

Christian Palestinian Archive: A Project by Dor Guez

Exhibition and Programs

**Christian Palestinian Archive:
A Project by Dor Guez**

**The James Gallery
The Graduate Center, CUNY**

**365 Fifth Avenue at 35th Street
The Graduate Center**

centerforthehumanities.org/james-gallery

Apr 8–Jun 4, 2016

Exhibition and Programs

Introduction

A golden sunset against a beach in present-day Jaffa serves as a deceptively idyllic backdrop for Dor Guez's film *Sabir* (2010). For about twenty minutes, we see shadows of individuals partaking in everyday activities against the slowly setting sun: children run home for dinner, couples hold hands on a romantic stroll, and joggers venture out for evening exercise while surfers ride the last waves before the sun's rays drop below the horizon. These shadows are more significant than the charming vignettes they appear to be at first glance. Their peaceful appearances belie a turbulent history and precarious reality of contemporary life in Israel—a discrepancy revealed by the film's narrator, a Palestinian woman named Samira Monayer. We never see Samira in the film, but we hear her story: her childhood in Jaffa and her family's expulsion in 1948 during the Palestinian exodus from land claimed by Israel (known as al-Nakba, "the catastrophe"),¹ their global dispersal to Lydd (Lod), Amman, Cyprus, Cairo, and London, and eventually, Samira's life in the new Israeli society.

The title of the film, *Sabir*, which derives from the Latin *to know*, is a Mediterranean pidgin language combining elements of French, Italian, Portuguese, Spanish, Arabic, Hebrew, Turkish, and Greek. Widely spoken among seafarers and travelers between the eleventh and nineteenth centuries, it refers to a time in which the linguistic and cultural borders of the region were fluid, informed by personal experiences and connections. Guez appropriates this term to refer to many displaced Palestinians who have learned multiple languages while adapting to life in the post-1948 diaspora. Over the crash of waves against the shore, Samira—in her native Arabic—recalls her childhood, when she could walk just one hundred steps from her home to the Mediterranean, and contemplates the 1948 war and its aftermath in Hebrew. Guez, however, visually and metaphorically complicates this binary between memory and history as the setting sun over the Jaffa beach transforms the contemporary Israeli

landscape into a sea of shadows. While Guez fixes his camera to produce a static "post-card" image of the beach as a site of recreation and leisure, this image is simultaneously reframed by Samira's story, not only as a site from her past but from where she is estranged in the present.

The story of Samira Monayer is central to this presentation in the James Gallery, where it serves as an entry point to Guez's artistic practice and the inspiration for the Christian Palestinian Archive. This digital archive was founded by Guez in 2009 after he discovered a suitcase under his grandparents' bed filled with old photographs and other personal documents. Organizing these materials into albums proved insufficient, as the photographs' personal, historical, and material significance was hampered by the rigidly linear book format. Following this failed experiment, Guez's grandmother, Samira, gave him permission to scan and upload the documents. Guez's solution marked the beginning of the CPA and a turning point in his artistic practice. Much more than a digitized family album, today the CPA contains thousands of images from Christian Palestinian communities across the world. Unlike other archives, the CPA is not invested in material conservation, and all photographs are returned to their owners after being scanned. Open calls have been held since 2009 from Berlin to London to São Paulo, with a new open call to be held in New York over the course of Guez's project at The Graduate Center.

Christian Palestinians make up a very small percentage of the population in Israel-Palestine today: less than 2% of Israel, 1% of the West Bank, and .5% of the Gaza Strip.² Despite their small numbers in those territories, they represent hundreds of thousands in a diaspora stretched across the Middle East, Europe, and the Americas.³ The CPA is at its heart a participatory project, exploring stories of the community members who wish to participate. Christian Palestinians have frequently been marginalized in historical accounts of the region, and Guez's initiative addresses this omission. Yet this process of writing history against the grain

is not exclusively on the level of content for Guez. His constant but subtle refusal to fall into the easy traps of predetermined narratives and reductive identity politics is best understood through the formal tensions of his artwork, which self-reflexively push the limits of representation and authorship.

“Scanogram” is the term Guez uses for the works that result from his digital manipulation of scans from previously existing visual materials. Loose historical precedents for this process are the early twentieth century photogram experiments of László Moholy-Nagy, Man Ray, and Christian Schad, who placed existing, often mundane, objects on photosensitive paper and exposed them to light, in the process creating abstracted and frequently surreal compositions visually akin to x-rays. By producing a photograph without a camera, these artists circumvented the supposedly “natural” relationship between referent and image, forcing the viewer to question the veracity of mimetic representation. Rather than photosensitive paper, Guez uses scanning machines as his medium. Since most scanners are automatically designed to smooth aberrations and imperfections, Guez relies on scanners of different commercial qualities for different layers: each layer is selected to highlight a different aspect of the original document, such as composition, color, and physical condition. The layers are combined into one high-resolution digital image that is often printed on a large scale, magnifying the details of the original composition. Guez’s new digital image paradoxically emphasizes the original photograph’s material history as an object of historical evidence. The original document’s tears, creases, and evidence of handling over time meld with the composition to produce a work that sits on the cusp between digital and material, image and object.

In this project Guez’s focus on Christian Palestinians within Israel hones in on a unique and complex experience difficult to represent and therefore ripe for his self-reflexive aesthetic strategy: the uncanny condition of being a “present-absentee” exiled on one’s own land.⁴ *Scanogram #1* (2010) is a series of fifteen black and white

scanograms based on photographs included in the CPA. The original photographs, dating from 1938–1958, portray important events in the lives of Samira and her family before and after the declaration of the state of Israel. After Jaffa was taken by military force in 1948, the family fled about seventeen miles southeast to Lydd, a city revered in Christianity as the burial site of Saint George. The Israeli military conquered Lydd just a few months later and marched most of the Palestinian occupants to the Jordanian border. Only 1,030 out of more than 20,000 Palestinians stayed in the city, including Samira.⁵ Jewish immigrants quickly filled the abandoned houses, and the city was given the Hebrew name Lod. The remaining Palestinian population was restricted to an area, which became known as the “Lod Ghetto.” Several of Guez’s scanograms document Samira’s wedding in the Lod Ghetto on July 13, 1949, exactly one year after the invasion of the city.

Accounts of the events in Lydd in 1948 vary widely among historians as the Israeli government continues to downplay its role in the violent Palestinian exodus from Lydd and its neighboring city of Ramla.⁶ By recovering the visual and material traces of this time and place, and making them publicly available, it can be argued that Guez enters his scanograms as evidence in this ongoing debate over the historical record. This testimonial potential of the scanogram, hinted at in *Scanogram #1*, is more evident in *40 Days* (2012), a series documenting vandalism of the Christian cemetery in Lydd, where Samira’s family is buried. Samira’s husband, Jacob, snapped the original photographs to initiate a police investigation into the desecration of the graves. Failing to find those responsible for the vandalism, police returned the photographs, after which they were kept in a kitchen drawer and exposed to heat and condensation, causing the photographs to congeal to each other over time. Separating the photographs later caused them to tear at the edges, leaving ghostly streaks. The resulting scanograms document both the desecration of the Christian graves and the human remains contained therein, and the destruction

of the photographs themselves as an object of discarded evidence. Their large format, which emphasizes the physical damage of the photograph, simultaneously abstracts the original composition and draws attention to the multiple levels of real and metaphorical violence the image represents.

Guez is astutely aware that evidence can never be self-evident, but, like history, is always constructed. In other words, evidence must be made legible to systems of power in order for it to be recognized as legally admissible. These photographs were deemed insufficient by the Israeli authorities. Guez's scanograms subtly critique this circuitous system of representation and the unstable category of evidence while also acknowledging and taking part in recognition for Christian Palestinians and their stories.

(Sa)Mira (2009) is a film in which Samira's granddaughter (also named Samira) relates a moment of discrimination in the Jerusalem restaurant where she works as a waitress. After customers complain about her Arab name, Samira's boss requests she change it to Mira, a name that can "pass" as Jewish-Israeli. Samira is asked to repeat this experience many times by Guez, who remains just outside the camera's frame. Like her grandmother's story in *Sabir*, Samira's traumatic moment takes some time to be fully revealed. While at first joking about the experience, over the process of telling and re-telling her story, she becomes acutely aware of the message of this seemingly minor act of discrimination—that in order to properly assimilate into Israeli society she must conceal her ethnic identity.

The stories that Guez tells in this presentation at the James Gallery are both deeply personal and noticeably always incomplete. They remain the traces of a history of a family and a community. Always careful to avoid the easy story or the complete picture, in these works Guez continuously and self-reflexively flips representation and narrative, much in the same way he sometimes reverses photographs to show the marks and personal inscriptions usually hidden from view.

—Chelsea Haines

1. Whereas most of Israel's Jewish citizens refer to the 1948 war as the War of Independence, Palestinians refer to the war and its aftermath as the Nakba, or "catastrophe." With the establishment of the State of Israel, nearly three-quarters of a million Palestinians were exiled.
2. "FACTBOX - Christians in Israel, West Bank and Gaza," Reuters UK, May 10, 2009 (accessed February 16, 2016).
3. William Safran, "Diasporas in Modern Societies: Myths of Homeland and Return," *Diaspora*, Volume 1, Number 1, Spring 1991: 83–99.
4. "Present-absentee" is the official term used to designate Palestinians who remained in the country after 1948, but whose land and property were confiscated and handed over to the state. The Absentee Property Law of 1950 grants to the State of Israel the assets of those Palestinians deported from it in the 1948 war. Israel's expulsion of Palestinian civilians in 1948, the confiscation of their property, and the denial of their right to return after the war are actions forbidden by the Geneva Convention (IV) relative to the Protection of Civilian Persons in Time of War. Geneva, August 12, 1949, articles 49 and 53 (see <http://www.icrc.org/ihl.nsf/FULL/380?OpenDocument>, accessed 6/3/12).
5. Haim Yacobi, *The Jewish-Arab City: Spatio-Politics in a Mixed Community*. London: Routledge, 2009: 32, 61.
6. For a detailed overview of the forced Palestinian exodus in Lydd and Ramla in 1948, see Benny Morris, *The Birth of the Palestinian Refugee Problem Revisited*. London: Cambridge University Press, 2nd edition, 2004.

Checklist

1. Dor Guez, *Scanogram #1*, 2010.

Series of manipulated readymades, archival inkjet prints, 23 1/2 x 29 1/2 inches each. (See next page for individual captions.)

2. Dor Guez, *(Sa)Mira*, 2009, video, 13:53 minutes.

3. Dor Guez, *40 Days*, 2012. Series of manipulated readymades, archival inkjet prints, 81 x 59 inches each.

4. Dor Guez, *Sabir*, 2010, video, 19:37 minutes.

5. Resource room for Christian Palestinian Archive (CPA).

4

3

3

1

2

5

