

Media Bias toward the Middle East



Rula Halawani
Untitled VI, 2002
From "Negative Incursions" series



Rula Halawani
Untitled XIII, 2002
From "Negative Incursions" series

Introduction

Observation Activity:

1. Look silently at the two photographs for at least 45 seconds.
2. Write down 10 observations.
 - 1.
 - 2.
 - 3.
 - 4.
 - 5.
 - 6.
 - 7.
 - 8.
 - 9.
 - 10.
3. Pair up with a partner and share your observations. How many observations did you share? How many were unique?
4. Again look silently at the photographs. Turn back to your partner and together come up with 10 new observations. Was it challenging to come up with 10 new observations as a pair? Why or why not?

Reasoning Activity:

1. Look again at the photographs.
2. What was your initial reaction to the photographs?
3. Make a claim about what is going on in the two pictures. Support your claim (e.g. provide evidence from the picture; share relevant personal experience or background knowledge).
4. What message do you think the artist is trying to convey? Is there anything specific to which the artist is alluding, historically or culturally?
5. Write down and share out at least three questions you still have about the photographs.
6. Consider where you might find answers to your questions.

CONTEXT OF THE PHOTOGRAPHS

Rula Halawani is a Palestinian artist and a native of East Jerusalem. She began her career seeking to capture the difficulties of living under a prolonged political conflict. Her earlier works show the different aspects of this political reality, from attempting to perform the mundane everyday tasks under a military occupation to the cyclical onset of violence in Palestinian neighborhoods. Her “Negative Incursions” series documents the Israeli incursion on the West Bank in March 2002. The Israeli incursion, known as “Operation Defensive Shield,” began with military operations in six of the largest cities of the West Bank, and much of the fighting occurred in areas that were densely populated by civilians.

She explains her experience as follows:

“Ten years ago when the peace process first started, I like many other Palestinians was ready to give peace a chance. As the peace process developed, the events that followed filled me with worry: the worry of losing my city, Jerusalem, and the right of exiled Palestinians to return to their homeland. The days went by and in my eyes things only got worse: more of the land was taken; more Israeli settlements appeared on Palestinian land, more killings.

On the 28th of March 2002 I was in Ramallah when the major Israeli incursion happened, I was shocked; everything around me looked so different. Every street and square I visited was dark and empty; no one was in the streets that day except the Israeli army and its tanks. I felt depressed and cold. The only Palestinian I met on the road that day was an old man. He was shot dead. I never knew his name, but I had seen him walking around those same streets before. That night I could not take away his face from my memory, and many questions without answers rushed inside my head. It was that night that my hopes for peace died.” –Rula Halawani

Halawani deliberately uses the negatives of the photographs she took during this incursion to express her disillusionment and negativity toward the political peace process as well as criticize the inadequacy of media coverage of Palestinian suffering. The thick black border around each photograph imitates the shape of a television screen, conveying Halawani’s criticism of media coverage of the incursion, namely the lack of attention toward its impact on Palestinian civilians.

In *Untitled VI*, a military tank roams around the street as civilians are positioned on the ground. The negative of the image highlights the civilian neighborhood in the background. In *Untitled XIII*, a woman stands amidst the remains of her home, screaming at the photographer that her daughter was killed during the incursion. Halawani’s photographs powerfully address the experience of destruction and displacement during the Israeli incursion and the lack of attention the media gave to the suffering of Palestinian civilians who were caught in the middle.

After Context is Provided

Perspective Activity:

1. After understanding the context, revisit the photographs. Look at them again for at least 45 seconds.
2. Are there additional aspects of the photographs that you didn't notice before? If so, what are they?
3. Did your thoughts on the two photographs change after considering its context? How?
4. How might people with experiences similar to those of the subject respond to this image? Why? What might they wonder about?

5. Imagine yourself in the shoes of a figure in the previous photograph. Describe the experience from your point of view.

i. What can you perceive (feel, taste, hear, smell, see)?

ii. What do you believe?

iii. What do you care about?



Nermine Hammam
The Break, 2011
From "Cairo Year One: Upekkha" series

Introduction

Observation Activity:

1. Look silently at the photograph for at least 45 seconds.
2. Write down 10 observations.
 - 1.
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 - 10.
3. Pair up with a partner and share your observations. How many observations did you share? How many were unique?
4. Again look silently at the photographs. Turn back to your partner and together come up with 10 new observations. Was it challenging to come up with 10 new observations as a pair? Why or why not?

Reasoning Activity:

1. Look again at the photograph.
2. What was your initial reaction to the photograph?
3. Make a claim about what is going on in this picture. Support your claim (e.g. provide evidence from the picture; share relevant personal experience or background knowledge).
- 3.
4. What message do you think the artist is trying to convey? Is there anything specific to which the artist is alluding, historically or culturally?
5. Write down and share out at least three questions you still have about the photograph.

6. Consider where you might find answers to your questions.

CONTEXT OF THE PHOTOGRAPH

Nermine Hammam is a Cairo-based photographer who was born in Egypt and studied film at New York University. Her “Upekkha” series consists of photographs Hammam took during the 18-day Egyptian uprising in January 2011 at Cairo’s Tahrir Square. Many of the photographs in the series focus on the Egyptian army that was deployed at Tahrir Square to disperse the protesters and maintain order.

As Hammam explains, “I have thousands of images from the square, but what really caught my eye was the complete bewilderment of these teenage boys in uniform, who didn’t know whether they were there to protect the revolution or not. They genuinely look like they’re dressing up, playing at being soldiers. It’s fascinating and appalling at the same time.”

The title of the series, “Upekkha” refers to the Buddhist concept of equanimity, which is a common theme in her photographs. Hammam embeds the photos of soldiers within paradisiacal sceneries of candy-colored postcards from her personal collection. She explains her reason for changing the background, “the point is that I removed the message from being specifically Egyptian by changing the backdrops. It’s about how we see the world and the young people we ask to fight our conflicts for us.”

Hammam’s “Upekkha” series not only humanizes the soldiers and gives viewers a different perspective on the Egyptian uprising but also makes a statement about the media’s coverage and reactions to the uprising outside of Egypt. Her work reveals what most people outside Egypt wouldn’t see and recognize, which is the inexperienced and confused youth that exist beneath the military uniforms, while also contrasting romanticized conceptions of the Arab spring with its less glamorous realities.

After Context is Provided

Perspective Activity:

1. After understanding the context, revisit the photograph. Look at it again for at least 30 seconds.
2. Are there additional aspects of the photograph that you didn't notice before? If so, what are they?
3. Did your thoughts on the photograph change after considering its context? How?
4. How might people of different cultures or religious backgrounds react to this image? Why? What might they wonder about?
5. How might people with experiences or backgrounds similar to those of the subject respond to this image? Why? What might they wonder about?

6. Imagine yourself in the shoes of a figure in the photograph. Describe the experience from your point of view.

i. What can you perceive (feel, taste, hear, smell, see)?

ii. What do you believe?

iii. What do you care about?



Nermine Hammam
Dreamland I, 2011
From "Cairo Year One: Upekkha" series

Observation and Perspective Activity:

1. Look silently at the photograph for at least 30 seconds.
2. Discuss with a partner what you think is going on in this picture. Support your claim (e.g. provide evidence from the picture; share relevant personal experience or background knowledge).
3. How does your initial reaction to this photograph compare to your initial reaction to Nermine Hammam's previous work?
4. What message do you think Hammam is trying to convey?
5. Write down and share out at least three questions you have about this photograph.



Jananne Al-Ani
Aerial I, 2011
Production still from *Shadow Sites II*

Introduction

Observation Activity:

1. Look silently at this photograph for at least 45 seconds.
2. Write down 10 observations.
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3. Pair up with a partner and share your observations. How many observations did you share? How many were unique?
4. Again look silently at the photograph. Turn back to your partner and together come up with 10 new observations. Was it challenging to come up with 10 new observations as a pair? Why or why not?

Reasoning Activity:

1. Look again at the photograph.
2. What was your initial reaction to the photograph?
3. Make a claim about what is going on in this picture. Support your claim (e.g. provide evidence from the picture; share relevant personal experience or background knowledge).
- 3.
4. What message do you think the artist is trying to convey? Is there anything specific to which the artist is alluding, historically or culturally?
5. Write down and share out at least three questions you still have about the photographs.

6. Consider where you might find answers to your questions.

CONTEXT OF THE PHOTOGRAPH

Jananne Al-Ani is an Iraqi-born, London-based artist whose work engages the landscapes, archeology and visual representation of the Middle East. Aerial photography was developed during World War I and was the basis for the creation of complex aerial reconnaissance and satellite navigation devices, which were used heavily by the U.S. military in the 1991 Desert Storm campaign and the 2003 Gulf War in Iraq. Al-Ani utilizes the vantage point of such aerial photography missions but alters the viewpoint of the ground surveyed.

Her film *Shadow Sites II* consists of aerial photographs of desert landscapes with barely discernible man-made structures seen at a distance. The distant wide-angle viewpoint of aerial footage contrasts sharply with the view that might otherwise be had from the ground. This work challenges the representation of the land and space of the Middle East in the media. Her approach is perhaps a subtle comment on the differences between media-produced images of the Middle East, composed of brief sound bites and headlines, and intimate knowledge only accessible through lived experiences.

As Al-Ani explains, “The prominent role of digital technology in the 1991 Desert Storm campaign was a watershed in the history of warfare and changed the way war was to be seen in the future. Within hours of the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait, the Western media machine had mobilized its forces and set its sights firmly on the region. Through the portrayal of the population, the culture and, crucially, the landscape of the Middle East, it revealed that the nineteenth-century Orientalist stereotype of the Arab and the desert remained firmly embedded in Western consciousness. The site of the war was shown to be a desert, a place with no history and no population—an empty space, a blank canvas.” –Jananne Al-Ani

Her work also highlights the absence of civilians in the media’s representation of the region during times of war. For Al-Ani, “This work explores the disappearance of the body in the landscapes of the Middle East by examining what happens to the evidence of atrocity and genocide and how it affects our understanding of the often beautiful landscapes into which the bodies of victims disappear.”

After Context is Provided

Perspective Activity:

1. After understanding the context, revisit the photograph. Look at it again for at least 30 seconds.
2. Are there additional aspects of the photograph that you didn't notice before? If so, what are they?
3. Did your thoughts on the photograph change after considering its context? How?
4. How might people react to this image in the context of a museum setting? In the context of a newspaper or news program? How are the reactions different? Similar?

6. Imagine yourself on the ground in this image while a plane flies overhead. Describe the experience from your point of view.

i. What can you perceive (feel, taste, hear, smell, see)?

ii. What do you believe?

iii. What do you care about?

Post-Lesson

Reflection Activity:

1. Consider how your assumptions and opinions have changed through the course of this lesson. Complete the following sentence stems:

I used to think_____.

but now I think_____.

2. If your assumptions and opinions have not changed, explain how the photographs supported opinions you may have already had.

Concluding Questions:

1. Do you think stereotypes of the Middle East influence the content and presentation of information on the region provided by major U.S. news sources? If so, how? If not, why not?
2. How do you think local Arab news coverage of events in the Middle East compares with Western news coverage? What similarities and differences might exist?
3. What factors do you believe influence which events and/or places in the Middle East receive coverage in news media on a given day? How do you think news producers choose what is worthy of coverage?