

THE ERASURE TRILOGY

Fazal Sheikh interviewed by Shela Sheikh

In 2010, Fazal Sheikh visited Israel and the West Bank for the first time. Sheikh had been invited to join *This Place*, a project initiated by the photographer Frédéric Brenner to explore the region through the lenses of twelve internationally-renowned photographers.¹ During the course of the many extended visits to the region that were to follow, Sheikh produced three bodies of work—*Memory Trace*, *Desert Bloom*, and *Independence/Nakba*—published collectively by Steidl in 2015 as *The Erasure Trilogy*. Together, through their juxtaposition of the photographic image and text, the three volumes trace the legacies of the Arab–Israeli War of 1948 and its lasting impact on the Palestinians, Bedouins, and Israelis of the region. While *Desert Bloom*, the work produced for *This Place*, has been exhibited in the traveling group exhibition that began in 2014, this spring marks the first simultaneous exhibition of all three elements.² Collectively presented under the title *Erasures*, the trilogy internally opens up in a movement of dispersal across multiple institutions, each with differing remits, and with this distinct, albeit often overlapping, audiences: the Slought Foundation (Philadelphia), the Brooklyn Museum, the Pace/MacGill Gallery, and Storefront for Art and Architecture (all New York), the Al-Ma'mal Foundation for Contemporary Art (East Jerusalem), and the Khalil Sakakini Cultural Center (Ramallah).³ To mark the occasion of this ambitious curatorial gesture, the interview that follows has been published through the Slought Foundation, where Sheikh is currently artist-in-residence. This discussion, which took place in Zurich in the summer of 2014, was initially commissioned by the *This Place* project, and appeared in an abridged and edited form in the group exhibition catalogue, published by MACK.⁴ Here, Sheikh reflects upon his initial responses to the region, the genesis and challenges of each

*Both Fazal Sheikh and I wish to acknowledge Aaron Levy, Executive Director and Senior Curator at the Slought Foundation, Philadelphia, as a key interlocutor, and to express our gratitude for his insightful comments during the final phase of the preparation of this text.

1. For further details, see www.this-place.org.

2. Venues and dates of the traveling group exhibition, of which *Desert Bloom* is a part, are available at www.this-place.org. Elements of *Desert Bloom* were also displayed in 2014 as part of the group exhibition “Now You See It: Photography and Concealment” at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York.

3. For full details, see www.slought.org/resources/erasures.

4. Fazal Sheikh interviewed by Shela Sheikh in Charlotte Cotton, ed., *This Place* (London: MACK, 2014), pp. 111–25; also available at www.this-place.org/photographers/fazal-sheikh/.

of the elements of the trilogy, as well as the relations between them and his hopes for their effectivity, and his mode of working more broadly. As such, together with the extensive documentation provided both within the *Erasure Trilogy* publications and across the venues, as well as a series of artist's talks programed for this spring, the conversation lends further context to the multi-platformed curatorial event of *Erasures*, which takes as its point of departure the following works:

In *Memory Trace*, Sheikh explores the enduring loss caused by the evacuation and destruction of Palestinian villages during the 1948 Arab–Israeli War and the subsequent 1967 Six-Day War through a series of photographs of ruins and their surrounding landscapes, accompanied by several portraits of Arab–Israelis and Palestinians who were displaced from, and unable to return to, their homes and land. As is also the case with *Desert Bloom*, the images are accompanied by extensive texts that provide the reader–viewer with historical and contemporary information about the sites and sitters. In the context of the Storefront installation in Manhattan, in order to access *Memory Trace*, the visitor must pass through images of the Israeli separation wall, and as such is invited to acknowledge the contemporary politics of division that have at once physically barred the passage of Palestinians to their former homes and silenced the history of and engagement with such historical acts of erasure.

In *Desert Bloom*, Sheikh turns from the lasting legacy of the Palestinian Nakba (“Catastrophe”) of 1948, as explored in *Memory Trace*, to that of the “Bedouin Nakba,” beginning in 1948 and continuing through 1953, during which period the Israeli military violently expelled an estimated 90 percent of the 100,000 Bedouin inhabitants of the Negev Desert into the West Bank, Gaza, Jordan, and Egypt, in the process erasing the traces of their settlements and their presence on the land.⁵ Across *Memory Trace* and *Desert Bloom*, Sheikh's photographs and their accompanying captions and testimonials not only honor the ruination of villages, settlements, families, communities, and modes of inhabiting the land, but also bear witness to the subsequent camouflaging of these historical acts of erasure, and the persisting mechanisms and consequences of this in the present. In *Desert Bloom*, Sheikh explores the manner in which the Zionist dream of settling the Negev, encapsulated in Ben-Gurion's invocation to “make the desert bloom,” has transformed the desert. Reading the land, we witness how decades of irrigation and afforestation have gone hand-in-hand with urbanization, militarization, mining, construction, contamination, and destruction, as well as the continued displacement of the Bedouins. Here, through the shift in vantage point, Sheikh's aerial images make eerily visible the

5. See Eyal Weizman, “The Conflict Shoreline: Colonization as Climate Change in the Negev Desert” in Eyal Weizman and Fazal Sheikh, *The Conflict Shoreline* (Göttingen: Steidl, 2015), esp. p. 37.

manners in which the rhetoric of conservation, environmentalism, cultivation, and commemoration in fact serves as a smoke screen for continued racism, expulsion, and dispossession.⁶ Exemplary of this is the case of al-Araqib, an “illegalized” Bedouin settlement that has been destroyed and rebuilt more than 85 times in what has come to be known as “the battle over the Negev,” an Israeli state campaign that aims to displace Bedouins from the fertile northern threshold of the desert in order to re-appropriate their lands. Displayed at the Slought Foundation is a video, made by the villagers themselves, that documents the repeated destruction of al-Araqib. This is accompanied by historical documents (for instance, maps and land contracts) and photographs, as well as recent photographs by Sheikh, that together record the historical and contemporary presence of Bedouins, and—in the case of many of the documents—have been used to buttress their legal claims to the land.

Finally, *Independence/Nakba* comprises a series of 65 diptychs that place together portraits of persons from both sides of the Israeli–Palestinian conflict, with one pair for each year between 1948—the year in which the State of Israel was established—and 2013, each pair increasing in age. If the double erasure—the “erasure of erasure”—to which the first two volumes speak does not cancel out the historical erasure experienced by the Palestinians, but rather intensifies the prohibition on mourning, commemoration, and even resolution, then this final volume asks us to acknowledge on the one hand the distinction between the experience of catastrophe (Nakba) and celebration (Independence), and on the other the lasting bonds that precede this act of division, as well as the shared condition of mourning and trauma that proceeds from it, as but one condition for the promise of a viable future.

Throughout his oeuvre, Sheikh’s practice resists easy categorization. Often published together with extended narratives, testimonials, and captions, Sheikh’s images find their way into the world both in publications and exhibitions, but also beyond the museum or gallery space, as a resource for human rights activists and advocates, be this through the dissemination of DVDs or online.⁷ Central here is the desire for the images to resonate with multiple audiences, and to function across various modes of aesthetic inquiry, with the latter implying the contribution of a multiplicity of voices and realms of expertise beyond those of Sheikh and his sitters. In this vein, the three volumes of *The Erasure Trilogy* are accompanied by further publications: *The Conflict Shoreline: Colonization as Climate Change in the Negev Desert*, published by Steidl in 2015, in which Eyal Weizman reads the legal battle over al-Araqib through the history of colonialism, environmentalism,

6. Regarding the rhetoric of environmentalism as a smoke screen behind which political conflict takes shape, see Weizman, “The Conflict Shoreline,” esp. p. 31.

7. Online versions of Sheikh’s publications are available at www.fazalsheikh.org.

global conflict, and the contested evidentiary role of images; and *Erasures*, forthcoming from Steidl, in which Eduardo Cadava, a longstanding interlocutor, weaves connections between the elements of the trilogy, the poetics of the image therein, and the political context of Israel/Palestine. Additionally, through and beyond the decentralized network of institutions hosting elements of *Erasures*, a newspaper that encapsulates the various elements of *The Erasure Trilogy* will be broadly disseminated, both in situ and online.⁸ Distributed free of charge, in English, Arabic, and Hebrew, this “portable archive” carries the body of work beyond the confines of the exhibition space and the publication proper, in order to spur discussion across geographies, languages, and populations. Here, across the various iterations and locations of *Erasures*, not only is the status of the photographic image itself put into question and expanded (as at once poetic, testimonial, evidentiary, and scientific) but also that of the publication, which, considered more broadly in its multiple forms, is but one mode of “making public.” In this vein, *The Erasure Trilogy*, from which *Erasures* takes its leave, serves as the springboard for a series of events and encounters across the participating venues, with discussions that speak both to and alongside the work, from and to multiple perspectives and concerns.

Shela Sheikh
April 2016

8. The newspaper is available to download at www.slought.org/media/files/s534-2016-03-22-erasures_newspaper.pdf.



From *Desert Bloom*
November 13, 2011
30°57'14"N / 34°39'25"E
Pitas, targets to simulate enemy
installations in a closed live-fire
training zone

SHELA SHEIKH: Of the three bodies of work, only *Desert Bloom* has previously been exhibited. But it in fact seems necessary to consider them collectively in order to fully appreciate the significance of each.

FAZAL SHEIKH: Yes, in my mind they are so interconnected, and *Desert Bloom* provides a link between the first and the third bodies of work quite clearly. Across the three projects, one experience opened on to the next, as is the case in much of my work. And central to all three are the events of 1948, even if this isn't necessarily explicit when one views the *Desert Bloom* images, for instance. I'd read a lot about the establishment of the State of Israel in 1948, so this seemed a natural place to start: visiting, interacting with, and interviewing people who'd been combatants on both sides of the divide. I realized the extraordinary rupture of what the turmoil around that time had created—a fissure within the society that is still palpable today. In all the time I've been there, this is what resonates with me the most: the idea of a scar just beneath the surface. Rather than leveling accusations at either side, my wish has been to try and address the wound, and to do so with what for me was an essential openness. Because this is such a taboo subject in the region, I want to mourn that loss and consider what that rupture has meant. A profound moment for me was early on during my visits, when it became unlawful to commemorate Nakba Day. I was driving through Sheikh Jarrah with one of my assistants, Talia Rosin, on the Israeli Independence Day, and there were thousands of young people gathered together

right there to start the parade. Why had they chosen to gather here in this fiercely contested part of East Jerusalem? It seemed to me somewhat an act of provocation: this idea that for every new year there's the birth of something new and optimistic for Israel, whereas on the Palestinian side it's



From *Independence/Nakba*

yet another year without some sort of resolution. This is something I explore in the third part of the trilogy, *Independence/Nakba*, which is comprised of a series of diptychs and is based on this very idea of the wearing of time: I wanted to articulate the expanse of time between 1948 and today (or at least 2013), so I photographed one person from each community to represent each year from the age of 1 to 65. (Importantly, on the Israeli side, I included people whose families had emigrated prior to the establishment of the State of Israel—people who also had a right to be there, a history there; people who, before the start of the state, had lived together as neighbors.) Here, as in *Memory Trace*, I saw my role as a kind of conduit. Although I was there as an outsider, this actually seemed to grant me the ability to engage with and be offered hospitality on both “sides,” to use a not-so-popular term. In this way, both works respond to the blockade imposed by the separation wall, be this literal or on the level of understanding and dialogue. Having passed through *Memory Trace* and *Desert Bloom*, it became increasingly necessary for me to work within the seam, openly and responsively to both communities. What was striking to me was the rupture beneath the surface not

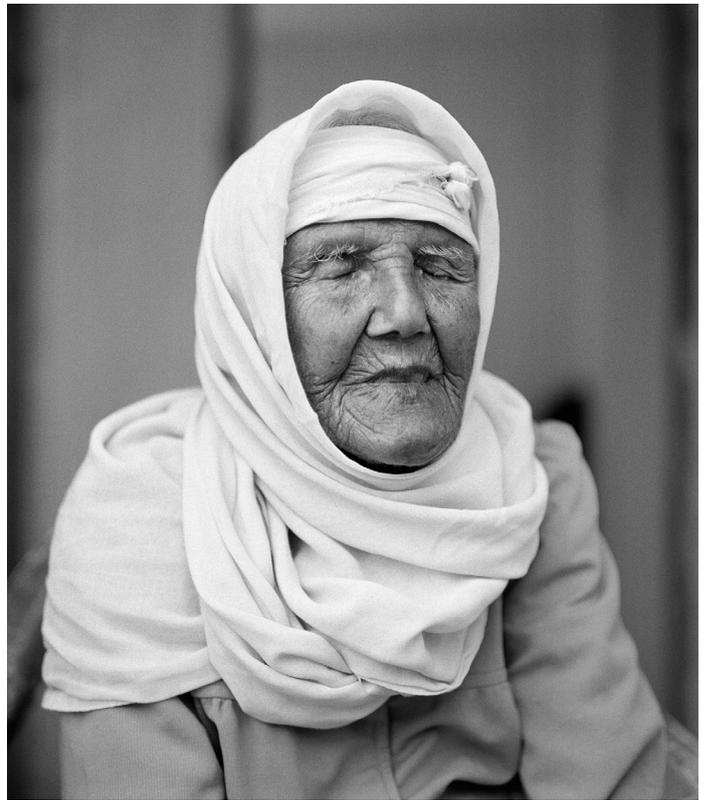
only of the land, but also within people's psyches. I feel like this last part of the trilogy finally accomplishes that in a very understated way. What interested me with the diptych format was the sense that the viewer can only attend fully to one of the portraits at any given moment; but still, the other segment remains, creating a looming and synchronous sense of the space. I would hope that the viewer feels some kind of affinity in each case for both subjects. Both sitters harbor this expanse of time within them, this sense of history looming within and beyond the façade.



From *Memory Trace*
31°47'46"N / 35°11'46"E
Lifta – Jerusalem District

So it's about mourning the fact that this event, or wound, has been repressed; in short, it's about mourning a certain kind of mourning, a working through process that hasn't been allowed to take place. With the commemoration of Independence Day, there's a gesture towards a future; whereas with the denial of the Nakba there's not only a blockade on the future but also on remembrance and the past. So there's this kind of frozen moment of abeyance that the Palestinians are forced to inhabit.

Yes, absolutely. For me a fundamental starting point was in allowing for a commemoration, for a remembrance—or acknowledgement even—of something that was so



From *Memory Trace*
Anisa Ahmad Jaber Mahamid,
Umm el-Fahem, 2011
Born in al-Lajjun – Jenin District
in 1908

profoundly tumultuous for the region. Why should remembrance be accorded to one community and not another? I started to think about this taboo subject of what the rupture of '48 and the start of the State of Israel—"A land without people for a people without a land"—meant when in fact hundreds of villages had been evacuated, or "depopulated," to use a more objective term, in the creation of this ideal. *Memory Trace* is about trying to honor what happened, trying to acknowledge a passage through history that seems, for some reason beyond my understanding, a taboo subject. As in all of my work, I try to speak about substantive issues in a manner that is non-combative and that encourages dialogue. For me there was no provocation in speaking about that time—it was a fact of history, and I wanted to honor what had happened. I wasn't talking about the notion of the Palestinian right of return or, very forcefully, the politics of what that meant; rather, I found myself acting as a kind of conduit, finding and visiting the places—hundreds of sites of turmoil, combat, and even massacre—that had been depopulated, and then moving from those places across the border into the Occupied Territories to find the people who had actually lived there but hadn't been able to return to, or even just visit, that place in 65 or 66 years. There was an upsetting realization that I could travel with relative ease between one place and the other, while many of these families had never been afforded that



From *Memory Trace*
Mahmud Muhammad Mahmud
Umm el-Fahem – Jenin District
Three generations of the
Mahmud family

opportunity, or were simply denied permission to go. The elders would tell me about their memory of their former homes, sometimes they would tell me what to look for or what to do, they would recount what had happened during the day of their flight from the village. These people are 80, 90, 100; the eldest woman I met was 103 years old at the time. And of course these people, the last of that generation, are not only passing away in quick succession, but the sites themselves are being subsumed within the land—erased, converted, re-contextualized. The presentation of history is in many cases altered, which is something I continue to explore in the *Desert Bloom* series. It's there in a latent fashion, but if one doesn't consider the space carefully it's hard to know what it is exactly you're looking at when you visit those sites, as is exactly the case when one views the aerial images. Many of the sites are within the National Park Service or the Jewish National Fund (JNF) forests, which one sees in the aerial images, and are either completely obscured, which is the intent, or attributed to archaeological remnants of an earlier era; but they are rarely acknowledged as former Palestinian villages.

So one sees how the *Memory Trace* project naturally leads to *Desert Bloom*.

Yes, that sense of being able to understand the dynamics that were swirling around '48 and the villages, and the people living in exile, opened up a mode of inquiry that I could then follow in a contemporary sense in the Negev. My experience of the sites of battle and/or evacuation that had been either willfully erased—dismantled, destroyed, and the stones taken away—or subsumed beneath forests, was astonishing; this idea that, years on, I could visit the site of a village and find that it is today an extraordinary forest, and unless you look with a critical eye it is virtually impossible to find the remnants of the past. And this makes one question what secrets the land holds within, beneath its skin. But then you start to realize that beyond this mystery—something that is also inherent to the very nature of photography itself—there was actually quite a concerted effort to re-contextualize what's there.

One of the most influential books for me was *Sacred Landscape* by Meron Benvenisti, who was previously the deputy mayor of Jerusalem, and quite prominent in the Jewish-Israeli community. He writes thoughtfully and openly about his childhood and how his father, in 1949, was a cartographer vested with the responsibility of drawing a new, Hebrew map for Israel, a “renewed title deed” to in effect Judaize the landscape. I was really struck by this, also by the openness of Benvenisti not to say “I don't have a right to be there, to be here”—he was born and raised there; he does have a right to be there—but to honor something that for some reason is forbidden to speak about. And right about that time I was given a set of maps. I don't know if they were drawn by Benvenisti's father, but they would have been from the same time—they had taken British Mandate-era maps and at the moment when they were Hebraizing the names, they had actually stamped in Hebrew within parentheses below the villages on the map, in purple, those that had been “erased,” destroyed.

They'd actually left traces of that gesture of erasing traces?

Yes, you see the notations that acknowledge what had transpired in the last couple of years. And of course there was the Naming Committee, which sought out Biblical sites that could justify a re-naming with a Jewish or Hebrew essence. So because the map is perceived as a clear, objective, fact-based resource or rooting, you realize how fragile your footing is even today: where are you standing, what does it really mean, how have archaeologists considered the space, how have they maybe manipulated the space? And with that also of course was this idea of what the

planting of forests had meant, what the Jewish National Fund—the international organization founded in 1901 that’s responsible for this afforestation and, according to its website, for “building a prosperous future for the land of Israel and its people”—had meant, what it means today.



From *Desert Bloom*
October 9, 2011
31°21'41"N / 34°45'54"E
Planting of the GOD TV Forest on the former
land of the Bedouin village of al-Araqib

How did you come to these particular areas in the South?

I had an invitation in the summer of 2011 to visit the unrecognized village of al-Araqib, on the outskirts of Beersheba, the largest city in the Negev, to meet with a quite extraordinary woman, Haia Noach. Haia runs the Negev Coexistence Forum, a joint Jewish and Arab organization whose mandate is to confront civil inequality and intolerance. It was just after the village proper had been razed to the ground by the state, and there were huge protests in Israel around this. When I arrived it was July and in the midst of sweltering heat, but the villagers still maintained a set of protest tents—simple, fragile structures that were erected on the site of what had been homes. But they also had tents closer within the compound of the cemetery, which had not been razed—there is a degree of respect within Judaism that forbids the desecration of other sacred sites, and in that cemetery were graves that were 100 years old, from a time far earlier than the founding of the State of Israel. Sitting in one of the protest tents that day, I looked out across the expanse of what had been homes two months prior, homes that I had never seen. I visited once again shortly thereafter, at a time when the JNF was starting already to dig the

trenches for the planting of the Ambassador Forest, which is part of a plan to create a circle of forest as a “green belt” around Beersheba. But many of the areas of afforestation are contested regions that were previously home to Bedouin communities; instead, the Bedouins are being encouraged and/or forced to move into seven townships that have been organized for them. And of course many of the Bedouins were resisting these consolidation efforts. They remain largely unrecognized by the state and in the vast majority of cases are given no access to the proper infrastructure, but the Bedouins continue to insist upon the right to remain on their land. Often the extensive appeals within the courts eventually meet their end and the Israeli Land Authority comes and demolishes the site.



From *Desert Bloom*
October 9, 2011
31°20'46"N / 34°46'42"E
Fenced perimeter of the al-Turi cemetery
within the demolished unrecognized Bedouin
village of al-Araqib

So essentially everything you've been seeing from '48 onwards, as registered in the *Memory Trace* project, you're seeing still happening, but within the space of even a few months.

Well yes, curiously I was now looking at what I realize was to some degree an extension of the same policy that was used in '48. Granted, in '48, many of the structures were built with stones, so were not so easy to completely demolish. The Bedouin homes, by comparison, are fragile structures. Sitting there in that tent during my first visit to al-Araqib, looking across the expanse of what had been the village and seeing the JNF's planting trenches, this scarification rendered on the land, I suddenly had the idea that it was important to see

that from the perspective of a distance, from above, in order to understand the context of what I was looking at on the ground.

Returning to that notion of openness, that seems to have also affected the formal approach: here a particular situation prompted the necessity to embrace a new form—aerial photography—that you might not have otherwise seen the value of, for your own work at least.

I have much respect for the use of aerial photography in the work of Edward Steichen and Emmet Gowin, for instance, in order to confront what the military does to the land; but until this moment this had never seemed relevant for my work. I had no idea if it would be a useful experiment. On one of my first trips, I flew above the Jerusalem corridor, looking at places that I had photographed on the ground for *Memory Trace* and that had previously been Palestinian villages that were planted atop after the creation of the state. I wanted a comparison for the areas in the Negev, where I was witnessing new afforestation, and to imagine how time might alter the character of the terrain; how it would look across the expanse of time. For the villages that had been planted over decades ago, from the air it was now almost impossible to identify those sites under the forest, to know what had been there previously. In turning my attention fully to the Negev, I flew above the land in a small Cessna with the door removed for increased ease of visibility, offering me a perspective from which to see things—traces of things—that I could not see on the ground. I thought about the Bedouins having lived here for hundreds of years and the question of what their life looks like from above. How do they sustain themselves in this inhospitable terrain? By viewing from above, I could also see that their fragile dwellings are in some way in harmony with the dictates of the desert and the unforgiving nature of the land. Above al-Araqib I could see the cemetery completely encircled by the troughs containing the seedlings of what would soon be the Ambassador Forest. I imagined myself visiting the site again in twenty-five years, seeing only the forest, and realizing that if I did not have this current view, I would not understand *anything* about this segment of history and what the land holds within. This for me was a kind of revelation, and I resolved to explore the ways in which Ben-Gurion's invocation, to "make the desert bloom," has transformed the Negev in the intervening years. I soon learned to read the clues, the signifiers, from above and it was this process that taught me about the

stewardship of the land and how it has been acquired, about the Jewish National Fund sites, the closed military zones, the *moshavim* (Israeli farming settlements), the industrialization of the landscape, and even about the smaller villages that now teeter on the brink of demolition and the eventual consolidation of their residents into the townships.

But this gesture of mapping and tracing in fact has its precedents in the history of aerial photography.

Much of the way in which the land in Israel has been acquired or surveyed since the beginning of the twentieth century has depended on the use of aerial photography: for instance, in 1917, there was a Bavarian aerial survey of the country; and in 1945, British aerial teams conducted a survey of the Negev, curiously the day after the liberation of Auschwitz. The Haganah archive houses a collection of the images that were made by the Jewish community during the British Mandate era that document what was on the ground from the air as a means by which to then understand access routes and vantage points on various villages.

So from the very beginning, aerial photography was used in the service of control and domination. And therefore, in a sense, you could be said to be using the technique against itself, or at least against its history.

Yes, indeed. You realize the militaristic, powerful attitude towards confronting the land from above; you realize just the strength of the state, or the intrusive nature of what that image-making can be. And, of course, one also begins to understand the sense of power that this perspective may entail, and how important it is to orient oneself in relation to that power structure.

You've already mentioned some of the practicalities of making the aerial images, but perhaps you could elaborate upon how you combined a necessary technical know-how with the openness and responsiveness you spoke of earlier.

Well one important factor was the seasonal shifts. On the one hand, looking from above, you're able to see much information that you wouldn't on the ground; but in the winter, when the crops are growing and the fields are more lush, a great deal of the information is obscured from view. There's a shifting margin of legibility based upon the season. I mostly photographed in the fall, when the crops are low and the

area arid. The air is crisp and clean then, and the clues more legible; one's vision is able to access that which is now only thinly veiled by the barren surface membrane of the land.

In terms of technicalities, as I mentioned, I photographed from a small, 2-seat Cessna plane that had the door removed. We flew quite close to the ground, almost skimming the threshold of the lowest level above the earth. Using a gyro-stabilizer to minimize vibration, the process was in fact for me very similar to that of making portraits: I would first of all fly around a space and then adjust my positioning so that I could isolate something that was, in a way, a portrait of a particular space in the desert. So in that way I felt to some degree protective of these "portraits," through this relationship established with, and attention given to, certain spaces. As I flew above the desert, I was attempting to remain receptive to the land that was offered, without much preconception, or orchestration. Returning to what I said a moment ago about a necessary reflection upon the power relations in confronting the land from a height, I was instead more interested in allowing the process of working to be instructive and responsive in establishing an intimate relationship with the space, rather than oppressive in the sense of confining the images to any expectation of what might be encountered. That said, of course the pilot and I would discuss before each flight the different areas and what we might perhaps be looking at; eventually, I began to learn to read the traces of historical archaeological sites, of prior Bedouin villages, and closed military zones.

As you say, one begins to see—in fact, to *read*—how different people have precisely sensed or read the dictates of the land around them in very distinct ways. In the case of the Bedouins, this reading of the land is very responsive and harmonious.

Exactly, and the notion of "desert bloom" was more in terms of controlling and *transforming* the desert, placing a value judgment upon that which is desert versus that which is a forested area, for example, or farmland. But it doesn't really acknowledge the long-term impact of what it means to build oxidation pools and divert aquifers, to try and sustain a forest over time in a desert area, and what that does to raising the salinity of the planted area. Can the desert base actually, over time, support a forest, and what aquifers are depleted to make that happen? So it's interesting to see how that was symptomatic, I think, of the mindset in terms of one's approach to both nature and space.



From *Desert Bloom*
November 22, 2011
31°8'7"N / 35°12'25"E
Evaporation ponds at the Arad Phosphate Mine

Incidentally, the Israeli Defense Force has historically employed Bedouins as trackers precisely because of their ability to read signs in the landscape. So on the one hand you have the idea of honoring that tradition of understanding nature; and on the other, the claim that this sense of nature is inappropriate or unworthy. It's a strange conundrum.

One that needs to be viewed and responded to with a certain distance, or the openness we spoke of earlier. But that mindset with regard to nature and value imposition also has much to say about colonialism. Obviously there's colonialism of land and people, but there's also an imposition of culture. And if you think of culture coming from the idea of cultivation, not only of the minds of people but also of the land itself, you see how what is being enforced here is a certain view of how a land and a people *ought* to become cultivated.

Well that's a big part of the way in which the state has insisted upon moving the Bedouins into these townships. Of course when you see the Bedouin villages from the air they're often quite unkempt and scattered; but again, it's just a matter of differing values and judgment.

It's curious to see how once the villages have been wiped out, the desert just reclaims the space. What will become of the spaces where oxidation pools now exist and there is a real, profound, and unalterable impact on the environment? The idea of the footprint on the land is vital: on the one hand, the argument would be that the Bedouins are not inhabiting the same space month in, month out, and that



From *Desert Bloom*
October 9, 2011
31°6'60"N / 34°43'4"E
Abu Asa family homestead in the vicinity of
the recognized Bedouin town of Bir Haddaj, of
the Azasme tribe

they move, they traverse the land. But why do they traverse the land? They shift to different spaces so that they can live without destroying the land, in harmony with the space that will sustain them over time. But this astute and non-invasive relation to the land is the means by which they are denied the right to be there.

Yes, exactly. Their not leaving their traces in and on the land is their virtue, but actually that's precisely their undoing.

That's quite correct. In fact for the Bedouin communities, the strongest groups historically were those that moved and returned to the land throughout the year, as opposed to those that settled. So then, what are the lasting traces? Where is it that we look for proof of the Bedouins' rights to the land? And don't forget that this also depends very much upon who is making the inquiry, and what the motives are for the assertion. Under closer scrutiny, the things that you find are the cemeteries, sometimes there are old ruins from when a house was built in stone, which was not that frequent, and then there are the cisterns and wells; but other than that, there's not much.

Whereas the turn to aerial photography marks a turning point within your work, this engagement with peoples' relationships with nature, and also with the paradoxes of the entangled relationship between the exploitation, improvement, and conservation of the land, and the effects of these for its inhabitants, is nothing new. One can think, for example, of *Simpatia* from 2000, which documented



From *Simpatia*, 2000
Gumercindo Lisboa

farming families in northern Brazil who had been displaced from their land due to the implementation of a national park—set up precisely to preserve the land in the face of commercialized farming and pollution—and who also found themselves without the means to legally lay claim to the land.

Yes, if one looks to some of the other, earlier projects—you mention the one in Brazil, but also any of the ones in African communities—there's a clear link between certain people's connection to the land and their sets of beliefs and community. As governments attempt to wrest the land resources from local communities, I have often been drawn to the nature of specific practices, and a community's voice in relation to that particular place on earth as a sort of quiet advocacy for their right to maintain their lives in opposition to state-sponsored modes of acquisition. Plus for a long time I've thought about the question of what the land holds within.

Across all three bodies of work, what's so captivating is the multivalent functioning of traces and inscription, both within that which is photographed and within the photographic medium itself. Perhaps, given that we've just been talking about *Desert Bloom*, we could begin here. We've already



From *Desert Bloom*
October 4, 2011
31°18'50"N / 34°40'58"E
Plantation work for the Ambassador Forest
organized by the Jewish National Fund

spoken about the lack of overtly legible traces left by the Bedouins on the land itself working to their detriment in terms of their claims to the land, and about your use of aerial photography as a tool for registering traces that would otherwise not be apparent. But could you say more about the idea of interpretation, or legibility, within the images themselves. This seems to be a key issue here, and one that also opens up onto the question of the evidentiary.

The interesting thing is how the photograph can be used as a kind of archaeology. It's a pause along a continuum; it holds within it everything that you need to access, but you also need a trained eye to unravel what it is you are looking at. The work is an elegy to something that is passing, being transformed. Each of the locations captured in the *Desert Bloom* images is locatable on a Google Earth timeline. Detailed within the captions are the coordinates of the space; that was important to me, so that the viewer could go to that exact site on Google Earth, which is public, and view for themselves what the last decade has done to that space. And then if you look, for instance, at one of my images from al-Araqib [see image above], it's an aerial view of just the planted troughs of the forest in preparation for the rains, but in point of fact when you go back the ten years on the Google Earth timeline, you see that on that same spot there were four houses, those of the Abu Jabber family. So I've mapped and traced what happened to the space on which the family once lived, marking its presence along the continuum and how that spot on earth has changed over time with the slow but sure encroachment of the afforestation onto it, followed by the

demolition and complete eradication of the houses. Similarly, this land of al-Araqib, as shown in the image, was included in the official census of 1945, which registered Bedouin tents on the land. If you look carefully at the image, you see that there's a well from that time within the area of afforestation. Curiously, in the two and a half years since I made the photograph, it became evident that the figure, the form itself of the beginning of the forest, was in fact just a placeholder, was being used as something to hold the space in abeyance for later progress. What you have in the last two years is a train line that has gone completely across and through the area that was to be part of the Ambassador Forest. So all of the photographs I made are traces not only of the moment that I photographed them, but also of the traces that lie just below the surface, from some other time, sometimes going back as far as prehistory, to Nabataean-era or Byzantine-era inventories; or to the remains of recent demolitions in Bedouin villages, including in fact the Bedouins still living within the landscape, under threat of eviction. In this sense, they are traces of what is already fading—bearing witness not only to a certain presence, but also to the tide of transformation.

One sees here the connection between the landscape images and the portraits, in terms of what the image offers up as information. And this is a question both of indexicality and of narrative temporality, of what lies beyond the photographic instant. For instance, as you've just said about the *Desert Bloom* series, the photographs on the one hand function in the isolated moment that is registered in the making of the image; but on the other hand, their broader significance lies within the acknowledgement of the passage of time and of a narrative in which such a moment is enmeshed—a narrative that isn't immediately obvious to the viewer. And much the same thing is at work within the portraits, insofar as the faces photographed bear witness to layer upon layer of psychic traces and scarring, for a start; in other words, they each bear witness to a history, one that lies beyond the photographic frame. What I'm getting at is that in both cases—in the landscape images and the portraits—what's harbored therein isn't immediately legible; it resists translation into a clear, calculable language, or into "fact." And this element of opacity, although arguably the case for any photograph, seems particularly pertinent to the images of landscapes as well as the portraits.

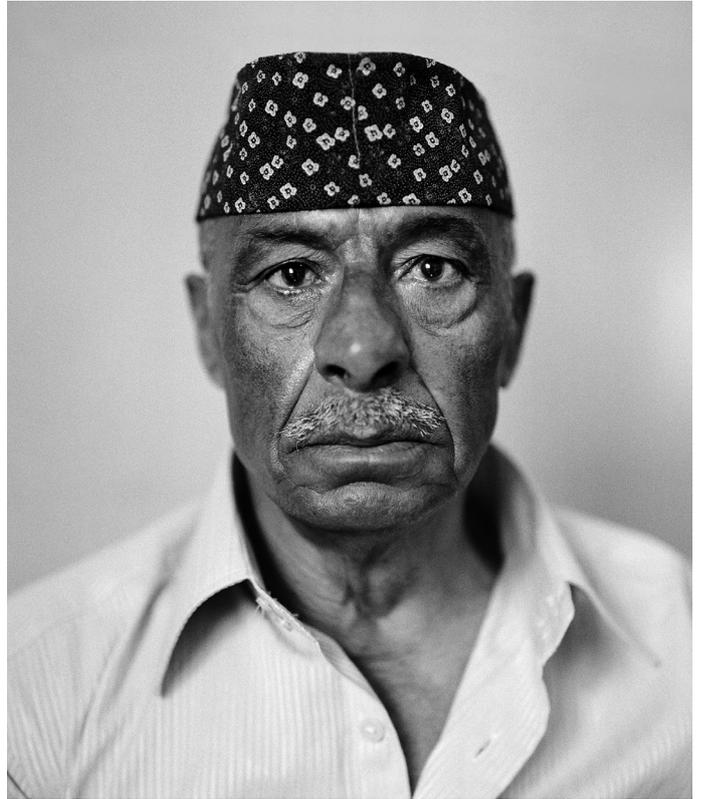
When I consider the relationship between these aerial images and the portraiture, I realize that they both offer one the



From *Memory Trace*
31°50'27"N / 35°1'33"E
Yalu – Al Ramla District

clues to that which is held within, beyond the immediate reach of the image, yet with close study there is an overture. In the case of the portrait, when I approach the encounter, it is with a desire to create a collaborative image that will offer the viewer a calm, open invitation to engage. In each case, you see that which is on the surface; you want to render it in an empowering way, you want to respect it, but you don't have all the tools at your disposal to unravel what it is exactly that you're looking at. What for me is compelling about the aerial material is that you can confront it on so many different levels, the Google Earth timeline comparison being so simple and yet so effective. Given the erasure or destructions of certain spaces, and with this the willful erasure of those very acts of erasure, my question, moving from *Memory Trace* to *Desert Bloom*, was that of what the land holds within. This seemed to me similar to what I was seeing in the landscape of the face. A portrait can do something very effectively if you approach the person in the right way and they offer you a kind of open, calm invitation. You realize that there's always something that the sitter retains for themselves. And maybe the fissures in the face or the gaze allude to part of that. But for me a photograph has always been limited in that sense: there is always this degree of mystery. It's precisely this limit, however, that makes one wish to revisit the experience of looking.

Given what you say about the notion of invitation, I'd like to return to a point you made earlier about feeling



From *Memory Trace*
Munir Khalil Ahmad Saber
Shu'fat refugee camp, 2011

protective over the aerial “portraits,” and to re-phrase this in terms of proximity. In many ways, the portraits that you’ve made (here and elsewhere) involve a very formal staging, one in which the subject has a certain active role in the manner in which they present themselves and face the camera. Whereas, as you’ve noted, there’s something very intrusive about the manner in which aerial photography has been used historically, in its dominating and “capturing” from above. Could you say more about how you view intimacy vis-à-vis the spatiality of the photographic scene, and distance-slash-proximity.

Well, first of all, I don’t think that physical proximity implies intimacy. Certainly in the case of portraiture, you can be physically close to the sitter and not achieve openness. When I speak of intimacy, I also mean a sense of immersing yourself in something emotive and complex. You want the picture to signal those things, but you don’t want it to explain something away so easily. That, I think, is what I was hoping for with the aerial images: you sometimes see just the trace of passage, often you don’t see people within the images, but you see the remnants of their movements and their dwellings, and you know that in some cases something complicated has happened there. But you don’t always know what that is; you just have the sense that something profound has taken place, or is about to take place there.



That, for me, is what links these images to the intimacy of the portraits.

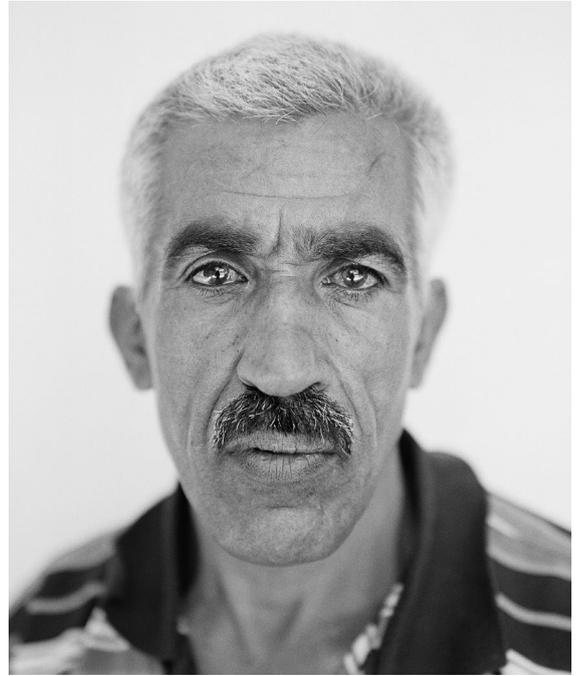
From *Desert Bloom*
November 13, 2011
31°6'46"N / 34°24'10"E
Intersecting seismic test lines in the Halutza Sands of the Palestinian village of Nabaat, evacuated in 1948 in the wake of Operation Yo'av

That sense of not quite knowing, or not explaining things away, seems very apparent in *Memory Trace*, which you describe as a “visual poem,” insofar as it’s a kind of hymn to traces that are being erased, or that are willfully not read, or wrongly attributed, mis-translated. The important thing is that the work both documents *and* leaves a lot unresolved—it shows the wound without naming it as such.

For me the strongest works I know are ones that raise questions and get you embroiled in the complexity and emotional weight of a situation, rather than operating in a straightforward mode. In some senses this was one of the greatest experiences I took away from working in Palestine: the longer you spend there, the more complicated and gray your sense of what’s going on becomes. This was certainly something I wanted to invite the viewer to experience. In the case of *Independence/Nakba*, my aim was to somehow gesture towards that which is simmering just beneath the surface—this rupture, wound, or scar that looms, with a forceful yet unresolved presence, its legacy not yet healed. To me, that emotion is something that runs through all three pieces.

Exactly. But, nonetheless, many of the images function as tools for research.

Yes, certainly. It’s important for me that the work operates on several levels and may be viewed in a variety of venues,



From *Independence/Nakba*

including, but not limited to, the museum or gallery space. One of my real priorities is that the work be more activist in its intent; but I don't see this as being discordant with the aesthetic quality of the work. Often it's claimed that there's some impropriety in a work's being formally or aesthetically compelling, but in my mind it's more a matter of attention and care: creating a framework for someone else to see the space in question in the most inclusive fashion. This then, hopefully, provides an invitation to want to know more: in this case, to consult the accompanying testimonials and the extensive captions.

I'd like to pick up from earlier and ask more about the viewer's experience vis-à-vis context: for instance, viewing the *Desert Bloom* work in an exhibition space, obviously one has to have a certain amount of contextual narrative in order to begin to access the images: where they are, what they depict, what conflicts they register, and so on. Again, it's a matter of legibility. It seems simplistic, perhaps, to ask what the relationship is between image and text, but there is one and it's vital if these images are going to mean anything beyond simply being ciphers that open up unknown questions for most people. So there has to be some form of narrative around the image, as a point of access for the viewer.

As I mentioned, essentially, the image is a kind of invitation, and one hopes that the formal aesthetic qualities can encourage the viewer to want to know more about what they are viewing. In this case it's difficult, precisely because

of the contested nature of narrative and historiography in this region—of what is and isn't visible, what is and isn't acknowledged—which the work addresses through its broader meditation on “erasures”; in the context of the exhibition, each space must have a clear description of what it is one's looking at, a clear reading of the image, as well as some things that one doesn't even see within the image. Hence the laborious research that was necessary in compiling the extensive captions. But at the same time, providing a clear-cut message closes down the subtlety and the resonances that can create true understanding. In short, the image and its textual description must each function effectively in the absence of one another; then, when combined, the work becomes something that transcends the separate elements, with each part retaining its weight yet neither merely “illustrating” the other. For instance, an important part of engaging with the work is to experience the physical sense of it, the experience of moving within and through the space, trying to figure out what the image contains without necessarily knowing what one's looking at. In this sense, the experience is at once specific to the particularities of the Palestine–Israel context *and* transcends this, insofar as it's a matter of looking, reading, and responding to images, positioning oneself in relation to images, more generally. In the case of *Desert Bloom*, the scale is important: making such large images is not something I usually do, but in this case I wanted the viewer to have the feeling of being a little overwhelmed, surrounded by the images without a stable position or reference point. On the one hand, it's about looking: I'd like the person who comes to the work to have the opportunity to look at it in the way that I looked at it, to explore what it is that's before them before they're told what they're supposed to be seeing. The viewer is sometimes in a vast expanse without any rooting, without certainty. On that level, I rather like that opening, which I would say is also a quality that exists in portraiture. On the other hand, it's about more than the viscosity of looking: returning to the particularity of the subject matter, the work, I hope, also demands that the viewer consider the modes in which we view and respond to the world around us, and in particular to zones of contestation such as this one, in which we are all in some way embroiled. Again, this is often a case of a deeply unsettling lack of assuredness, one that translates into many other contexts.

That notion of the individual's reaction—indeed, of the invitation to lose one's bearings in immersing oneself in

the work—seems so important given the tendency towards seeing a conflict such as this one in terms of “sides,” which you earlier problematized. In other words, what is quite distinctive about *The Erasure Trilogy* is that it addresses both communities *and* individuals, and as such that it functions both on the level of the public and the private; if, that is, we are to maintain such a distinction, which is of course questionable when one considers politics and community, but this is also something that the trilogy prompts us to think through. I think this is perhaps particularly pertinent to *Independence/Nakba*, but functions across the project as a whole.

Yes, certainly. I would hope that the works operate on all of these levels, and that they be an invitation to reflect upon our own subjectivity and how we imagine our relations between self and other, and to erasure and memory.

You mentioned that you'd like the viewer to be able to “look” at things the way you saw them—with “looking” here functioning in an expanded sense—but also to consider their own mode of viewing and relating. Could you say something about how you yourself were able to grapple with the divisions and exclusions you encountered, and how being from “without” influenced this?

People often use the dichotomy of “insider”/“outsider,” but for me neither is better or worse—it's just different. Perhaps the greatest photography book made about North America, *The Americans*, was made by Robert Frank, who's Swiss and who was encountering the country for the first time. I don't know what the right word for this is; perhaps “permission.”

Rather than objectivity?

I don't think I'm objective at all; in fact I think my work is very subjective. What I'm referring to is an essential openness, without prejudice. Much of this, I think, comes from my own experience of being of mixed heritage, and hence of feeling at once at home and a little aside or “other”; it offers the desire to reach across a divide, whatever that may be. Maybe all of my work has been formed within that idea of reaching across divisions, be they of ethnicity, religion, or class.

Or gender.



From *Moksha*, 2003
Asha Rajak ("Hope")

Well yes, in my earlier work in India I was very much taken by the idea that one might imagine that the images I made could only have been made by a woman. I love the idea that you can meet someone on a human plane that transcends all these divisions. I feel as though my first days in Palestine were about trying to find that ease. And I did find it in the moments of rapport during one-to-one meetings with whoever it was, from whatever community.

Throughout your work there's a strong element of activism, insofar as much of the work functions in a testimonial mode that seeks to engage in complex human rights issues. But, as we've discussed to some degree, these three projects, especially when considered together as *The Erasure Trilogy*, also provoke the question about the image itself—and indeed the act of learning to decipher it—as a tool for research, scientific and otherwise; as a kind of mode of inquiry beyond what we might commonly think of as simply the aesthetic. Could you say more about that?

If there is an activism here, I would hope that it's one that hovers between the evidentiary and the emotive; between the juridical and the ethical. On the one hand, I'm interested in the fragility and complex mechanisms of the evidentiary

and its erasure, as this comes to bear upon past injury and human rights abuses; on the other hand, the work is like an hymn to not only memory but also the poetic, as that which escapes capture, which escapes the narratives and “facts” that we are fed with regard to such a conflict. As we were just discussing, I’d like the viewer/reader to share my experience of “seeing.” Having accepted the invitation to work in the region, I resolved to really learn about the place—a complex, dense, and confounding set of circumstances with a history and politics that, like most people, I had read a great deal about just in the course of my everyday life. But the moment I arrived and spent a couple of days there, I found that all that prior knowledge meant very little and that I was best off starting from scratch and allowing what was there to wash over me, which has been my mode of working for some time now. I realized that doing away with my preconceptions and letting the immediate sense of place inform what I do creates a certain sense of insecurity or vulnerability, but that these emotions are in fact a strength, since they allow for a degree of openness and a receptivity to the cues that are present. In the same way, in order for the work to enable a conversation—which one may or may not name “activism”—I would hope that the viewer approach it without being over-determined by existing convictions and positions, that the viewer experience in some way this vulnerability and openness. In this way, I would hope that the work is not simply read as being “about” the Israel–Palestine conflict, as a surface upon which people find what they are searching for, as determined by their existing systems of belief, or existing modes of “looking” at that region. And, moreover, as determined by systems of belief about what counts as reliable, indisputable evidence, or what aesthetic mode is deemed suitable in such a context.

I am hopeful that the work will raise discussions and also be useful as a tool for those who wish to scrutinize the region and its alteration over time. From the outset, I resolved that I would only be able to work there if I could contribute to a conversation around the substantive issues in the contemporary society. As I mentioned, it’s vital to me that the work function on multiple levels, and that it is disseminated widely within a variety of contexts. In terms of the publications, I’ve had the good fortune to work with two authors: Eyal Weizman, whose book *Hollow Land* was extremely influential for me and who reads the land and the history of image-making, or the acquisition of the land, in a rigorous fashion that centers upon some of the legal issues surrounding the current situation in al-Araqib; and Eduardo

Cadava, whose writing explores the connections between the images in the three projects and how these resonances create a certain emotive mood *and* act as a catalyst for saying something more considered about the political situation. We share the desire to have the images serve to provoke further inquiry, and envision a series of lectures and conversations, as such taking the work well beyond the book form, as well as the white cube of the museum, and allowing it to be shared as a resource for others, especially the community, to utilize.