

Charlotte Bank

Wandering Witness

Since the beginning of the Arab revolts, Mario Rizzi has been on a quest to bear witness to the changes the events have brought to the societies of the countries around the Mediterranean. His relentless searches have so far resulted in a body of work that through film and photography allows some unique insights into the lives of people who ordinarily only appear as anonymous numbers in statistics.

The film *Al Intithar* (The Waiting, 2013) follows a young widow in her efforts to build a home, however transitory, for her three children in the Zaatari refugee camp in Jordan. Rizzi traveled to the camp in the fall of 2012, shortly after its establishment and spent his days there during seven weeks. He got to know the protagonist, whose name, Ekhlās, we learn at the end of the film, and followed her in her daily chores as she strove to get her life back into shape. Time is an important element in Mario Rizzi's work, as is conversation. The time needed to reach the necessary level of confidentiality with the protagonists plays a central role in each of the artist's projects and adds a unique quality to them. He succeeds in establishing profound bonds and allows the simplicity of small gestures and everyday routines to enter the creative space. Rizzi is an attentive observer who captures intimate images, yet remains nonintrusive and discreet. It is characteristic of Rizzi's work that he succeeds in entering into worlds that would normally have remained inaccessible to a western (male) filmmaker. Thus, Ekhlās, the young widow from Homs whose husband was killed in an attack by the Syrian army and who was forced out of her familiar surroundings into a life of insecurity, allows Rizzi to film her cooking, cleaning, praying and dealing with bureaucracy. The film is not a classical documentary; it does not pretend to offer any explanations or comments. It offers so much more: it gives a human face to one of the most horrific conflicts of recent times, a conflict that since the film was made has

become daily news, but whose victims mostly remain strangely faceless. While life in Zaatari camp might seem to condemn her to a life of waiting, Ekhlās refuses to give in to passivity. She tries to turn the family's tent into something that resembles a home and starts a small business to sustain herself and her children.

Like *Al Intithar*, the film *Kauther* (2014) gives centrality to a woman. Kauther Ayari is an activist of the early days of the Tunisian revolution, a woman who, in defiance of the social conventions of her society and the undeniable danger of raising one's voice



against power, called President Ben Ali out for his crimes against the Tunisian population. Reflecting on her role as an activist, Kauther talks about her experiences of violence against the women of her family and how this influenced her to become a political activist. Since 2001, she has been fighting against poverty and for human, and in particular, women's rights. The initial hope that she shared with the crowds demonstrating against the president and his corrupt system were gone at the time of her conversation with Mario Rizzi. The goals of the revolution were betrayed by Islamists and members of the »old guard« who were re-installed in positions of power. For a woman like Kauther, what remains is the

hope that a second revolution is about to happen, one that will get rid of the system that keeps people in poverty. As to the limiting, patriarchal structures that insist on seeing women as weak creatures without agency, she seems less optimistic.

Both Ekhlās and Kauther are women who defy conventions of traditional Muslim societies by taking up roles normally reserved for men. In the case of Ekhlās it did not happen out of her own choice as it did with Kauther, but the courage and matter-of-factness with which they take up the challenges they are facing stand out as strong evidence against the usual clichéd mainstream representation of Arab and Muslim women.

Since the realization of the two films, the situation in many regions of Middle East has deteriorated dramatically. The massacre and mass-enslavement of the Yazidis stand out as one of the most horrifying examples of this descent into disaster. On August 3rd, 2014, Daesh, the self-proclaimed »Islamic State«, began its genocide against the Yazidis in Sinjar, Iraq. This date is written on numerous tents in the camps that were created to house those members of the community who succeeded in fleeing. It is also prominent on one of the photos of Mario Rizzi's photographic series August 3rd (2016). Invited by members of the Yazidi community, Rizzi visited a camp in Iraqi Kurdistan and photographed a number of women in their transitory homes. Some chose to look straight into the camera, others preferred to avert their gaze, silent witnesses of a hell the world was unable (or unwilling?) to prevent. We have all heard stories about the plight of Yazidi women and girls, but in Rizzi's photos these stories are not central. Like the above mentioned films, the photos are staged with a particular care, allowing the person to emerge with dignity and discretion.

The particular importance of bearing witness that drives Mario Rizzi's work has for the past twenty years brought him to share his time with many marginalized and threatened communities. Just as he decided to go to Bosnia as a volunteer in the 1990s, he decided to travel to the informal camp of Idomeni on the Greek-Macedonian border, where thousands of refugees remained stuck when several European countries closed their borders in 2016. Some of the photos

of the series Bare Lives (2017) are from this strange no-man's land, a space outside of time, a spot of land where life is halted and the days filled with anxious, yet hopeful waiting. A makeshift German flag next to an official Greek one shows the hoped-for end of the journey. For the moment, however, patience is needed, life is put on stand-by.

In her essay, *We Refugees*, a piece that was to become greatly influential and lead to later, more elaborate texts, Hannah Arendt made an attempt to put into words some of the experiences of being a refugee. She also reflected upon the effects discrimination had on people and societies who were practicing it: »The comity of European peoples went to pieces when, and because, it allowed its weakest member to be excluded and persecuted«. Today, we might say that the last remains of a European comity have gone to pieces as we are allowing people to drown in European waters and perish at our borders. Mario Rizzi's work offers us a mirror in which to discover ourselves in others. In the way he combines engagement, activism and a refined aesthetic that is far from any simplistic, journalistic gaze, he helps us connect with people who, while having lost everything, refuse to give in to desperation and seem to start each day with a fresh hope.

In times where right-wing, populist parties are widely gaining in popularity, we need this urgently. For displaced people, one question seems to always linger at the back of their minds: »Was werden sie morgen verlangen?«, »What will they demand of us tomorrow?« This question of the refugees in Elfriede Jelinek's piece *Die Schutzbefohlenen* sums up the entire tragic vulnerability of the refugee, of not knowing what tomorrow will bring, of new demands that decide who is invited in and who is left out. Art can help remind us of this and offer a vehicle to remain connected against the dehumanizing forces that are trying to tear our societies apart.

Charlotte Bank is an art historian and independent curator. Her work is focused on modern and contemporary artistic practice from the Middle East with a special emphasis on the independent contemporary art scene since 2000 in its global context.