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## Painting Photographs: Absence on Mohammed Mahmoud Street

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Painting Photographs:  
Absence on Mohammed Mahmoud Street

Kirsten E. Stricker

Mohammed Mahmoud Street is the metaphoric tomb of Tahrir Square, Cairo where violent protests erupted during the Egyptian Revolution which began in 2011.<sup>1</sup> It is on the walls of this street that Ammar Abo Bakr painted outside of his studio for the first time.<sup>2</sup> “Lost Eyes,” a large mural commemorating the men and women who lost their eyes in clashes during a demonstration against military rule on November 19, 2011, was the first large mural that he made commemorating those who were injured during the struggle for freedom (Figure 1). Since then Bakr has continued to work on an ever evolving mural on Mohammed Mahmoud Street. While he is responsible for a great number of fascinating pieces of art this paper will focus primarily on the mural he added to the wall in May 2012—a mural of mourning mothers holding photographs of their children who died in the revolution. These works are haunting familiar to those of Gervasio Sanchez’s *Forgotten Victims* that Antonio Monegal, a professor of Literary Theory and Comparative Literature at the Universitat Pompeu Fabra in Barcelona, discusses in his article “Picturing Absence: Photography in the Aftermath.” Monegal claims that such images—those that depicted that aftermath of violence without containing images of violence themselves—morally address their viewers which turns documentary photography into activism.<sup>3</sup> They are a way of representing violence without adding to the violent images that have become banal.

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<sup>1</sup> Comment on Ammar Abo Bakr’s Facebook page, August 18, 2012, accessed February 13, 2017, <https://www.facebook.com/Ammar.Abo.Bakr/photos/a.294726310635240.67138.294723210635550/294727233968481/?type=3&theater>.

<sup>2</sup> Marieke Zwilling and Caram Kapp, “Street Art Egypt: Ammar Abo Bakr,” *Vimeo* video, 4:13, posted February 17, 2013, <https://vimeo.com/59835511>.

<sup>3</sup> Antonio Monegal, “Picturing Absence: Photography in the Aftermath,” *Journal of War & Culture Studies* 9, no. 3, (2016): 253

Prior to the beginning of revolution there was little to none graffiti in Cairo; no graffiti in one the world's largest cities.<sup>4</sup> The revolution's "art attack" was not a safe activity for the artists.<sup>5</sup> Jehane Noujaim, the director of *The Square*, an award winning documentary about life on the streets of Cairo during the first two years of the Egyptian Revolution, remembers seeing Bakr painting while she was filming some of the larger battles of Tahrir Square. She said "He's a whole film on his own!' ... during the bigger battles in Tahrir Square, 'he was just continually painting these ever-changing murals' amid the tear gas and flying bullets."<sup>6</sup> Even before the revolution those who are caught painting the walls with political messages could be given five years in prison along with a fine for "defamation of national leadership."<sup>7</sup> While being caught in the act of graffiti carried fines the images were often not traceable to a particular person. Following the beginning of the revolution the graffiti was continuously being white-washed and covered up.<sup>8</sup> Two days before the presidential election in 2012 the government sent workers to cover up the murals and graffiti on Mohammed Mahmoud Street. They succeeded on covering part of the wall before workers from the American University of Cairo, who own the wall, stopped them.<sup>9</sup> Bakr's mural of the "Lost Eyes" was covered up. Sometimes, however, the white-washing was done by other artists who needed space for their own work. Some of these artists

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<sup>4</sup> Mia Gröndahl, *Revolution Graffiti: Street Art of the New Egypt*, (Cairo: American University in Cairo Press, 2012), ix-x.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid, 1.

<sup>6</sup> Maddie Oatman, "How the Artists of 'The Square' Fueled Egypt's Revolution," *Mother Jones*, January 11, 2014, <http://www.motherjones.com/mixed-media/2014/01/jehane-noujaim-the-square-egypt-oscar-ammam-abo-bakr-karim-amer>.

<sup>7</sup> Gasma Hamdy and Don Karl, *Walls of Freedom: Street Art of the Egyptian Revolution* (Berlin: From Here to Fame Publishing, 2014), 9.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

<sup>9</sup> Rowan El Shimi, "New Layer of Anti-Election Street Art on Mohamed Mahmoud Street Walls," *Ahram Online*, May 31, 2012, <http://english.ahram.org.eg/News/43323.aspx>.

chose to work with spray paint and stencils. Others, like Bakr chose to work with acrylics to create massive, detailed murals.

The mural of Bakr's that will be addressed here is that of the "Mourning Mothers" (Figure 2). The mothers were added to the collage of martyrs with angel-wings on Mohammed Mahmoud Street in May 2012. The martyrs in the background are memorials for those that died in the Port Said massacre on February 2, 2012 (Figure 3). Bakr began painting these portraits that night as violence erupted around him.<sup>10</sup> Large calligraphy was intentionally "grafittied" over the mothers and the martyrs.<sup>11</sup> The words were a commentary on the current political climate: "Forget what passed and stay behind the elections."<sup>12</sup> The mothers hold photographs of their deceased children. The white rectangle that they hold is marked with a black ribbon for mourning it and the figure within the photograph is only a silhouette in some cases (Figure 2). Other times the deceased children's faces can be seen (Figure 4). Even when the face in the portrait photograph is almost non-existent we recognize it as a photograph because portraits of people holding portraits of their loved ones that have passed on is a standard convention in photography (Figure 5).

Monegal discusses Gervasio Sanchez's series *Forgotten Victims* that consists of photographing the traces that the "missing" leave behind. Some of these photographs are of mothers holding pictures of their deceased children (Figure 6). Monegal says that there are two

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<sup>10</sup> Comment on Ammar Abo Bakr's Facebook page, August 18, 2012, accessed February 13, 2017, <https://www.facebook.com/Ammar.Abo.Bakr/photos/a.294726310635240.67138.294723210635550/294727233968481/?type=3&theater>.

<sup>11</sup> Comment on Ammar Abo Bakr's Facebook page, August 18, 2012, accessed February 13, 2017, <https://www.facebook.com/Ammar.Abo.Bakr/photos/a.294726310635240.67138.294723210635550/294727537301784/?type=3&theater>.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

different types of victims in Sanchez's work those that are living and those that are dead.<sup>13</sup> These photographs act as evidence of violence even though the loss, pain, and suffering are not explicitly depicted. They are evidence of atrocities.<sup>14</sup> Photography has borne the burden of evidentiary proof since its earliest days. In *Regarding the Pain of Others* Susan Sontag says that photographs are required as evidence of war crimes—"the very notion of atrocity, of war crime, is associated with the expectation of photographic evidence."<sup>15</sup>

However, during parts of the Egyptian Revolution, there was no way of making photographs available to the public. The government shut down the internet after it proved instrumental to the movements of protestors. What was painted on the walls was often used as news. In *Walls of Freedom* Rana Jabour says, "I will know what has changed by reading the graffiti. ... After all, the writing is on the wall."<sup>16</sup> Bakr explicitly says that he sees his work as being informative, "Graffiti in Egypt has become an information medium. An alternative medium to traditional mass media, because journalists and news media are not doing their duty. They hide the truth and won't tell us anything. When a catastrophe happens they look to the other side. I often remind people: this is not art. ... Don't waste time analyzing the painting style, this is not art, it's news."<sup>17</sup> The only way for artists to communicate with the people is to write on the walls. The people could look for the truth that was hidden from them on the walls of their city.

In this case photographs do not act as evidence of atrocities. Artists must paint the news on the walls; their paintings are evidence of atrocities. "Mourning Mothers" was a commentary

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<sup>13</sup> Monegal, 264.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 267.

<sup>15</sup> Susan Sontag, *Regarding the Pain of Others* (New York: Picador, 2003), 74.

<sup>16</sup> Hamdy and Karl, *Walls of Freedom*, 12.

<sup>17</sup> Zwilling and Kapp, "Street Art Egypt: Ammar Abo Bakr."

on the results of the election in 2012. When the preliminary election results were broadcast on television those who supported the revolution, those who were injured, and the families of the martyrs were shocked by the choices they were being offered.<sup>18</sup> Their two options were Ahmed Shafiq, Hosni Mubarak's prime minister, and Mohamed Morsi, a man who viewed the revolutionaries as traitors.<sup>19</sup> Many of the revolutionaries felt that they had accomplished nothing with these two men as their options.<sup>20</sup> They were dismayed, angry, and full of regret when confronted with the results. The new layer of the mural, the mothers and the calligraphy, represents those feelings of betrayal. Bakr said "what we are doing has another philosophical element to it: that we are coming to paint over the martyrs' images. ... People forgot the image of the martyr[s]."<sup>21</sup>

The victims that Bakr painted were just as forgotten as those photographed by Sanchez. The victims represented in the mural are the dead and the living. The dead are those who were killed during violent confrontations between the revolutionaries and the military and police. The violence of their deaths are not depicted. The loved ones that they left behind, those who still grieve, are evidence of the martyrs' passing. These grieving mothers are a way of showing suffering with making the horror banal. Nameless bodies that have suffered are incapable of returning a viewer's gaze; they do not have a chance to speak. However, those they leave behind can speak. They can confront the viewer. Monegal says that the relatives photographed by Sanchez "have allowed themselves to be photographed not just to give testimony, but as a political act, a form of protest."<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> El Shimi.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid.

<sup>22</sup> Monegal, 264.

The women depicted in these murals are protesting. If the revolution accomplished nothing then their children died for nothing. Their sorrow is for their children, but it is also for the people of Egypt and for the revolution, because it cannot all have been for naught. Everyone was paying attention to the presidential candidates and no one was paying attention to the martyrs: they were being forgotten. These large images confront the viewer, they are impossible to ignore. The women would confront their viewers with grief, sorrow, what is left behind after violence. They do so without adding to the graphic images that were all too common during the revolution. Bakr's work reacts to traces of violence that have become invisible through the results of the election. He makes them visible again. He makes viewers confront the martyrs when all they have been seeing on the news is the faces of the presidential candidates that do not represent the values that the Egyptian people fought and died for. While Bakr says that his paintings are news and information they also encourage people to take action. Monegal says that "we can say that goal of these images [of absence] is not to report an event but, at a deeper level, to compel us to acknowledge it and let ourselves be morally addressed by it. This intimation of a moral address is what can turn documentary photography into activism."<sup>23</sup>

Bakr using his murals to communicate with the people of Cairo. He uses the walls to inform the populace of what the mainstream media covers up. Bakr's mural of the mourning mothers' forces viewers to confront loss and pain through what those things leave behind. The mothers are what the martyrs left behind. They left behind grieving family and friends: a potent image. These images morally confront the viewer; they challenge the viewer. Bakr is making sure that the people of Cairo cannot forget all the pain that was caused by the regime, because if they forget the pain then they might elect someone just like Mubarak into office. Bakr represents

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<sup>23</sup> Monegal, 253.

violence in a different way. His paintings act as evidence, as documentary proof to spur his viewers into action. "Mourning Mothers" is meant to encourage Egyptians to refuse to accept the results of the election and to keep fighting until to achieve their goals.

## Figures



Figure 1: Bakr, Ammar Abo. *Lost Eyes*. Acrylic. December 2011. Mohammed Mahmoud Street, Cairo. [https://scontent-ord1-1.xx.fbcdn.net/v/t1.0 9/422423\\_294727493968455\\_1352978581\\_n.jpg?oh=6463f50409e0d9ef25924ae3f3168c63&oe=593732CF](https://scontent-ord1-1.xx.fbcdn.net/v/t1.0 9/422423_294727493968455_1352978581_n.jpg?oh=6463f50409e0d9ef25924ae3f3168c63&oe=593732CF) (accessed February 12, 2017).



Figure 2: Bakr, Ammar Abo. *Mourning Mothers*. Acrylic. May 2012. Mohammed Mahmoud Street, Cairo. [http://dbprng00iic2j.cloudfront.net/userimages/101642/4cut/20141216192241-2.\\_BasmaHamdy\\_AmmarAbouBakr\\_.jpg](http://dbprng00iic2j.cloudfront.net/userimages/101642/4cut/20141216192241-2._BasmaHamdy_AmmarAbouBakr_.jpg) (accessed February 12, 2017).



Figure 3: Bakr, Ammar Abo. *Angelic Portraits of Young Victims of the Port Said Tragedy*. February 2012. Mohammed Mahmoud Street, Cairo. [https://scontent-ord1-1.xx.fbcdn.net/v/t1.0-9/574481\\_294727233968481\\_229978329\\_n.jpg?oh=68b7328ba8da07906720de10c3ac6c86&oe=593E534C](https://scontent-ord1-1.xx.fbcdn.net/v/t1.0-9/574481_294727233968481_229978329_n.jpg?oh=68b7328ba8da07906720de10c3ac6c86&oe=593E534C) (accessed February 12, 2017).



Figure 4: Bakr, Ammar Abo. *Mourning Mothers*. Acrylic. May 2012. Mohammed Mahmoud Street, Cairo. <https://s-media-cache-ak0.pining.com/564x/6b/89/58/6b8958fe402570542ed04137013f6207.jpg> (accessed February 12, 2017).



Figure 5: Wilson, George Washington. *The Queen, Princess Louis of Hesse and Princess Louise, Balmoral*. Albumen print. October 1863. Royal Collection Trust. <https://www.royalcollection.org.uk/collection/2900814/the-queen-princess-louis-of-hesse-and-princess-louise-balmoral> (accessed February 12, 2017).



Figure 6: Sanchez, Gervasio. *Khama Hakeem, wife of Kareem Shareef and mother of Mustafa Kareem, Abdulla Kareem, Rasheed Kareem, Mahmud Kareem, and Bakaken Kareem, disappeared 31 July 1983 in the Barzan Valley, Kurdistan, Iraq, among other 8000 men and boys in Forgotten Victims*. 2011.

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