

LETTER FROM JERUSALEM

I Witness Silwan

Who is Watching Whom?

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Previously published:

The Jerusalem Quarterly, Issue 82, Summer 2020

<https://www.palestine-studies.org/en/node/1650290>

Abstract

“I Witness Silwan” is an art installation in the Silwan neighborhood of Israeli-occupied East Jerusalem. The installation features large images of eyes—belonging to philosophers, activists, and artists—that dare to look back at the occupying forces and bear witness to the colonial violence that is wielded against the Palestinian people. “I Witness Silwan” looks the ‘colonial gaze’ in the eye, asking: Who has the power to look and why? Whose sight counts? Concurrently the process of creating the imagery involves a looking and witnessing of the colonial occupation in East Jerusalem. The images are created and installed by an international collective of artists and activists working with the local population, and will soon be supplemented with oral histories accessible both on-site and remotely. In this way, “I Witness Silwan” generates a global gaze within the region, making visible what was invisible and enabling and empowering others to bear witness, in solidarity with the Palestinian people, to colonial violence and dispossession. The article describes the art installation and the social, political, and economic context around it as well as its collaborative and creative process. It includes testaments to the social and political impact of the installation written by community leaders and project participants.

Keywords

Silwan; East Jerusalem; colonial gaze; surveillance; occupied Palestine, Israeli settlements; murals; Madaa Creative Center; Art Forces; art activism, international solidarity.

- The staring eyes say to people we see them and they should see us too . . . we want to say that we are here, we love our land and our home.

Jawad Siyam, director of Madaa Creative Center, Silwan

- To exercise sovereignty is to exercise control over mortality and to define life as the deployment and manifestation of power . . . to kill or to allow to live constitutes the limits of sovereignty, its fundamental attributes.

Achille Mbembé¹

“I Witness Silwan – Who Is Watching Whom?” is an act of visual decolonization in the neighborhood of Batan al-Hawa, Silwan, East Jerusalem. Monumental sets of eyes and goldfinches (*tayr hassun*) are being installed in the hillside overlooking Wadi Hilwa (Kidron Valley), facing West Jerusalem and the Old City. The eyes depicted belong to local heroes, international leaders, philosophers, activists, revolutionaries, writers, and artists, and are visible from miles away.



Figure 1. Batan al-Hawa, Silwan, East Jerusalem (2019). Photo by Kobi Wolf.

Israel and its proxy “nonprofits” aim to solidify Jewish Israeli sovereignty in East Jerusalem by dispossessing Palestinians in the Old City basin, which includes the Old City’s Muslim Quarter and surrounding Palestinian neighborhoods such as

Silwan. Within Silwan, in Batan al-Hawa, more than eighty-four Palestinian families (approximately seven hundred people) are fighting eviction orders by the settler organization Ateret Cohanim. To date fourteen families have been forcibly evicted, their confiscated properties turned over to Jewish settlers. Recently, three more families lost their eviction cases and have been ordered to leave Batan al-Hawa by August 2020.

Israeli courts of law, including the Supreme Court, support this organized state violence and dispossession of Palestinians. The courts' decisions hinge on disregard for crucial facts, duplicitous arguments, and flawed reasoning. The fields of archeology and history, the Bible and tourism industry are harnessed to justify and enact these policies.

The increased presence of IDF soldiers, border police, and armed guards in Batan al-Hawa – who always accompany the settlers – has led to higher levels of violence against Palestinians, including young children and elders. As the level of settler presence rises in Batan al-Hawa, the security apparatus increasingly affects Palestinians, even if they are not facing eviction directly. The Israeli state has placed all Palestinians under extensive systems of surveillance, a “colonial gaze” that renders the population hyper-visible as objects but invisible as subjects. Zuhayr Rajabi, a community leader, and director of Madaa Cultural Center in Batan al-Hawa explains:

If you take a look, you can see all of the cameras that are installed [by Israeli state]. These cameras intervene in the privacy of Palestinians here. The cameras are again and again intervening in the privacy and in every single detail of the people's lives here – which leads to further pressure on the people – a pressure that is already immense because of the guards and the settlers.

“I Witness Silwan” looks the “colonial gaze” in the eye, asking: Who has the power to look and why? Whose sight counts?

Zuhayr Rajabi was born and raised in Batan al-Hawa. He began surveilling his neighborhood in 2004 after his brother was shot and injured by Israeli police. His father died shortly thereafter when Israeli military forces fired tear gas into their home. After his father's death, Rajabi attempted to sue the police. The court said he did not have a case as there was no evidence. This is what led Rajabi to install a series of cameras to document assaults by the sovereign state against the Palestinian population in Batan al-Hawa.

Rajabi currently has ten cameras, although in the past he has had up to sixteen. Over time the occupation confiscated or damaged some of Rajabi's equipment, sometimes after complaints from settlers. The documentation of increasing Israeli police, army, and settler brutality has indeed helped to win some measure of justice and has raised awareness globally.

The existence and placement of the “colonial gaze” – surveillance cameras – in Silwan suggests that Israel has documentation of the same incidents of violence that Rajabi's cameras are filming. The two realities – that of the sovereign occupier and that of the occupied – are layered one atop the other in the same location, as settlers and Palestinians live next door to each other, sometimes in the same building. The meaning and value of the images depends on who is doing the looking, on whose

camera is capturing the images. In other words, the occupation cameras are an extension of the sovereign eye, therefore the data collected does not see the occupied. With their cameras, Zuhayr Rajabi and the Palestinians of Silwan counter the claim that what is visible is only the domain of the sovereign state.

When Zuhayr Rajabi installed cameras he claimed a right he does not have in the “state of exception,” that is, Occupied Palestine – he claimed the right to look. Jacques Derrida’s phrase, *droit de regards*, can be translated as meaning either “the right to look” or “the law of the gaze.” How an event unfolds and is seen depends precisely on the politics of visual rights. The “other” is a reflection of “the look” that emerges out of what Derrida calls “the infinite asymmetry of the relation to the other, that is to say, the place for justice.”²

I Witness Silwan, Phase 1

- The idea of de-colonization as an intervention in the field of vision is not only about physical occupation. How do you own something through vision? How do you participate in the landscape through vision?

Eyal Weizman, Decolonizing
Architecture Art Residency, Bayt Sahur

The images in “I Witness Silwan” are either painted directly on the wall or glued in the form of large-scale vinyl stickers printed from digital files of photographs or paintings. To date ten sets of eyes and scores of Palestinian “national birds” ranging up to four meters tall have been installed. Several of the murals are not visible from outside the neighborhood at all. Other murals are visible from both inside and outside the neighborhood and some of the murals are only visible from a vantage point across Wadi Hilwa. “I Witness Silwan” aims in part to bring a global witnessing gaze to Silwan by including artist participation from around the world. (The images below include the names of a number of participating artists and portraits.) A media program is in development for linking oral histories to the images via AR (augmented reality) technologies, accessible on site and remotely.



Figure 2. View of Batan al-Hawa across Wadi Hilwa (Kidron Valley), facing west. Photo by Kobi Wolf.

In the second phase, 1,242 square meters of eyes and finches are planned for across the hillside. Included will be portraits of Edward Said – Palestinian intellectual and critic; Milad Ayyash – a 15-year-old resident of East Jerusalem killed by settler guards; Rene Yañez – Bay Area, California, curator and supporter of Palestinian artists and themes; Razzan al-Najjar – medic murdered in Gaza; Naji al-Ali – beloved Palestinian cartoonist and creator of Handala; Red Fawn – native American incarcerated in the United States, to name a few.

“I Witness Silwan” grows out of a decade-long relationship between the Madaa Creative Center in Silwan and the U.S.-based group, Art Forces. They have been painting community murals together since 2015, although their first joint project occurred in 2011.

The Madaa Creative Center, founded by Jawad Siyam and Silwan residents, has five locations throughout Silwan. The center works to resist dispossession through activities and resources that include dance, music, poetry, hip-hop, libraries, language classes, martial arts, and mural painting (www.madaasilwan.org).

Art Forces, founded in 2001, uses community public art and technology, to inspire critical thinking and action. The projects make visible histories and relationships that have been obliterated and forgotten, making connections to national and global issues of social justice, borders, precarity, migrations, and decolonization (www.artforces.org).

Statements from Project Participants



Figure 3. “Eyes of Nihad Siyam,” Silwan resident, acrylic on concrete. Muralists: Susan Greene and Fred Alvarado. Photo by Kobi Wolf.



Figure 4. (Right) “Eyes of Palestinian community member,” acrylic on concrete. Muralists: Susan Greene, Laura Rosner, and Batan al-Hawan youth. (Left) “Eyes of Bai Bibiyaon Bigkay, Lumad leader, Talaingod Woman Chieftain (Philippines),” an organizer who leads her tribe in defense of ancestral lands, vinyl print image of Bai Bibiyaon by Cece Carpio (Philippines and USA). Photo by Kobi Wolf.

Zuhayr A-Rajabi, community leader and director of Madaa Center in Batan al-Hawa:

“I Witness Silwan” has been going for nearly a year now. First of all, it gave us a lot of energy, and secondly, it gave the neighborhood in Batan al-Hawa in Silwan more beauty. Most importantly, it talks about the people’s suffering in Batan al-Hawa, about the current situation that we are going through, expressed in the form of paintings. The project talks about what the look in our eyes says and what is inside of us. Not only was Silwan impacted by this project, but also all of the visitors who come to Silwan to witness and try to understand the situation here. These paintings leave a big mark on them, a strong vision that will stay in the minds of everyone, old and young, and that is very important for us.

I think this project will make people understand more of what is happening – whether people come to Silwan and see everything up close or see everything from a distance. Hopefully, the project will lead to more people coming to visit and meet the people of Silwan. Before COVID-19 many people were coming to Batan al-Hawa to see the murals and hear about our situation. We want everyone to know that we are people who love life and want to live in peace – we want to live a flourishing life in our homes and neighborhood – and that our only wish is not to be deported from our homes.



Figure 5. “National Bird of Palestine,” designed by Susan Greene, mixed media. Image of sitting finch by Eric Norberg (USA). Photo by Kobi Wolf.

Susan Greene, director, Art Forces:

I have had the honor of working in Silwan, East Jerusalem for the past few years. In the fall of 2019, work began on “I Witness Silwan” in the neighborhood of Batan al-Hawa in Silwan. At the end of October, as I was working two stories above the ground on the finch mural, a tour led by the right-wing settler group, Ateret Cohanim, started gathering below. This settler organization is responsible, with full support of the Israeli government, for dispossessing Palestinians and moving Jewish settlers into the stolen property. I began filming the tour as they milled around the tour guide. Soon some of the participants noticed and began filming me. The tour started and the guide explained that the three-meter (9 foot) high birds that I was painting are “one of the symbols of Palestinian liberation, of freedom.” He says the birds are very beautiful and adds: “I’d say it’s beautiful in the way that Hitler’s paintings are beautiful. The painting is very aesthetic but we know what it really means.” The sixty tourists nodded solemnly and continued on down the street to have tea in a building that was confiscated from a Palestinian family and turned into a synagogue. In their wake, eight heavily armed Israeli border patrol took their places facing Palestinians who were socializing outside their homes, and waited to accompany the tour out of Batan al-Hawa.



Figure 6. “Eyes of Alex Nieto,” a Salvadoran-born American citizen killed in San Francisco, California, 2014,” vinyl print. Image by Josue Rojas (USA). Photo by Kobi Wolf. “Nieto died because a series of white men saw him as a menacing intruder in the place he had spent his whole life,” Rebecca Solnit, “Death by Gentrification: The Killing that Shamed San Francisco,” 21 March 2016, online at (theguardian.com) bit.ly/30PDLUv (accessed 8 June 2020).

Mohammad Salaymeh, project translator:

Living in Jerusalem as a Palestinian has always had its fair amount of frustration, confusion and feelings of alienation. I always have the feeling of things being built and made while people like me are excluded. Living in a well-to-do family, the few privileges that I had protected me from some forms of the occupation but not all of it.

Occupation and settlements never made sense, there is no logic behind them, no clear reason, nothing more than greed for land, mixed with racism and disregard for Palestinians. And confronting these things was always hard and more than a bit dangerous.

What is happening in Silwan is another example of the tragic fate of the Palestinian identity of Jerusalem, erased, demonized and considered the lesser identity of Jerusalem’s many identities. As a young man trying to decide what will he do with his life, taking part in something that stands up to these forces of injustice in a creative and beautiful, meaningful way has given me an opportunity to see my existence in this city flourish.



Figure 7. “Eyes of Hamad Moussa,” farmer from West Bank, Palestine. Image by Palestinian American artist John Halaka from series “Faces from Erased Places,” vinyl print. Photo by Kobi Wolf.

Silwan community member:

I would like to talk about the paintings that are being painted in Silwan. I think they talk and express something that is inside of us. The painting is about our suffering and adds to the beauty of Silwan.

Jadala Rajabi, Community Organizer, co-director of Madaa Center, Batan al-Hawa:

As for the murals project ... I think it has added a lot to Silwan, and also added a lot to the children – they are living through all of this frustration and suffering because of the settlers presence. The project has changed their lives and changed their way of thinking in this neighborhood. It has given them a new level of awareness. It has changed many things – the murals catch the eye of any visitor that comes or passes by. Susan and her helper have done a lot to this neighborhood and everyone is thankful to her – she also has given the hardships that the Palestinians of Silwan experience a new form of expression. It was a transformation in the neighborhood, and I hope we will continue this work and change the neighborhood even more for the better in the future.



Figure 8. “Eyes of John Berger,” art critic, painter and writer,” vinyl print. Photo by Kobi Wolf. Berger’s writing has shaped how many individuals see, analyze, and try to remake their world. Berger wrote frequently about Palestine in his late work.



Figure 9. “Eyes of Che,” Ernesto Guevara de la Serna, who played a major role in 1959 Cuban revolution, land reform and literacy, vinyl print. Photo by Kobi Wolf.



Figure 10. “Eyes of Rachel Corrie,” a student from Olympia, Washington, killed in 2003 by Israeli forces in Gaza as she peacefully protested the demolition of Palestinian homes, vinyl print by Denny Sternstein. Photo by Kobi Wolf.



Figure 12. “Dove and Olive Tree,” acrylic on concrete. Muralists: Laura Rosner, Jadala Rajabi, and Batan al-Hawa youth. Photo by Laura Rosner.

Laura Rosner (U.S.), Art Forces Team:

Working in Silwan for over half a year at this point, I've been filled with renewed hope that art has the capacity to facilitate change on a grassroots level.

I remember when I was asked to begin a mural across the street from the Batan al-Hawa mosque – a place where people come to gather throughout the day, to sit in prayer, to sit with God – seeing faith central to the life of the neighborhood. Collaborating, as for all of the paintings we create in Silwan, Jadallah and I manifested the idea of an olive tree with arms extended in prayer on either side of the wise, gnarled tree – a symbol of this land. Flying above the tree are doves – beautiful winged creatures flying for freedom, for peace. Together we painted this scene, later with the help of the older neighborhood girls, who grinned at the opportunity to contribute to the transformation of the streets of Silwan.

A few weeks later, after the mural across from the mosque was completed, I understood its importance on a deeper level. One morning after arriving in Batan al-Hawa, Jadallah and Zuhayr called me to their rooftop. They greeted me with the hospitality I'm consistently humbled by and motioned to the bird coops, where beautiful "hamam" of all colors emerged from the shadows. Jadallah had raised all of them, taking great care to ensure they would be healthy and sustained. The sun shined brightly above us and Zuhayr slowly placed a white dove into the hands of little Jude, his son. I was immediately overcome with gratitude to share this moment with the Rajabi family. That so much "*amal*" – hope – is nurtured on that rooftop felt emblematic for how much our world needs it, especially somewhere as politically charged as Jerusalem – a complicated but beautiful city.

Statements from children of Batan al-Hawa:

- Peace be upon you. We think that the murals made Silwan really, really beautiful.
- The murals are beautiful and we love them.
- They gave us a lot more space to have fun. Silwan is a beautiful place and is more beautiful with the drawings – Silwan is beautiful and will not be shaken by anything!
- The murals show that Silwan is a beautiful place full of creativity.
- Silwan has been creative and made itself more beautiful.



Figure 13. Youth painting stairwell leading to Madaa Creative Center.



Figure 14. “Eyes of Sigmund Freud,” Austrian Jewish founder of psychoanalysis, vinyl print. Photo by Kobi Wolf. Freud’s last work *Moses and Monotheism* (1939) grapples with origins of Jewish identity in part by claiming Moses was Egyptian. Edward Said, in his last work *Freud and the Non-European* (London: Verso, 2003), elaborates a vision of identity that is never whole or fixed but necessarily contains foreign elements at its core. Said finds that, “The complex layers of the past...have been eliminated by Israel.”



Figure 15. "Eyes on Um Nasser's House," Um Nasser and her family have been resisting eviction orders by Ateret Cohanim in Israeli courts for years. Muralists: Laura Rosner and grandchildren of Um Nasser. Photo by Kobi Wolf.



Figure 16. "Eyes of Um Nasser's Granddaughter". Located on the front of Um Nasser's house facing main street of Batan al Hawa. Muralists: Laura Rosner and youth of Batan al Hawa. Photo by Kobi Wolf.

Zuhayr Rajabi:

When I take a look at the internationals who come here and paint paintings like these – like the birds for our children – I tell myself these are people who understand and feel our suffering and sympathize with our situation. And because of that I wish that this project will keep happening – because it makes this place more bearable and helps life to keep going and be full of happiness for our children.



Susan Greene is an artist, clinical psychologist, and founding director of Art Forces, based in California, U.S. The “I Witness Silwan” project is partially funded by generous contributions from the Sam Mazza Foundation, Left Tilt Foundation, the Middle East Children’s Alliance, and A. Greenberg Foundation.

Endnotes

- 1 Achille Mbembé, trans. Libby Meintjes, “Necropolitics,” *Public Culture* 15, no. 1 (2003): 11, online at <http://www.muse.jhu.edu/article/39984> (accessed 6 June 2020).
- 2 Nicholas Mirzoeff, “Invisible Empire:

Visual Culture, Embodied Spectacle, and Abu Ghraib,” *Radical History Review* 95 (April 2006): 40, online at www.researchgate.net/publication/249880269 (accessed 6 June 2020).