INSTITUT D’ÉTUDES POLITIQUES DE PARIS

***The Dubious Birth of Geography***

CONTEMPORARY ART AND GEOPOLITICS IN THE ARAB WORLD

Joice BARBARESCO

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***The Dubious Birth of Geography***

*The Dubious Birth of Geography* is art work done by the artist Mehreen Murtaza in 2012. It is a series of 15 photographs that are included in her project called *Crisis Apparitions,* which is divided in three series: *The Great Patch Conspiracy*, *Dispatches From The Edge/ End Of The World* and *The Dubious Birth of Geography*.

In the former, she inserted different and fantastical elements in historical photographs through image-editing methods. The original photos are symbolic of the 20th century and make mention not just the past, but also the present and the future of some political and geographical aspects in the Middle East and Africa.

The next paragraphs analyze the critical aspects of *The Dubious Birth of Geography*, intending to understand the ability of it as an instrument for reflection of the construction of political, historical and geographical axioms.

The artist of this work, Mehreen Murtaza, born in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia, currently lives in Lahore, Pakistan. She graduated from Beaconhouse National University, Lahore in 2009. This background allowed her to develop a critical discussion of political, religious, historical, scientific and cultural issues in her works, aiming to understand the human behavior. She works with different materials, techniques and subjects in her art production. Using new technology and non-traditional arts tools, she questions the reality and characteristics of the humankind. In general, her projects involves references of sciences fiction, theories of constipations and others fantastical tales but she also do different mentions of the religion and the political aspects. Her portfolio is complex and rich of critics.

Especially in *The Dubious Birth of Geography*, the work brings elements of the past at the same time that brings fantastical components which question about the construction of our idea of geography nowadays and also presenting some modern political questions.

The construction’s process of the work started in the selection of original photos. The photos selected are not popular images but they are freely available in the internet and others sources. The images’ choice was based in an arrangement of chance and some artist’s interests: 1) political and war periods that makes references to the setting for a geological and political repositioning or re-orientation of the world map as we know to this date; 2) North Africa and Middle East as places that origins much of modern and early Islam; 3) historical events that changed history as we know it to this date and contain significant markers on the time line of Modern Islam. Mehreen Murtaza assumes that *“these are all very broad parameters and the final 15 images were chosen based on intuition and more of a throw of dice.”*

Mehreen Murtaza did not choose images well-known around the world but that ones that are representative for the construction of some axioms. Much of what is taught in organizations of the society (like schools, religion and family) and also shown in daily media can be constructed for a political purpose. In this sense, the work is very remarkable because, in addition to its aesthetic character, it introduces a criticism of this political instrumentalization of the images and instruction. The artistic idea *The Dubious Birth of Geography* is support by the critical and questioning of the building of some political, historical and geography axiom that are in our imagination through education and media. As examples, we can headline three photos in work: *Lake Chad in 1930;* *Boatmen waiting to land passengers at Jaffa*; *Ottoman flags fly over the Nabi Musa for the last time.*

***Lake Chad in 1930***

In the photo *Lake Chad in 1930,* Murtaza modified the original photo adding a very drastic flow that has the appearances of a drain sink. Lake Chad is localized in the west-center Africa and makes part of four countries (Chad, Cameroon, Nigeria and Niger). Additionally, Lake Chad’s size has varied over the centuries and it has proved to be economically significant as well as an important source of fresh water to Africa. The lake has passed through serious environmental problems, and the size of which has varied as a result of desertification. The use of the Chad Lake’s water is a point of political and social disputes between these four countries. Thus, some geographical and ecological problems effect new policy and political complications.

***Boatmen waiting to land passengers at Jaffa***

The photo *Boatmen waiting to land passengers at Jaffa* is a very symbolic image in the construction of the state of Israel and of the Zionist Project. Jaffa was an important city because of its port and markets during the nineteenth century. The city in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century had become a center of Jewish migration during the first *Aliya* that resulted in the creation of Tel Aviv which was located next to the north of Jaffa. Under the British mandate, Tel Aviv developed into an almost exclusively Jewish city, Jaffa expanded. Jaffa was a center of opposition to Zionism, and during the strike that took place between 1936 and 1939, in Arab revolution. The rebellion paralyzed the port; it had not been recovered, so the port of Tel Aviv replaced it. Most of the Jews left Jaffa at that time. After the United Nations decision of partition Palestine in 1947 and, in the fighting that ensued, the Jews took Jaffa. Most of the Palestinians abandoned the city. A large number of Jewish immigrants were housed in the city, and in 1950, Jaffa was incorporated into Tel Aviv-Yafo. Thus, the history of Jaffa is representative: it was changing along the years and its political status was modified by different political projects.

***Ottoman flags fly over the Nabi Musa for the last time***

The *Ottoman flags fly over the Nabi Musa for the last time* is also a very representative photo of the politics in Middle East. It express the construction of the geopolitical aspects of the Middle East because of the slow decline of the Ottoman Empire and its efforts to resist territorial losses, economic decline and the emergence of the new national identities in the Middle East. Understanding the legacies of the imperial era in the region allows a greater comprehension of the colonialism’s impacts and the formation of the states in the region. The imperial rulers influenced political, economic and social aspects in the Middle East. It is evident that the struggle between ethnic identity, religious affiliation and regional links is an issue that reflects many of the matters that underlie the fragility of regional identities and political affiliations today. The Ottoman Empire’s legacy is still a point of intense debate. However, the basic importance of this period is undeniable. While centralized and bureaucratic, the role of military in politics, economic dependence on Europe and the antagonism this created, cultural influences and resentment and external infiltration are not exclusive to the Middle East.

These three photos are representative for capturing the essence of the artistic work. They intend to show the process of geopolitical transformation of important focuses of tensions in the Middle East and Africa. The fifteen photos interact with each other in the *The Dubious Birth of Geography* and approach others important issues: Zionism, Arab–Israeli conflict, geopolitics, construction of national identities, history of the sciences, immigration and history of the war. Although it is focused on the Middle East and Africa region, it has also a universal facet that is to think the process of constructions of societies imaginary. The work makes us reflect about the concepts of history and knowledge of the society and the process of construction of social mentalities during the years. Such reflection is as important as knowing the facts their selves.

Photos do not always tell the truth, some are manipulated and there are even historical photo-montages that have the tendency to distort a reality. Our view of a particular event can change depending on the presentation of a photo. In this sense, the humankind realities can be shaped according to the informations and trues that are told during the education of the society and the media. As we saw, the selected original photos from *The Dubious Birth of Geography* are pictures related to some events that changed the history. But, by adding magic elements in important moments or fact of the reality, Mehreen Murtaza created a kind of sciences fiction history and present the history and politics in an absurd way that encourages the spectator to think about the process of the history. And it is essential be aware that our imagination is full of constructions that came from the past, but that remain in the present. Murtaza’s work has the idea to rediscover the construction of our knowledge.

The intellectual reflections proposed by the artist put us in a position of critical sense-and not in a position of total negation of political constructions. They put us to think if a fact actually exists. The choices we make indicate political and ideological tendencies that define us as intellectuals or simply as an expert and professional, tailored and shaped. Of course, this choice has its advantages and is a permanent temptation to intellect.

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