

DOR GUEZ'S HOLY OF HOLIES

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All installation views © Charles Mayer

Above and on pages 66-68:
Installation views of *Dor Guez:*
100 Steps to the Mediterranean
Lois Foster Gallery, Rose Art Museum

Entering *100 Steps to the Mediterranean*, we first encounter Dor Guez's two-channel video installation *Untitled (St. George Church)*, set in a darkened, contemplative space that inspires reverence. On a large floating screen, we see the golden iconostasis at the Greek Orthodox church in al-Lydd.³ A second, smaller screen shows a priest giving a sermon, while an audio track plays a few strums of an oud—music that is initiated but never completed.

The iconostasis, an architectural feature typical of Eastern Orthodox churches, is a richly decorated wall of icons separating the nave from the sanctuary. The order and placement of icons on the wall follows a strict tradition handed down from Byzantine times, and is highly symbolic. At the wall's center is the Holy Door, which is used only by

priests to access the sanctuary, it is flanked by two smaller doors used by deacons. In the Eastern Orthodox tradition, the sanctuary is a restricted space where priests, deacons, and altar boys are allowed but parishioners are not, and where women are never permitted.

Guez places us directly in front of the principal icons, then slowly pulls the camera back into the nave to reveal the full iconostasis. To move through to the next work and beyond the iconostasis is in effect to accept Guez's invitation into the inner sanctum of the church, and into the metaphorical restricted space of his oeuvre's primary subject, the sanctuary of the personal.

On the second screen the priest, standing at the Holy Door in front of the iconostasis, gives a sermon in Greek (the official language of the Greek Orthodox Church) to his Palestinian parishioners, while a deacon by his side simultaneously translates the sermon into their native Arabic. Guez highlights each act of translation with the haunting notes of the oud, which promises an Arab tune that fails to materialize. By combining the act of translating prayers with the arrested Arab music, which is not permitted in the church, the work underscores the dissonance between church leaders and local parishioners and their respective cultures.²

This dissonance is heightened by the visual juxtaposition of *Untitled (St. George Church)* and a series of photographs, *Lydd Ruins* (2009), on the surrounding gallery walls. These nocturnal images, which show remains of the city demolished or fallen to ruin as a result of the 1948 war, are eerily intimate and command a similar sense of reverence.³ Guez shifts the viewer between the interiority of the sacred space and the exteriority of the city in ruins, and between the private space of contemplation and the public zone of religious and national violence.

Inviting viewers to enter the exhibition through the iconostasis is Guez's first subtle act in subverting the order of things. It is also the beginning of our journey into disjunctive narratives of identity and reflections on the multiplicity of belonging. The exhibition next introduces us to personal stories revolving around the town

of al-Lydd and several generations of the Monayer family: the artist's grandparents, and their children and grandchildren. The arc of Guez's work is an aesthetically sophisticated contemplation on shifting emblems of memory, culture, language, religion, identity, and politics.

The role of the church is central to the lives of Guez's subjects. In the video *July 13*, Jacob Monayer (the patriarch of the family) describes how they took refuge in St. George Church during the fighting in 1948, and how it later became part of a fenced ghetto restricting the Palestinians who remained in Lod. The church becomes at once the fortress that stands amid the ruins, a last communal haven for this fading community, and their effective ghetto, defining their otherness despite their attempts at assimilation into Israeli society.⁴ Jacob's familial connection to the church runs deep: his grandfather transported stones for the structure, bringing them from Jerusalem on camels, and the adjacent monastery was built on what was originally Monayer land. Later in the video, Jacob is seen trying to enter the church grounds but finding all the gates locked, keeping him out; he subsequently emerges into the nave through an underground passage (from the crypt) and proudly poses for his grandson's camera at the Monayer family chair, reclaiming his position in it.

Guez's transformation of the Foster Gallery in the Rose Art Museum and the precise order and placement of his photographs and videos within its spaces make deliberate references to church architecture. Conceived as an extension of the works themselves, the spaces in which we experience them, and the flow from one to the next, are thoughtfully controlled. Employing the architectural device of compressing and releasing space to maximize psychological effect, Guez narrows the entry to the gallery to create a sense of awe as we are released into the monumental hall, where we encounter the floating iconostasis. The compression is repeated when we exit the *Lydd Ruins* photographs and approach the four video works. The videos, *July 13*, *Subaru-Mercedes*, *Watermelons under the Bed*, and *(Sa)Mira*, are arranged in a series of spare enclaves on either side of a central aisle. These spaces are

reminiscent of side chapels in a cathedral. In the videos, we face three generations of the Monayer family, who articulate personal stories of life during and after the Nakba, fractured identities split between assimilation and rejection, and encounters with racism.

In *(Sa)Mira*, Samira, her grandmother's namesake, recounts an episode in which she was asked to choose between her Arabic first name—her grandmother's legacy—and her paycheck. The poignancy of her story lies in the way she gradually peels off layers of cultural identities that she believes simultaneously coexist within her, exposing her scarred and rejected soul in the face of the violence of racism. The exhibition design transforms the site of Samira's self-reflection in this "chapel" into a kind of private confessional; however, in the hands of Guez's subtle subversion, the roles of sinner and absolver are playfully confused.

The themes of dislocation and an equivocal sense of belonging continue in the other testimonial videos, *July 13*, *Subaru-Mercedes*, and *Watermelons under the Bed*. Sami Monayer in *Subaru-Mercedes* describes his cultural bearing as "essentially Western culture," adding that "in recent years there has been leakage of Eastern culture into my Western culture." His Westernness stems from his assimilation into Israeli culture, which is viewed as superior by many Palestinian Israelis. His use of the term "leakage" tellingly implies that the Eastern culture's "reappearance" in his orientation occurred despite his own efforts. While Sami tries to articulate the conflicts within his identity, his wife and daughters are heard in the background objecting and arguing with his assertions: "Say that you live in Israel but that you do not feel ... Israeli," he is instructed, and "You can't stand up and say that you are a Palestinian. ... You can't feel what they feel." The ambivalence of each person's self-definition does not even encompass other family members' own ambivalence. In these three works, the female voice emerges from the background (always off camera) to editorialize, instruct, and gently direct the male protagonists. In *July 13* the elder Samira, Jacob's wife, interjects, corrects, and adds to her husband's narration of their lives during and after 1948. These female voices are, in keeping with Palestinian tradition, "respectful" of the man's

formal position (in front of the camera) but not afraid to express themselves forcefully and independently. In the "Holy of Holies" that Guez guides us through, women are no longer kept out of the metaphorical inner sanctum but are an articulate and powerful presence in this community.

At the terminus of the central aisle in the exhibit, Guez positions his video work *SABIR*, which features the family matriarch and shows a setting sun and the beach in Yaffa [Jaffa]. Guez's grandmother tells of her memories of life in Yaffa, where she grew up and from which she was forced to flee in 1948. Samira switches from her mother tongue, Arabic, to her later-acquired Hebrew as she emotionally meanders among memories of the past, the Nakba, and the present. Reminiscing about her family's house in the port city, from which it was just "100 steps to the Mediterranean," and evening meals at a café at the water's edge, she longingly describes a world that no longer exists. Her lost paradise is made more fantastic and imaginary by the mesmerizing descent of the sun and the soothing sounds of the Mediterranean. In the analogy to church architecture, *SABIR* takes the position of a rose window above the altar. Samira's nostalgic descriptions of Yaffa and the barbarity of the Nakba correlate to depictions of heavenly places and otherworldly events, carrying Samira's narrative into the realm of the spiritual.

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NOTES

- 1 The name al-Lydd—the city is also called Lod, Lydda, or Georgiopolis—is used here to reflect the mind-set of the protagonist and not as a strict historical reference.
- 2 The sounds of the liturgy, moving between Greek and Arabic, take me back to childhood memories of our family's Greek Catholic church in Nazareth, where I was born, and are as natural to my ears as the sound of *atha'an* (the call to prayer for Muslims) followed by church bells, both muffled by the voice of Umm Kulthum, singing through the static on a nearby radio; however, in Guez's installation a layered dissonance is highlighted.
- 3 For a detailed analysis of "the Palestinian city of al-Lydd ... into the 'Hebraic City' of Lod," which is still ongoing, see Haim Yacobi, *The Jewish-Arab City: Spacio-Politics in a Mixed Community* (London: Routledge, 2009).
- 4 The Christian Arabs make up approximately 10 percent of the total Palestinian population of Israel. According to the Lod municipality, the population of the city is 74,000; 72.5 percent are Jews and 27.5 percent are Arabs, mostly Muslims. Only 1,000 are Christians.

