

Pia Lauro

Women of resilience

Translated from Italian by Edward Fortes

Defining the Other is a means of demarcating the boundaries of the self and its physiognomy, in an indivisible relationship between what one is and what one is not: between positive and negative, between values in which we recognise ourselves and standards we perceive as alien. Free from prejudice and theoretical superstructures, Mario Rizzi's research takes the Other as its pivotal theme; in much of his work this is represented by Islamic society, itself widely unsettled in recent years as a result of the major geopolitical upheavals which the Middle East and North African regions have undergone.

The Bare Lives exhibition reveals—through the films *Kauther* and *Al Intithar*, and the photographic series *August 3rd* and *Bare Lives*—the transformations, experiences and hardships suffered by Islamic and Middle Eastern populations from the time of the so-called Arab Spring to the mass migrations of refugees seeking a new life in Europe.

The definition of ›Other‹ can be summed up by the words different, dissimilar, left over, additional, antecedent. From this point of view, the usual portrait of the Other sketched out by Western narratives seems to find its equivalent in each of these terms: different by virtue of culture and tradition; archaic in their approach to modernity; close but never so much as to become a shared problem; cast aside like something additional, or left over. To deconstruct, overturn and overthrow these prejudices Rizzi distances himself from single political events and shifts his reflection onto the lives of ordinary people, focusing on the everyday aspects of their day-to-day existence—itsself governed and conditioned by exceptional events. This free and unconditional means of representation, in addition to allowing the Other to take on a more familiar appearance and reducing the distance brought about by misguided

interpretations, enables Rizzi to tackle broader and more complex subjects, such as the role of women in the family and Islamic society, revealing unexpected facets to these at the same time.

Rizzi tells the story of a varied female world, marked by a mixture of ages and experiences. The protagonists of the two films in the exhibition, for example, are very different: *Kauther Ayari* (Kauther) is a Tunisian political activist, the first in Tunis to dare speak out against dictator Ben Ali during the 2011 uprising; *Ekhlas Alhwni* (*Al Intithar*) is a Syrian woman, a widow and refugee at the Zaatari camp along with her three sons.



Kauther talks about herself and her family with absolute openness and honesty, without leaving any memories out or denying the difficulties of being a woman in Arab society today. Kauther is alone between the walls of her house: an intimate, bare environment in which she stands solid as a monolith. And although her political activity is no longer what it was in the days of the revolution, a smile still appears on her face when she discusses her nonconformist choices, her desire to assert her identity, and the ongoing struggle for the development of a more modern nation.

Ekhlas's life, on the other hand, is contained within the dusty

streets of the Zaatari camp in the Jordanian desert. She is alone at the head of her family. The three children portrayed with her, whether disoriented or not fully conscious of what is going on, given the age of the youngest, look like satellites revolving around a strong, stable gravitational centre. Rizzi reveals the journey of her life, which she has taken with placid determination and a deep, intense gaze, one which never allows us to think of surrender, but rather of determined resistance. Other women live in the camp with Ekhlas, and as with the women in the photographic series *Bare Lives*, they are all joined by similar destinies and the same approach to facing the present. The women talk and allow themselves to be captured by Rizzi's lens, without ever shrinking from it.

The subjects of the photographic series *August 3rd* do not turn away from the camera's gaze either. This is a very different piece of work, however: one characterised by a more personal and private atmosphere, and made up of seven portraits of Yazidi women living in an internally displaced people's (IDP) camp in Iraqi Kurdistan, following the massacre of the Yazidi community on 3. August 2014 by the self-defined Islamic State. Four faces, four stories, four different universes we're drawn into and become involved in; because although they do so in quiet, silent terms, these women seem to whisper the story of their memories, their interrupted lives, of their carrying on in spite of the horrors of the present. During the attack of August 2014 the majority of women and children were kidnapped and forced into slavery; only a few of them, thanks to the payment of a ransom, managed to return to their families. Yazidi women bear the weight of the experiences they have lived through, be they personal or familial, along with the triple crime of being a woman, belonging to the Yazidi community and confined to an IDP camp. The will to state their dignity, and to keep the memory of the equality denied and of the most frightening crimes, reveals the absolutely lucid reading by female communities of the events in which they have been involved, and the resilient spirit which seems to define their approach to life.

Within the camp, the relationship between masculine and feminine worlds highlights the significantly different approaches to

coping with everyday life and the forging of one's own role in society. Indeed, the men remain caught between the horrors of their individual existences and the expectations imposed on them by a markedly patriarchal society. The women, on the other hand, like tireless worker bees carry on with their lives, their family's, and thus that of the entire community. Whether that life takes place in a camp, on a train station platform or an apartment, women always stand out as the active element—the motor driving this daily, drifting life—in the knowledge that the coming of another day cannot be seen as a trivial event, and that every moment of normality achieved will lift them and their families out of a situation of deep despair. Cooking, cleaning, tidying up—just like reading, studying and smiling—are the evidence of a silent, steadfast struggle that these women endure without ever giving up. As the common denominator in all of these emotional and spatial environments, women stand out as the restorative element of an entire community in times of crisis.

The life of these disrupted communities takes place in refugee camps, places of protection and restrictions, which have more often than not emerged in a completely artificial manner to help, support and protect those groups and communities forced to flee their native lands because of violence and oppression. The camps are conceived as transit areas which are governed externally—not by those who live in them—and soon turn into places where people remain for undefined periods of time. This permanence is not tied to a relationship with the land, but rather a momentary and yet at the same time indeterminate suspension from their previous life. They are extra-territorial entities in the fullest sense, which do not belong in the context in which they are located, where those who live there are 'in' a place without being 'from' that place.

Al Intithar (*The Waiting*) tells the life of the Zaatari refugee camp, which has welcomed almost half a million refugees fleeing the Syria war since its foundation in July 2012, causing it to become the third largest population centre in Jordan, with a number of inhabitants that is constantly changing and has even exceeded 125 000 people. Zaatari is an example of a camp-city, a kind of urban surrogate which replicates a city's planning system but lacks its



spontaneous quality, founded on the meetings between individuals. The extension and order of this immense, steadily growing space is articulated by the white tents of the UNHCR (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees). The tents, all the same size and colour, make for an anonymous, uniform landscape, and clearly testify to the UNHCR's intention not to support the establishment of more permanent, urban structures instead of camps in any way, as per the agreements with the governments of the host countries.

The photographic series *Bare Lives* tells the stories of two different camps, distant in space and time but bound by a common thread, the narratives of those who live there, which combines them into a single story. Indeed, if one can draw out an ideal timeline, *Al Intithar* and *Bare Lives* constitute a single story told backwards, taking us from the Jordanian desert to a camp for internally displaced people, before finally arriving at Idomeni, a Greek village on the border with Macedonia where refugees who have arrived from the Middle East hoped to find a way into Europe.

In the Yazidi camp life seems to carry on peacefully, as in any other average town. Scenes of everyday life are interspersed with pictures depicting a landscape made up of tents, each one equipped with a satellite dish and a generator. At night the streets

are lit by huge lamp posts, and between one shelter and the next you might find a seamstress, a shoe shop, or a tent where you can smoke shisha and use the wifi signal, in an unusual short circuit of modern and nomadic existences. Children playing in the streets, women busy cooking and looking after the management of their living space, young men waiting for a cut at the barber's, lessons at school and people's smiles: all of these seem the story of a permanent environment, one which has found a new opportunity for development and growth in this particular place. And yet this is only one side of the coin, because even here the unease of a daily life which is always provisional, the lack of proper housing and the forced sharing of limited spaces for entire families, makes life extremely complicated for the Yazidis.

From the humanitarian point of view the construction of the camp fulfils the mission to protect refugees, while as organisational construct it symbolises the idea of total control: a microcosm, a new social reality which confines people within a space because outside of it the refugees would not have access to the same security system that exists within. And it is the mental rather than the physical means of control which blocks these displaced people, occasionally causing them to seek the protection of their very torturers. These people, therefore, stand out as the multitudes of those »without: without land, without a country, without rights, without authorisation. Herein where the central point of the *Bare Lives* exhibition emerges: Rizzi highlights how the camp dimension is the space in which the *bare life* concept—as defined by Giorgio Agamben in his 1995 essay, *Homo Sacer*—is actualised. In ancient Roman law the *homo sacer* (sacred man) could be killed by anyone without committing murder, he was not granted the dignity of being sacrificed in accordance with the rite's prescribed norms. The man who can be killed and not sacrificed, stripped of everything he has owned in a previous life, is thus reduced to *bare life*. From this perspective the refugee camp establishes itself as a form of formal protection in which the fundamental principles on which Western democracies are founded—from human rights to citizenship and freedom—do not apply. And unfortunately not even

reaching Western countries and possibly acquiring refugee status restores their basic human rights, as they often remain marginalised and relegated to the condition of second-class citizens.

Popping up spontaneously and never either officially managed or recognized, the Idomeni camp, cleared in May 2016, was the largest refugee camp in Greece. Rizzi photographed it in the period when a sea of tents, patrolled by soldiers, sat where there had once been an access point to the Balkan route to Western Europe. This collection of private camping tents, depicted in the series *Bare Lives*, outlines a painful patchwork of disconnected entities, whose link with their previous lives has not yet been severed: children, the elderly, men and women—everyone seems to be continually thinking back to what they have lost and what they are failing to find; they remain eerily suspended, in a halfway house between the tracks of a railway line forced into disuse, and stretches of wheat fields.

Those at Idomeni were not part of a community to be protected, but refugees arriving from different regions of the Middle East, tricked by the hope of being able to stay there only so long as necessary before continuing on their journey to a new life and a new legal status. Following the closure of the Macedonian border on the express request of the countries of Northern Europe, as well as the problematic agreement between Turkey and the European Union, the Balkan route through Macedonia was definitively demolished and the Idomeni camp seemed to morph inexorably into a kind of limbo populated by interrupted lives. And yet the fact that this was a place of transit, where stability was not envisaged either by the occupants or by those dealing with the management of the area, emerges clearly from the photos. They also reveal the extent to which the refugees were not willing to surrender to a life of confinement, choosing instead to continue to forego their rights, even though they would not be registered, out of fear of forced repatriation or having to live in a country they had not chosen.

Equally incisive is the struggle and the resilience of the Yazidi community represented in the portraits of women in *August 3rd*. The series is completed by the image of a sea of tents with, in the foreground, one of them bearing the large inscription »3/8/2014«.

August 3, 2014 is the date of the massacre with which Daesh (the self-defined Islamic State) began its genocide of the Yazidi minority in the northern Iraqi city of Sinjar, simply because the Yazidi are non-Muslims. Inside the camp the inscription appears on many tents: the Yazidi write out the date of that last, dreadful attack on their homes as if tattooing themselves, but the act does not seem to be commemorative in character; rather, it is a means of re-establishing what they were, giving life back to that last moment in which they existed as a community, and recreate that physical place of which they have been deprived, thanks to a cyclical rather than linear conception of time, in which the world repeats and remakes itself anew.

Mario Rizzi's work is, therefore, an opportunity to discover and reveal the realities of the Middle East and Islamic societies, while challenging us to overturn or overthrow Orientalist prejudices we often carry inside ourselves. Assumptions due to a lack of knowledge and superficial interpretations of different aspects of other lives and cultures mean that our reading of phenomena and events which increasingly affect our own lives is often erroneous; above all, it calls for a moral and ethical rereading of Western values based on human rights and the notion of democracy.

The key to Rizzi's work probably lies in his research methods: establishing a relationship, building an authentic and intimate connection with the Other, and breaking down cultural and relational barriers, allows him to render a genuine and sincere image of those he has met, and imbues authenticity into work which is constantly renewing itself—as if that relationship of trust and discovery, drawn from the research process, had become an intrinsic part of the piece's value, one re-established every time between artwork and viewer.

Pia Lauro is an art historian and independent curator based in Rome. She is the director of Stefania Miscetti Gallery, a project coordinator for LUISS University and writes for *Exibart* and other art magazines.