Life and War in the Middle East

Gohar Dashti

Untitled #5, 2008
From “Today’s Life and War” series
Introduction

Observation Activity:

1. Look silently at the photograph for at least 30 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 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).

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

**CONTEXT OF THE PHOTOGRAPH**

Dashti is an Iranian artist who grew up during the Iran-Iraq War, lasting from September 1980 to August 1988. Growing up in a town near the Iran-Iraq border, Dashti experienced the conflict on a personal level and as an everyday affair. In her series "Today’s Life and War," Dashti stages photographs that address the effects of the war on civilians and explores the impact of the conflict on the daily lives of Iranians and Iraqis.

As Dashti explains herself,

“The series “Today’s Life and War” emerged from my experiences during the eight year Iran-Iraq War. This conflict has had a strong symbolic influence on the emotional life of my generation. Although we may be safe within the walls of our homes, the war continues to reach us through newspapers, television and the Internet.

“This body of work represents war and its legacy, the ways in which it permeates all aspects of contemporary society. I capture moments that reference the ongoing duality of life and war without precluding hope. In a fictionalized battlefield, I show a couple in a series of everyday activities: eating breakfast, watching television, and celebrating their wedding. Though they do not visibly express emotion, the man and woman embody the power of perseverance, determination, and survival.” —Gohar Dashti

In *Untitled #5*, a newly married couple sits in the shell of an abandoned car. The image depicts a celebration of unity amidst symbols of discordance.
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. War greatly impacted Gohar Dashti’s life. Can you think of an event that impacted your life? In what ways did it change your world view?

5. How might people with experiences or backgrounds similar to those of the artist respond to this image? Why? What might they wonder about?

6. When you see someone who looks different than you, what is your initial reaction?
7. 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?
Shadi Ghadirian

_Nil, Nil #1, 2008_
From “Nil, Nil” series

Introduction
Observation Activity:

1. Look silently at the photograph for at least 30 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 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; sharing 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 this photograph.
Shadi Ghadirian is an Iranian photographer who lives and works in Tehran. Similar to Gohar Dashti, Ghadirian grew up in Iran during the Iran-Iraq war. The war influenced her work as she recounts the unknown stories of war experienced by Iranian society. While the war ended decades ago, her photography narrates the wartime stories and anxiety that permeated in the consciousness of Iranians and Iraqis. In her series “Nil, Nil,” Ghadirian humanizes the daily experiences of war and explores the impact of war on not just those on the battlefield but also those waiting at home for their loved ones to return.

As Ghadirian explains, “In the ‘Nil, Nil’ series you can see another point of view on war. In the image with the pumps, I want to show everyday life and war simultaneously. I wanted to show how war is reflected inside the home—what happens to the other members of the family who stayed at home and are now waiting. I also wanted to show what life is like when somebody comes back from war, and that many things change after war.” –Shadi Ghadirian

In Nil, Nil #1, Ghadirian juxtaposes a pair of shiny red heels with a pair of dusty combat boots. The red heels starkly contrast the muted colors of the boots with the exception of bright red streak of blood. The combat boots are placed in a domestic space, symbolizing war’s intrusion in to the homes and private lives of ordinary civilians. Ghadirian’s photograph brings to the forefront the experiences of millions of women at home during the war by presenting unaccounted for stories of loss and waiting.

By juxtaposing military imagery with stereotypically feminine objects, Ghadirian's photographs consider the impact of war on domestic life. She indirectly questions the logic of war by presenting the untold consequences whose effects penetrate every realm of society, including the home.
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. When you see someone who looks different than you, what is your initial reaction?

7. Imagine yourself in the shoes 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?
After your reflections on the previous work of Shadi Ghadirian, consider the following photograph, also part of her series “Nil, Nil:”

Shadi Ghadirian

*Nil, Nil #10, 2008*

From “Nil, Nil” 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 Shadi Ghadirian’s previous work?

4. Write down and share out at least three questions you have about this photograph.
Tanya Habjouqa
Untitled, 2009
From “Women of Gaza” series
Introduction

Observation Activity:

1. Look silently at the photograph for at least 30 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 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).

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 this photograph.

6. Consider where you might find answers to your questions.
Tanya Habjouqa is a Jordanian-born photographer, raised in Texas, who now lives in East Jerusalem. Married to a Palestinian lawyer, Habjouqa’s photography focuses on the experiences of Palestinians in the West Bank and Gaza. Instead of focusing on the suffering and hardship experienced by Palestinians in the Israeli-controlled West Bank and Hamas-controlled Gaza, Habjouqa focuses her work on the simple pleasures of life. As she explains, “I am in awe of the Palestinians for not only surviving but actually enjoying their lives in the face of the difficulties of their daily life and their political situation.”

Habjouqa’s series “Women of Gaza” specifically explores the lives of women in Gaza affected by Israeli blockade of the territory and restrictions under the Hamas government. “I explored how their lives were more broadly affected by their environment. How were women able to continue with their dreams, day to day activities, work, and care of their families in this very tense environment where their husbands could not find work, where people were still left with post-traumatic stress, where the idea of leaving was impossible? How were they living?” says Habjouqa. The photographs celebrate modest pleasures, such as a picnic on the beach, an aerobics class, or a boat ride on the Mediterranean, and portray the bright side of their not-always-so bright lives.

The description of the photograph reads, “A family in Gaza City enjoys a picnic on the beach, one of the few options left to most families in Gaza unable to escape the siege.” The photograph depicts an aspect of life in Gaza often overlooked by stereotypical news and media representations of Gaza and the larger occupied Palestinian territories. It shows a scene of rest, leisure and community, contrasting sharply with the narratives of suffering and devastation more commonly associated with the region. The image also draws attention to the devastating contradiction between the open ocean and vast skies shown in this scene of Gaza and the political realities of a military blockade that restricts freedom of movement and limits the possibility of leaving.

Tanya Habjouqa’s photography presents a multi-dimensional and nuanced image of Gaza and the daily realities of living in a region of conflict. Her work provides a view of humanity’s capacity to celebrate the simple pleasures of life in the face of difficult circumstances.
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 subjects respond to this image? Why? What might they wonder about?
6. When you see someone who looks different than you, what is your initial reaction?

7. Imagine yourself in the shoes of one 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?
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. What effects do you believe war, or military conflict, has beyond direct destruction or casualties on the broader society of a country across generations?

2. Did these photographs’ recounting of the untold effects of war on domestic life change your understanding of the consequences of war?
3. Tanya Habjouqa’s photograph presents a humanizing image of simple pleasures of life in Gaza that are otherwise rarely depicted in the media. Why do you think these types of humanizing images are not commonly shown in the media? What effect do you believe this has on viewers?

4. How do you think the impacts of war on civilian society influences the public discourse in the United States about war?

5. The photographs discussed were created by women commenting on the effects of war on domestic life. What significance do you think the female perspective might have on the specific aspects of war represented in these photographs?