

## **ADRIFT**

*Amanda Dowd, ANZSJA, IAAP*

*'Art does not reproduce what we see, rather it makes us see', Paul Klee.*



*Figure 1: Sislej Xhafa's work Barka is a boat made of hundreds of shoes owned by the migrants who arrived in Lampedusa in 2011. <sup>i</sup>*

The images which you will find here are creative responses by Syrian refugees and artists to the almost unimaginable plight of the many thousands of refugees displaced by the Syrian war. They are gestures made into the empty spaces of destroyed homes, communities and cities, temporary refugee camps and makeshift roadside dwellings, overcrowded buses and boats adrift on endless roads and inhospitable seas. They speak of the empty eyes of mothers and fathers who have lost loved children, wives and husbands and, for the time being, any sense of safety, purpose and future.

These images are a testament to both the inhumanity of war and the courage of the human spirit and all give voice to an experience and grief which is beyond words. Figures 2, 3, 4 and 11, 13 and 14 are examples of the work made by refugees who have found some sanctuary in the various camps in the Middle East (the names of the artists have been withheld by the UNHCR).<sup>ii</sup>



Figure 2



Figure 3

into an imaginative human place in which feeling and hope of recovery might be found again, even if momentarily. Relief in such circumstances may be fleeting but a thread, however flimsy, can help humans continue to put one foot in front of the other.

War and the transience of lives lived in refugee camps or on the move, negates the dignity of human life and is a severance of the link between people and their lands and histories. Such horrific experiences and memories are too real and, like the Medusa's head, they cannot be looked upon directly but must be approached indirectly via their reflection in a receptive space - the open eyes and ears of a compassionate other, a blank canvas, uncarved block of wood or lump of clay, a dancing ground or carefully gathered group of stones: feeling fashioned out of earth.

Before we can find words, it helps to find an image--or to make one--that can hold the experience for us until it becomes safe enough to feel the emotions associated with it. Only when we are safe enough to feel, are we able

to think about what has happened and find a place for it in mind and memory. In the finding and creating of images an opportunity arises that can potentially transform an empty inhumane space



Figure 4

The Syrian sculptor Nizar Ali Badr (Figures 5, 6, 7, 8, 12), uses stones gathered from Mount Saphon, known as Jebel al Agra, near Latkia, Syria to tell the stories of his countrymen and women. He describes a “moral human relationship” with his family of stones because, he says “they feel the misfortune of the poor which

is part of their land”. “These stones know how to scream and their voices are stronger than bullets.”<sup>iii</sup>



Figure 5



Figure 6



Figure 7

A way of being that makes sense in one place doesn't necessarily make sense in another because place itself provides the framework for all that it means to be a person situated in space and time. Places contribute to organising our minds as well as our lives and it is difficult to convey in words just how

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destabilising the experience of total loss of our place in the world's scheme can be.

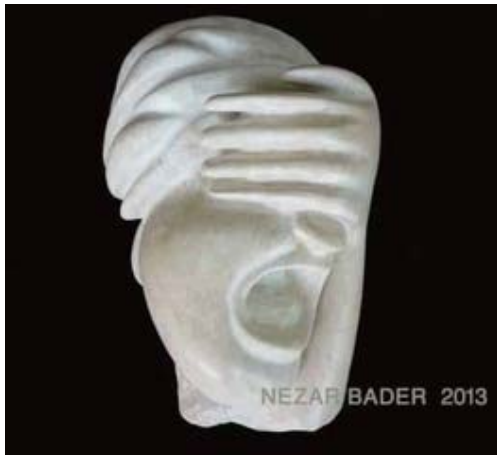


Figure 8

To 'be' a refugee is to be in a state of utter shock and loss of all that has been meaningful, familiar and valued: the sense of occupying a particular place and position in the world with its community of relationships, language and customs and cultural heritage is

shattered. This trauma is a radical rupture and loss of all that constitutes our sense of personal, spiritual and cultural identity. Displacement through war robs human beings of the very structures of life and leaves people unable to effect change in their situation. Life as it has been known unravels. Another carving by Syrian sculptor Nizar Ali Badr (Figure 8, photograph by Nezar Bader, 2013)) captures this state of frozen, unseeing terror which can only begin to be thought about, indirectly, via an image.

Eloquent expression is also given to this pain beyond words in 'Fade to Black', a short film by Amer Al barzawi.<sup>iv</sup> Described as a horror story told in one minute, the viewer is confronted in the changing face of a young Syrian actress, the speechless horror of the devastating change and loss in her country.



War of the kind that we are seeing in Syria is also an attack on memory as well as meaning and as we have seen elsewhere in the Middle East, the destruction of antiquities and sacred sites, the levelling of cities and the use of rape as weapons of war against cultural memory is another form of genocide. It is the anguish of such losses that is so movingly and shockingly depicted in these images.



Figure 9: From "Storeys" by Tammam Azzam, 180 x 235 cm, acrylic on canvas, 2015.<sup>v</sup>

"I believe that art can't save the country. ... But I believe at the same time that all kinds of culture, art or writing, cinema or photographs, can rebuild something in the future", exiled Syrian artist Tammam Azzam.

The Chinese artist Ai Weiwei responded to this crisis by transporting a white grand piano to a cold, rain-soaked refugee camp on the border between Greece and Macedonia. Here, Ai Weiwei offered a Syrian musician, Nour Alkhzam, a chance to play. Nour was trying to reach Germany to be with her husband and hadn't played the piano for three years. "I think it is very touching, what she did" he said. "It tells the world that art will overcome the war. The humanity, the people, the love for art and the understanding of art — human



emotions will overcome the politics and the war" and he called her playing "life itself."<sup>vi</sup>



Figure 10

By making a platform and covering it with plastic sheeting Ai Weiwei gestured towards the human soul and feeling and created a small, safe place in the midst of desolation. In that place the piano gave Nour Alkhazam an opportunity to reconnect with a part of herself left behind by war and chaos. Making music brings order to chaos and these two creative gestures towards remembering what it is that makes us human speak as loudly as the arrival of clean water, food and dry tents and blankets to grief stricken, cold, hungry homeless people.



When an open yet contained space is created for the expression of the human spirit and soul it becomes *temenos* – a sacred place into which experience which is either inexpressible in any other way or simply too distressing to either see or feel directly can be safely located. When the senses seem to refuse to take in the unspeakable because it cannot be processed it lodges in memory anyway.

One of the most traumatic images of the war to date has been the photograph of a three-year-old Syrian boy of Kurdish descent, Alan Kurdi, whose body was washed up on a Turkish beach. The photograph itself is almost impossible to look at because of the jolt of pain it brings to our sense of humanity, justice and feeling for this child and his experience; this painting allows the viewer just enough space to breathe and in so doing both Alan's death and the circumstances that brought him there can be witnessed and therefore remembered<sup>vii</sup>



Figure 11

The facilitation of the creative gesture by opening safe places where the voices of those dispossessed and traumatised by war are recognised and enabled to speak through their own paintings, poetry, dance, sculpture, song or film is an act of love. An antidote to hate and destruction.



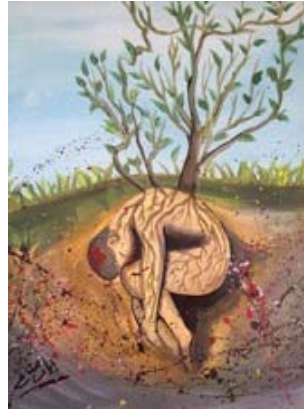
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The creative gesture, however it is made, is, as Ai Weiwei said, an expression of “life itself”. It offers a potential way back from a darkening world towards the restoration of memory and recovery of a sense of beauty and hope.



Figure 12

For those of us living in relative safety and security it is easy to forget, perhaps, how fundamental our relationship to familiar places is to our sense of safety, being and well-being. It is also easy to turn a blind eye to the tragic ease with which places can be destroyed whether by war, climate change, overuse and misuse and simple lack of care or lost contact with through displacement. As carriers of cultural memory, the devastation of place is our collective desolation.



Figures 13 and 14

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### Sources for images

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