

## **Vitrined Parks, picnics and reclaiming the city** **Saba Innab's intervention at Makan**

Conversations around citizenship and the relationship between the inhabitants of Amman to their city has been a topic dwelled on many times in the past years. Ideas and theories related to the city and the public space in light of urban development / regeneration, gentrification, regional and social politics are all heavily discussed, raising questions about citizenship and ultimately reflecting on how people identify with and develop a sense of ownership to their city.

In light of these issues we can step into a reading of Saba Innab's intervention at Makan, entitled 'Park'.

Upon entry the viewer is confronted with a vitrine partitioning the main hall of Makan, on the vitrine's plane spells the word *Aam*(which in Arabic means public). The other side of the partition houses a patch of grass, squarely centered in a whitened room. The grass patch is adjacent to the balcony which opens onto a view of downtown Amman. Automatically, the partitioning between the viewer and the grass, something subconsciously associated with parks / outdoors / picnics, creates a distance that forces the viewer to contemplate the publicness of what is seemingly public. Audiences stand at a distance from the vitrine, and peer over it to get a closer look at the specimen of precious lush green on the other side.



The rest of the exhibition follows through a side hallway and into a room in which a frieze of photo-collages of cityscapes from the surrounding neighborhoods of downtown Amman continue from the wall and onto the windows. The room also opens back onto the grass patch and the balcony.

In the text for the exhibition, Saba describes Amman as "A rural city that is suffocating from the inconsistencies of scales, egos and representations...where the experience of a place and places of experience withdraw into becoming an image and commodity, signs articulated with the promise of a contemporary living- a picnic on the highway with a casserole of *Mujaddarah* (dish of rice and lentils) appears to me as the right way to do it!"

The cityscapes playfully offers another alternative in which the city is for the people. In one part hills are connected across the valleys with enormous washing lines, or colossal figures walk from one hill to another across a horizontal ladder. In another, children on the edge of a residential area are playing by the side of a river; in the backdrop an enormous ferris wheel sits amidst a neighborhood of downtown Amman. These playful,

imaginings, continue from the walls of the room onto the windows, and drawings of people on swings are juxtaposed onto a real view of the city, carrying the fantasy into reality.

While Saba's work presents a fantastical proposition in which the city becomes a playground for the people, the larger than life sizes implying a somewhat surrealistic occupation of the city by the inhabitants. There is however a sense of nostalgia, a reminiscing on the past memory of the city in which the river still ran through it at Ras El Ein, children played in the neighborhood, and washing lines blurred the boundaries between the private and public.

Whether a reflection on the past dynamics of life in the city as remembered and narrated by the older generation's memory of Amman 'in the old days' (*Ayyam zaman*). if the work is commentary on urbanism "that is generated by boundaries and constantly fed by politics of exclusions and inclusions" as explained in the exhibition text. The work ultimately offers a contemplation on the relationship between citizenship and the public space.



Yet a vitrined park inside the space of Makan -which in a sense brings the public arena into the private- may offer another reading in which the park as a space accessible to all, becomes an isolated experience within a private and closed off building. This understanding can come in relation to the everyday reality seen as a consequence to current trends of urbanism; hence the work becomes an illustration of peoples concerns. This notion is further illustrated by the audience who were reluctant to step on the grass only walking around it, avoiding any contact with it, which is contrary to the subconscious attraction to green spaces usually prompting physical engagement. Did the work fail to engage the audience in its ideas? Or can we read into this as a reflection on peoples habits and ideas towards parks and spaces of leisure, especially in light of the (seemingly) national definition of the ideal picnic location as one under a row of trees off the noisy, polluted highway heading to the airport.

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21 March 2010

*Photographs taken from Makan's website <http://www.makanhouse.net/content/park-intervention-artist-saba-innab-0>*