

The Possibility of Wealth: On Ron Amir's Art of Life

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For more than a decade now Ron Amir has been photographing the Arab village of Jisr al-Zarqa whose inhabitants are outcasts from both the Israeli-Arab and the Israeli-Jewish population. For many observers, Jisr represents one of the most impoverished living environments in Israel due to the complex history of its constitution and to the displaced status of its residents. While Amir spent many years in the village performing different roles (teacher, wedding and special events photographer, artist) and taking countless photographs, in none of these did he "represent" the village. This may sound paradoxical but in fact marks Amir's unique form of practice through which the village exists not as a "fixed," pre-existing sociological and anthropological entity that he "documents," but precisely as a living and open site of inventive exchanges, correspondences, and improvisations within which his photographs circulate like any other object. This dynamic and contingent system of exchange appears in the works as pertaining to life's constraints and difficulties as much as to art's pleasures and freedoms.

The power of Amir's work lies in the way that it combines the art of the poor, the public art of the ceremonial photographer and that of great artists into a vibrating sensual mosaic of changing lights, bright colors, and tactile textures and surfaces. The aesthetic rewards his images offer thus reside not in the fact that he photographs the "misery of the world" but, rather, in his insistence on its wealth. And it is an egalitarian form of wealth, one that, as Jacques Rancière argues, "everyone at all can become master of: that of catching the splendor of a reflection of light, but also of being able to speak in a way that is commensurate with one's fate."¹ In this regard, the aesthetic power of the photographs is

inseparable from their political one, and consists in the proposition, eloquently formulated by Antonio Negri in his *Time for Revolution*, that "poverty is the opposite of wealth because it is the singular possibility of all wealth."² It is the aesthetic and political possibility of wealth for all that forms the heart of Amir's project.

Improvised Territories

Consider *At Anisa's* (2010) (p. 129) in which an open closet appears packed with mattresses, blankets, carpets, pillows, fabrics and clothes. Anisa's entire house, it seems, is packed into a single closet because there is simply not enough room for all the necessary domestic utensils in her minuscule apartment, so that living space must be repurposed and given multiple functions. Yet rather than following the familiar photographic iconography of poverty, which emphasizes material scarcity (a well-known example is Walker Evans' 1936 famous photograph of the Field house kitchen wall in *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*), Amir's image focuses on abundance and playfulness, on the almost comic encounter between the softness and malleability of the crammed objects and the closet's rectangular rigidity.

Moreover, the over-stuffed closet is photographed frontally, like a "scientific" exhibit or ethnographic artifact, bringing to mind well-known typological photographic projects, like those of Bernd and Hilla Becher, which aim to offer a formal classification and ordering of material objects and environments. In Amir's photograph, however, the organizing gaze is turned toward that which resists order and instead offers the pleasures of an overflowing plenitude of decorative

patterns and colorful arrangements of different textiles. The photograph thus stages a tension between the static position of the large-format camera, which imposes compositional unity and balance, and the material and concrete existence of things "in the world" which rebel against this form of photographic abstraction.

The same motivation also underlines the two triptychs, *Eid al-Fitr Prayer #1 and #2* (2007) (pp. 90, 92), which were taken before and during the morning prayer that concludes the Ramadan fast. Since Jisr's two mosques are too small to accommodate the large audience that attends this important religious event, the prayer is held in the village's main basketball court, which is turned into an improvised mosque: carpets are laid out on the ground and an audio amplification system is installed. Amir photographed the two triptychs within minutes of each other. In the first image, the male worshipers have just begun to gather in the court and are shown sitting on the colorful carpets, waiting for the prayer to begin, while in the second the court is filled to capacity, the prayer has begun, and everyone is standing. Yet the most significant difference between the two triptychs is not the position of the subjects but the changing effect of the light. Whereas in the early work the court is shaded, in the later image the sun has risen slightly, illuminating parts of the scene with a beautiful early morning glow that radiates off the worshipers' heads and transforms the functional court, with its massive exposed concrete columns, into a spectacular communal hall. Amir's photograph thus creates a visual expression of the grandeur of this event and of its powerful communality despite and perhaps because of the compromised material conditions that force it to take place outdoors, in the open air, rather than in a designated building.

These triptychs, in their simultaneous broad view and close focus on details (the momentary movements and expressions of the worshipers), indicate that, as Rancière argued, everyone can become a master of "catching the

splendor of a reflection of light": the privileged worshiper who can attend a proper mosque and the one who has been deprived of this right. Thus, the aesthetic operations Amir's works perform consist not simply in beautification but in an insistence on the shared capacities to enjoy the unexpected and fleeting pleasures life offers.

Acts of Exchange

Yet it is not merely the passive contemplation of life's natural beauty that is celebrated in Amir's photographs, but also the active capacity to create images and forms of representation that are commensurate with one's life experiences. It is the agency and inventiveness of the inhabitants of Jisr that forms the central subject of Amir's work, the way in which they transform their living environments, as for example in the triptych *If You Will It, It Is No Dream* (2010–2013) (p. 120), taken in a private garage. The central image shows the silhouette of a tiger, made with a lighter, on the ceiling of the garage, and the image to its right depicts a peeling wall with an open window, an exposed electricity box, and the remains of what appears like a wooden cupboard. These are surrounded with arabesque-like pencil and charcoal graffiti and a large heart-shaped gash in the wall. The most surprising element on this wall is the inscription of the famous Zionist statement by Theodor Herzl, the founder of the state of Israel, "If you will it, it is no dream," which Amir chose as the triptych's ironic title. In another captivating image, *Blue Wall* (2011) (p. 123), a bluish exterior wall with a closed window and white painterly expressive stains appears illuminated in a way that emphasizes the different textures of its multi-layered surface.

These walls are photographed frontally in a way that sometimes blurs their architectural boundaries and turns them into abstract or dislocated objects. At the same time, the tight framing also results in an intensely

tactile, sensual, and rich materiality. That is, the focus on light, color, textures and surfaces registers not only the material conditions of the living environments but also the active presence of their residents, who are not seen. The walls function as indexical traces of the activities of those who use these places and possess the freedom to shape, decorate and mark them, and even to appropriate a Zionist motto, thereby altering its meaning. While the graffiti mark is often associated with anonymity and violation, here it is linked to a particular form of ingenuity, one that exploits the limited material resources available in Jisr.

For some in Jisr, creating an image or a representation that is commensurate with their life experiences means marking the body itself and not just the space surrounding it. In two striking images, *Ship* (2010) (p. 113) and *Nehaya, Bidaya, and Aya* (2009) (p. 122), Amir offers extreme close-ups of tattoos on the bodies of Jisr residents who had spent time in incarceration. In *Nehaya*, the face of the ex-prisoner's wife, her name, and the names of his two daughters are inscribed in Arabic on his abdomen. These tattoos are marks of love but also of particular forms of exchange. They were made within the prison, in return for cigarettes, by Russian inmates using improvised instruments. The tattoos are therefore complex signs, as on the one hand they are recognized by Jisr's inhabitants and mark their bearer as "criminal," yet on the other hand they are irreducibly personal (and therefore not "readable" or exchangeable). As indexical marks, in other words, the tattoos point to an enforced form of experience, yet they also register the individual's resistance, in both body and mind, to this experience through his capacity to remember and manifest his loved ones even in their absence.

Ship points to two acts of exchange: the one, a photograph depicting a tattoo, and the other – the frame that encloses it, made in prison using wrappings of "Elite" black coffee. The frame was given to Amir by a friend

in exchange for photographs Amir took of his family. This photograph brings to mind a recent project, *Time Currency* (2006–10) by the Mexican artist José Antonio Vega Macotela, in which the artist asked inmates to perform various activities, like mapping their cells, mapping scars or tattoos on their body, and recording prison sounds, in exchange for performing certain tasks for them outside the prison (visiting a wife or son, tracing someone, attending a religious event, etc.). At a certain point, the prisoners started making what they called "survival art," and when Macotela sent them his art books for inspiration, they shredded them and used the shreds to make colorful bags that bear a distinct resemblance to the prison-made frame given to Amir.

Macotela's project and Amir's photographs point to creativity and agency as a possible response to systems governed by surveillance and control. In Amir's case, it is the photographs themselves that become currencies, as he has always, since his first series of Jisr photographs in 2002, depicting families on Jisr's beach, handed over the photographs to the photographed subjects. This act of exchange enabled him to enter the homes of those photographed in the first series and take his second series of photographs in Jisr, this time of families in their private domestic space. In one such photograph, *Yusuf* (2002) (p. 69), a young man, is seen lying on a bed next to a dresser; above the dresser hangs a mirror to which are affixed Amir's color photographs alongside old black-and-white family photos. Amir's photographs of the family become an integral part of the décor in this domestic space, which is filled with images and objects that are precisely commensurate with the life experience and history of its inhabitants.

Amir's photographs partake in a unique circulation of objects and images. They are both the result of an encounter enabled by the act of photographing and the condition that allows for the continuation and proliferation of this long-term relationship with

the residents of Jisr. They are taken, displayed, used and exchanged as part of a "barter" economy that evolves out of the material conditions and concrete living experiences of Jisr's inhabitants – conditions and experiences that generate not an aesthetic of victimhood and dependency, but quite the contrary: an ingenious and original art of life.

Curious Tableaus

Beside registering a shared right to enjoy beauty and a capacity to create representations, some of Amir's striking images show a passion for collecting and displaying diverse cultural and natural objects. Consider *On the Shore of the Sea of Galilee* (2008) (p. 109), in which a man is seen knitting a fishing net in a room packed with pictures, musical instruments, sculptures, miniature models of ships, rugs, stuffed animals, and fishing materials. In its tonality and in the position of a man completely absorbed in his work, the picture immediately evokes Jeff Wall's *After "Invisible Man" by Ralph Ellison, the Prologue* (1999–2001) (p. 14). Wall created this image based on a literary description of the home of a nameless black narrator who claims to be invisible to white people. The man describes his home as a "hole" in the basement of a building, which is nonetheless bright thanks to the hundreds of light bulbs lining the ceiling.

Since Wall's photograph was meticulously built and composed over many months of preparation to create a scene that conforms to the textual description, it clearly resembles a staged tableau. In Amir's case, the scene was not staged and the objects displayed were collected not by an art-director but by Khaled, the man depicted in the photograph, who accumulated this personal collection over a lifetime and for whom each object carries special meaning. Yet this in no way suggests that Amir's work is "documentary" because it deals with the "real" whereas

Wall's work is "staged" because it is based on a fictional description. In fact, both works mobilize the tableau form in order to create an image that is carefully composed, but while Wall uses it in a painterly way, to evoke the long tradition of Western pictorial conventions, Amir's motivation is to trigger, as Jean-François Chevrier states in his important text on the recent reappearance of the tableau in contemporary art, "a thinking based on fragments, openness, and contradiction, not the utopia of a comprehensive or systematic order."³ In other words, while Wall's work emphasizes pictorial unity and coherence (a clear division into foreground, middle ground and back ground) regardless of the cluttered room he has created, Amir's work conveys the sense of an inherent disorder and temporal disjuncture not because of the arrangement of the objects in space but because of their diverse and heterogeneous origins and unclear classificatory status.

Amir's photograph turns Khaled's living room into a "cabinet of curiosities," those sixteen-century and seventeen-century European rooms that displayed diverse objects such as shells, fossils, minerals, preserved animals in jars, as well as books, maps, and ethnographic and art objects. The emphasis was on the irregular, the exceptional and the strange rather than the exemplary and ideal, as would be displayed in museums. Perhaps the most surprising or displaced object in this image, which also gives it its title, is a poster, hanging on the lower back wall, of an exhibition of Reuven Rubin's picturesque and naïve landscape paintings at the Israel Museum. The painting depicted in the poster shows the road leading to the Sea of Galilee, and while this maritime imagery does appear in some sense to "belong" in Khaled's space, still, as a familiar Zionist icon Rubin's image seems out of place in the room. Amir's work points to and partakes in the contingencies, irregularities, and contradictions of lived spaces, suggesting, precisely as Chevrier stated, an experience of fragments and resistance to semantic closure and order.

On the Shore of the Sea of Galilee forms part of a series of interiors by Amir that include photographs of makeshift fishing shacks along Jisr's beach. These interiors all display a unique form of heterogeneity. In *At Hamdan's* (2006) (p. 80), for example, the space looks on the one hand private and domestic, with the made bed, lamp, and dresser on the right side of the image, and on the other public and functional, with the fishing nets, plastic containers, and lifebuoy on the left. In *At Khalil's* (2006) (p. 81), the various pictures hanging on the wall form a salon-like display, showing a mix of family, official events and tourist photographs, texts from the Qur'an, and newspaper clippings. In a prominent place on the back wall hangs a black-and-white photographic portrait of Dib al-Ali, Jisr's first *mukhtar* and a mythological founding figure whose portrait is ubiquitous on the village walls. The portrait that hangs in *At Khalil's* was painted over, giving it the appearance of a hybrid between a painting and a photograph.

One of the most unusual interiors Amir has photographed is of an improvised living space, essentially a den, in *At Skander's* (2010) (p. 83). The photograph is taken from an oblique position that emphasizes the low ceiling and the narrow walls, suggesting a cave with a window to the outside. But at the same time it is a "home" that communicates established comfort through the presence of a bed, a night table, curtains, a stereo, wall decorations, and a carpet on the wall. In this case, it is the touristy decorations that convey a certain air of bourgeois domestic respectability that seem completely out of place in the cramped space: the tropical plastic flowers, the Japanese-style fan, and a grid of old-fashioned black-and-white tourist photographs from Singapore. How did these objects get there? Amir's photographs of interiors constantly challenge the viewer's expectations and assumptions by framing surprising and often incongruous scenes of abundance and playfulness, thereby resisting the canonical and tiresome iconography of poverty and scarcity.

Amir's photographic practice consists not in "documenting" Jisr as an emblem of impoverishment, nor in staging aestheticized still-life tableaux out of its limited material conditions. Rather, it involves framing and composing "curious tableaux" that emphasize the shared inventive capacity to restructure a space, form an image, and decorate a living environment in a way that is commensurate with one's life experiences. His is an art of life that registers acts of exchange and communal affiliation within contingent arrangements of colors, textures and surfaces; the kind of art that acquires its force and justification from an aesthetic and political demand for material and perceptual wealth for all.

- 1 Rancière's comment was made in relation to the films of the Portuguese director Pedro Costa. See his "The Politics of Pedro Costa," available online at <http://www.b-books.de/strasz/dffb/ranciere-costa.pdf>
- 2 Antonio Negri, *Time for Revolution*, trans. Matteo Mandarini (London and New York: Continuum, 2005), 190.
- 3 Jean-François Chevrier, "The Adventures of the Picture Form in the History of Photography," in *The Last Picture Show*, ed. Douglas Fogle (Minneapolis and Los Angeles: Walker Art Center and UCLA Hammer Museum, 2003-4), 116.