation, crushing "containers overflowing with the hidden oil of femininity." The symbolic father is also the dead one, killed by his sons.

In addition to the symbolic (personal/collective) father, there's an imaginary one in the installation: an image made up of the imaginary order the artist has embraced in her imagination about the father's character, as reflected in the installation's "image." These imaginary orders may involve a minimal relationship with the father, as reflected in reality. The imaginary father can be perceived as a perfect healer, like oil smeared on the exhausted body, or the reverse – "the father who has castrated his son." He is the protector, the healing god, while still the menacing father.

Between the symbolic father and imaginary one, the question of "matter" and "form/design" comes up in the installation: who is the real father?

The real father is no other than the "great emasculator," or the castrating instrument that invades the femininity of the generally empty space of the installation and the place (the Palestinian village of Al-Shaykh Muwannis and its symbolism). Another question arises, inevitably: who is the eunuch/the womanly within the complicated political narratives associated with the place?

Throughout the history of the place and of human (patriarchal) society, the father is in the pipes that climb up into the air, to the uncertain space, while the mother/daughter stands on the firm ground, providing society with living, healing oil.

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