



# DRAWING A LINE

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The first section of Dor Guez's multi-part project, *The Sick Man of Europe*, despite being titled *The Painter*, opens with neither an image of a painter, nor of a painting. In fact, both remain somewhat peripheral to the visual narrative of Guez's film, with the painter of the title, D. Guez, appearing only in photographs. His presence is principally felt in the voice-over, and his paintings are mostly shot too close-up to grant the viewer sight of any one work in its entirety.

Instead, the central actor of the opening sequence is a single line, which is captured in a state of persistent metamorphosis. Metamorphosis here is a chain reaction of one thing continually turning into another, rather than a singular change of shape. To begin with, this black line takes a vertiginous plunge from the top of the screen, slowly carving in two the green ground – which is not unlike the inside of the vitrines in Guez's accompanying installation – only to curl snake-like into the right half of a Star of David. When the line reaches the bottom of the screen, the frame switches to a bird's-eye view of richly toned wood evoking aerial landscape photography. As the line reappears, it turns into a rivulet, running along the grain of the wood as if through a barren river bed before zig-zagging left and right to circumnavigate a series of geometric obstacles that slowly reveal themselves to be mother-of-pearl inlay in an *oud*, an Arabic string instrument. From here, the line follows the darker wood below the central oculus only to drop once more

into the void beneath the screen. The next time it appears, it does so to draw the circular ornament that traditionally adorns an *oud*. Once completed, the drawn line surreptitiously morphs into an animation of the real thing, the separate rings of the ornament spinning like a medieval wheel of fortune. All the while, we listen to the sonorous voice of the painter recounting a Tunisian fable about a beetle that wants to get married. After a long time failing to find a suitable husband, the beetle eventually chooses a mouse as her groom. One day, while doing her washing on the banks of the river, the beetle falls into a pit. Fortunately for her, the mouse comes to her rescue by lowering his tail for her. However, as the beetle climbs out of her predicament, she inadvertently rips off the tail that has saved her. This is where the narrator stops, as does the opening sequence, to make way for the harsh technological sound of a scanner shown in the process of scanning one of the painter's early drawings, while simultaneously providing the coda for the title graphics.

The Swiss painter Paul Klee famously described drawing as "taking a line for a walk". To be more precise, he opened his *Pedagogical Sketchbook* of 1925 with the following: "An active line on a walk, moving freely, without goal. A walk for a walk's sake." This is how the line in Guez's film appears: as moving of its own accord, periodically diverted by what stands in its way, yet ultimately following a logic only known to itself. Yet, however beguiling both Klee's description and the flow of Guez's line may appear, we know neither to be true. However well disguised, the actual agency lies elsewhere: lines do not draw themselves.

As much is true of that most notorious of lines: the Green Line. Taking its name from the colour of the ink with which it was drawn on a map during armistice talks in 1949, the Green Line set out the demarcation lines between the Israeli armies and those of Egypt, Jordan, Lebanon and Syria. All of these countries rose as nation states from the ashes of the Ottoman Empire, which the Russian Emperor Nicholas I is credited with calling "The Sick Man of Europe" in the mid-nineteenth century; and, all these countries have borders that were drawn in accordance with European colonial interests, the concept of the nation state itself a Western import.

Though continually invoked by all sides during territorial disputes, past and present, the Green Line was never intended to become an official border; rather it was to define a status quo after the first of many violent conflicts

that followed the official formation of the State of Israel in 1948. One of the most significant in this long line of disputes was the Yom Kippur War in 1973, or the 6th of October War as it is known in the Arab world. The cost of several thousands of lives notwithstanding, the Yom Kippur War ultimately achieved very little: the early gains made by the invading forces of Egypt and Syria were soon rebuffed by the Israeli military with no significant alterations to either country's border as a result, and with earlier claims and counter-claims to Sinai and the East Bank remaining unresolved. The psychological impact, however, was deep. Arab countries enthusiastically celebrated the war as a bravura demonstration of their reawakened strength: to this day, a large panorama in Heliopolis, a modern suburb of Cairo, executed by North Korean painters schooled in the art of pictorial propaganda, eulogises the crossing of the Suez canal and Mount Sinai by Egyptian forces. In sharp contrast, in Israel the war led to a parliamentary enquiry into the lack of strategic defence, which betrayed the woeful arrogance of the country's ruling military and political class. The trauma of the events and their aftermath lodged itself deeply into Israel's national psyche. A line going for a walk, a line crossing a screen, a line dividing a map in two, or three, or four, a line forcefully being moved: drawing a line is never as innocent an act as it may seem at first.

...which takes us back to the story of the painter, who, as is soon revealed, is not just any painter. D. Guez, who shares surname and initial with Dor Guez, the maker of the present film and installation, comes from a family of Tunisian Jews who, as relationships between Israel and her Arab neighbours deteriorated, emigrated to Israel. Growing up in a religious Zionist household, D. Guez spoke Hebrew when out and Arabic at home. As a young man, he decided to apply himself to the art of painting and immersed himself in the medium's – principally European – history. In 1973, D. Guez was called to defend his country in the Yom Kippur War. While on duty in Syria, his tank was hit. D. Guez had to disentangle himself from the mess of metal and wounded bodies. He was so distressed by what he had witnessed that he abandoned painting for the next fifteen years. Eventually he returned, though he stopped painting from life and based all his work on photographs. His recovery from what today would be called 'post-traumatic stress' was fuelled by his rekindled passion for art, though most importantly, by the love, dedication and patience of his Palestinian wife (at which point note that D. Guez narrates the story of the beetle and the mouse in Arabic and not in Hebrew). Another sick man, and no straight lines here either...

Although the first work we see of his in the film is a drawing – a drawing of an olive tree, which in the exhibition is displayed together with a sling shot he carved from olive wood as a boy – the title of the film identifies D. Guez as *The Painter*. Painting operates differently from drawing, just as history as lived and remembered by an individual differs from history as recounted in official text books. Drawing in a far more immediate way encapsulates both time and space, and the way we move through either. When looking at a drawing, we retrace the movement of the pencil or charcoal, the pressure exerted by the draughtsman, the speed and decisiveness of the line, or indeed the moment of doubt and hesitation. This is why we often feel that drawing offers an opportunity for more intimate communion with the artist: we experience the time of looking at a drawing as analogous to the time of making. Painting, on the other hand, transcends time. The constituent components of a painting – line, shape, colour, subject matter – vie to be seen as an inseparable unity. For this to happen, they need to be perceived simultaneously. It is not by coincidence that simultaneity was such a preoccupation for many avant-garde artists at the beginning of the twentieth century. To 'read' a painting critically often entails resisting this siren song of simultaneity and re-introducing time – the time of looking – a hierarchy of attention and, above all, an engagement with the seams, where the artifice of the painting, the scaffold of its formal and conceptual construction, become most palpable.

This is precisely the strategy that Dor Guez adopts in his work. For what we see first and foremost are not his namesake's actual paintings but scanograms thereof. Scanography is a radiography technique in which a narrow beam of light is moved along the object under investigation to produce a life-size scan that helps diagnose various medical conditions. The objects exposed to this method here are the paintings of D. Guez. Rather than focusing on the paintings as such, Dor Guez uses their material flaws, their cracks and ruptures to speculate about much wider issues: the depth of trauma, both individual and collective, the challenges of identity, personal memory and official history, the force-field of Western colonialism and Israeli nation-building, and its impact on those most directly affected, not least Arab Israelis and Palestinians.

It is in these fissures that the simultaneity of the paintings breaks down, and with it the optimism of the painter D. Guez before the war. The harsh light of the scanner throws into sharp relief the compositional flaws that crept in as the young D. Guez sought to emulate his art-historical heroes in

a language that is not his own, the way his paintings deteriorated as they were stored for decades at his parents' house after his break-down, and the paucity of materials to which the young son of Tunisian migrants was limited in the first instance. Without exceptional aesthetic merit in their own right, the paintings' greatest narrational potential, as it turns out, lies in their imperfections. As with the many personal belongings displayed in the vitrines, the montage of filmed images, and the narration of D. Guez's life divided into three distinct chapters – painter, soldier, painter once more (albeit on very different terms) – it is the space between, the ground uncovered, the seam and the pause that Dor Guez reveals as most pregnant with meaning.

Drawing is often understood as painting's minor cousin, as a form of preparatory pattern-making on the road to a higher expression of art, one that aspires to trade the discernible subjectivity of the draughtsman for the timeless universality that was so important to the inventors of easel painting in early Renaissance Europe. Within painting, drawing gives structure - by which we mean order in the face of the potential disorder of colour, if left to its own devices. It is the lines of drawing that demarcate the point where fields of colour meet, or, by extension, are being kept apart. Line stands for reason, while colour implies the lack thereof: just think of the way children first paint with colour, then learn to draw before being instructed how to bring the two together. Allowing two sides to meet and simultaneously keeping them apart while also existing on their own terms: a line is never just a line.

