

The Lara Baladi Perfume

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sketch for an essay on *lara baladi*

roger connah 2004-2008



I do not know Lara Baladi, yet I already know her from the artwork that is electronically mailed. I make from this a scheme. It is as if from these images and some initial hunches a coherence, a blind poetry is invited into my life as well as hers. I invent the connections as we do if we wish to make more of ourselves to make less of ourselves. Let's go home and we do via the journeys of others. I enter the poster world, the world in a box, *nawara* (a woman's name and/or in Arabic one 'who illuminates') as if it is a world I know, a world I have experienced. This is the post-it world that can turn message into memory, reminder into forgetfulness without actually being there, without ever arriving at infinity. I am intrigued and seduced by bleeding feet, by the light of the sun on the limited editions we make from life. It is becoming obvious today: some of us are more trans-national than others. Awkward word, perhaps, but nevertheless true. Intimacy circulates ready to fall; art circulates intimacy ready to reveal ourselves once more.



2 Art continually asks us to ask ourselves the obvious question: what is worth knowing? It is the ultimate cul-de-sac; the drift into a life that is replicated, returned and rebuffed. How many of us sit under flyovers, are handed a photograph by an architect or a designer and asked to reproduce this 200 times over. How would you do it? By drawing squares? How many of us enter the Magic Lantern, acknowledge the 9x9 numeric infinity and dream the garden that is derelict as images of the Shalimar Garden decay in front of us. And then the Islamic Star is launched into our own X-ray 'in utero' world. The acetate of a dream must fall from the women of our details; El Fabous el Shery – Lara Baladi at her inviting best. My country, my kitsch, my baladi, my blighty!



3 In New Delhi some time back in the last century leading to my home in Lajpat Nagar, time suspended, history repeated shaped only by partial destinations. There under the flyover a small child is handed a photograph. It shows an Indian man reaching into his western suit pocket seeking for some money. It will become part of a 40foot re-scripted movie poster – *The Art of Shelter* - which will be erected in the art gallery at Ravindra Bhavan in Delhi. The movie poster would narrate the exhibition itself, the script from village poverty to city dwelling, from sewer pipe to umbrella to the discarded fast-food packages from Nirula. Later the politicians and bureaucrats who were obliged to open the exhibition will look at this movie poster and wonder why it is in an art gallery. The young boys and mater-painters who sit under the flyovers in Delhi when they see their work in an art gallery are ashamed: they wish they could have shown their art in a different way. This for them did not belong in a gallery, it belonged on those huge hoardings that blind the sight. They apologised: if only they had known. It would have all been different; it would have been ‘art’.



4 De Kooning: “An artist is someone who makes art too. He did not invent it. How it started – ‘to hell with it.’ It is obvious that it has no progress. The idea of space is given him to change if he can. The subject matter in the abstract is space. He fills it with an attitude. The attitude never comes from himself alone.” There with De Kooning’s friend sitting in the tribal area just outside Peshawar, it is evening. I thought of my daughter Nadezna’s ‘lego’ narratives. I thought of the movie posters re-scripted and painted on the trucks that ply the GT Road from Peshawar to Karachi in Pakistan. The narratives are the films that are watched, the fragments extracted to become storyboards in other people’s lives: there is a lake, a house, a mountain, invariably a winding road. It takes us all into eternity; no one is exempt this invitation. Nadezna: a girls’ name and/or the hint of the Russian word for ‘hope.’

4 (addition) De Kooning: “An artist is someone who makes art too. He did not invent it. How it started – ‘to hell with it.’ It is obvious that it has no progress. The idea of space is given him to change if he can. The subject matter in the abstract is space. He fills it with an attitude. The attitude never comes from himself alone.” There with De Kooning’s friend sitting in the tribal area just outside Peshawar, Pakistan it is evening. I thought of my daughter Nadezna’s lego narratives. I thought of the movie posters re-scripted and painted on the trucks that ply the GT Road from Peshawar to Karachi in Pakistan.

It is no accident that the dream of the truck driver risking their lives is also that of a return. A return to the hills, somewhere beyond - always beyond; where a stream, a bird, a mountain and a house lie, always alone, always idyllic, always unreachable, invariably a winding road. The narratives are the films that are watched, from the latest dvds that find their way from Karachi up that very same road. They 'comment' on the contemporary issues (guns, Osama, Taliban, USA etc.). They repeat the fragments extracted from life as film to become storyboards in other people’s lives.

It is no surprise that the dream sometimes ends on the road itself; an accident, a collision, worse even death. Knowing this dream, the hope is voiced in the simple, oral poetry that is scripted - ‘painted’ - onto the side of the trucks and rickshaws. Couplets are often written in Urdu calligraphically sometimes mixing with Persian. ‘You may be very coy,’ the anonymous driver is saying, ‘but I will take you to be my bride in Nowshera.’

The artist replies, turns this back and on. The *clin d’oeil* takes us all into eternity; no one is exempt this invitation. The woman are always present, dolls in other men’s lives, but sometimes no more. It is the water that is lascivious, the schoolgirl’s skirt that becomes wings for a fantasy that is less out of reach than it was. The newscaster will announce impending rain, ‘hail stones’, she says, ‘the size of nipples’. The dominatrix puffs out smoke, the aeroplane flies in and Pandora is revealed. The eyes of an owl, the wings of desire, pigtailed and pigtailed whether dominatrix or Madonna, they will take up a gun or lie down with themselves, expose themselves to expose others and the injustice all around.

The dream is never over, it becomes national, then 'trans-national' in the awkward but useful sense of the word whilst also 'picturing' the romance of 'eternity', the pain of lost love and inevitability, death and poverty, and the often devastatingly deferred notion of Paradise, the garden and 'immortality'; the forbidden. This is the artist's exchange, a barter of the present and in the present; a repertoire of world images, a theatre of images, which travel, change, mutate and are - if you like - re-assimilated (not replicated) as they shift cultures. They can be read with as much seriousness as Persian miniatures and landscapes; they carry the dreams of many who have no voice, who lose out but yet always dream of better things to come.

Un-belonging becomes belonging again, becomes power. The woman takes up the gun, the eyes made up deep in the sinister gaze of the inflatable, disposable model. These narratives, these paradise landscapes and eternity hunches, pass on, across and through Islam, East, West, South or then up to the North through the Khyber Pass and onwards, up, up and up. To Viena, Terijoki, Karelia where my daughter Nadezna's grandfather came from; that liminal zone that is neither Russian nor Finnish but so strongly defined. Nadezna: a girls' name, or the hint of an eternal and forbidden innocence in the Russian word for 'hope. Or Nadezshda, that aristocratic Russian dominatrix from South Yorkshire who has stepped into the artist's canvas.



5 The passion for images dangles as the trucks pass by in the dead of night on their way to Kabul, illuminated by exquisitely placed reflector lights. We are scrambled at every turn. We are cinema without knowing any history. Guided into a side street by a young Muslim on a bicycle; the refurbished Mercedes makes its way carefully, majestically; a hummer over a moonscape. Lights from the various shop fronts illuminate the muddy interior. We step out and follow the young man. I am guided to a bench seat. The others take their place for their own business on the low carpet with cushions around. They have all been here before. This is a menu. You can choose the story you wish to hold. We'd just come from Qureishi's in Peshawar where we'd eaten lamb's tails, cooked in front of our eyes, laid on the boot of the Mercedes, a Turkish newspaper our tablecloth. Inside, on the walls in the bootlegger's shop images of the lives of others. A house, a mountain, a winding road, a lake. Always a sky heavily made up like those Taliban photographed with rouge, lipstick and an enticing gaze collected by the German photographer Thomas Dworzak (Taliban, 2003).



6 As De Kooning's Friend negotiated the different prices of Vodka I inspected the Kalashnikov behind me leaning up against the corner. There was laughter in this open secrecy; as if we already live in a new set of ground rules. Some would instantly mock this and call it the ground-zero rules. Then a bottle of Finlandia is produced. The litre size. It is magnificent in comparison with the smaller bootlegged Russian or Tajikistan vodka. The bootlegger knows it. The price rises Enormously, out of the roof. The ground-zero rules change; the film has become individual. Everyone has a movie poster of their own lives waiting to be scripted and painted; digitally or not. The *shish kabab* is manipulated and animated in front of our eyes; we make the magic lantern from this nostalgia, and we are asked to re-assemble a world 'out of place'. Eternally this is our future, and we already know it lasts a long time.



7 I wish to collapse the artist Lara Baldi with the novelist Ahdaf Soueif's *Mezzaterra*. The art too is a collection of fragments from the Common Ground. It is perhaps an unnecessary gesture, yet I am attracted to it. I would wish this space of trans-nationalism to remain as unremarkable and as undefined as it need be for us all to survive. I wish it would survive the necessity of an art discourse that alienates and comforts. But co-option is everywhere around; everything in unassembled until the reader arrives. The blind redeemer recognises like-souls and affixes angel wings. Is it possible for the East and West to be on better terms by merely removing the idiocy of 'not understanding each other'? Suspicion and hatred perhaps are removed, fragment by fragment, as we enter the works of *baladi*, that home away from home, as we enter a more complex understanding of the culture and politics interwoven. In a review (a glimpse of hope in a polarised world) Guy Mannes-Abbott writes:

“The brilliance of this collection lies in Soueif's linkage of "small" things to universal categories. She praises her friend Edward Said for being "human", "fair" and "inclusive", qualities that describe the "mezzaterra" of her title. This common ground, where differences enrich rather than clash, is civilisation.” We are not with anyone, we are not against anyone; we are only at war against ignorance, and I collapse Baladi and Soueif; they include us in their world. It's enough that we are invited to redeem the unknown and pass out of this place to another place: always liminally, always partially. Supreme as we are, in movement, in motion.



8 In the museum, in any museum, one guard looks back. “A powerful response to a piece of art can arouse ecstatic feelings akin to religious experience. People will always yearn for experiences that raise them above everyday human experience. And since it looks as if religious enthusiasm – in its traditional form, at least – is most likely to wane, in our culture, enthusiasm for works of art can substitute for it – in part, at least.” Ivan Klima writes this in ‘Between Security and Insecurity’. Will we always need such words, or can we live in a world where the codes are endlessly scrambled; and so endlessly scrambled are we able to accept the brevity of sense. A sense that invites content, but flickeringly in the desert. A sense that ethically, but devastatingly swirls into meaningful sense, meaningful love with an intimacy that this time, this time, we think we can hold onto.



9 I prefer Helene Cixous words (preface to the Helene Cixous Reader): “Our own subjective singularities are in truth composed , on the one hand of many other near or distant humans, we are carried of previous generations, we are, without knowing it, heirs, caretakers, witnesses of known or unknown ancestors; on the other hand we are full of others originating from the books we have read....The miracle is that language has not been cut from its archaic roots – even if we do not remember, our language remembers, and what we say began to be said three thousand years ago. Inversely language has incorporated in our own times, before even we know, the most recent elements, linguistic and semantic particles blown by the present winds.” For many artists toward the end of the last century, formalist and accepted critical claims were at best suspect, at worst irrelevant and anachronistic. As scientists were pulled into the narratives of science itself artists moved toward the white-coated image of the scientist-researcher, the lab-technician. X-ray time! It was an odd reversal but one not missed by both scientist and artists. If the artist appeared to want to abandon the sacred individuality, then the scientist wanted to explore individuality. If the artists wanted to sink themselves in technology and physics conducting experiments as in their own laboratory, the scientists wanted to see how much art and ‘sleepwalking’ (to use a phrase from Arthur Koestler) was in their scientific methods. Now there is no doubt about it: we are all sleepwalking.



10 Others will speak of Baladi more knowingly, more sharply in a language I cannot hold onto. They will speak of nostalgia, of assemblage, critically, politically in a way which I cannot; in a way which is described as contemporary, shared with many other artists of her generation. If she so wishes to build her own world, the reverberated femininity, she wishes us to build our own. I am not sure whether we really dismantle this world in front of us, digitally re-mastered, in order to rebuild - for what would such process bring; another illusion? Another partial destination? We dismantle to let this moment stay with us, to live in the provisional. I loot, raid and re-assemble, just as Baladi does so seductively. For that moment when it all appears coherent, am I foolish to let this sway my mind? I would not dream any more of taking the metaphor by the horns; I cannot distinguish passion when it re-scripts that little hope that pulls at our trans-national skin. A small girl sits in a dish, the messages of the world beamed through her body, the text – the young woman’s fantasies - written on her skin, the image flashed through her womb. I do not know Lara Baladi, yet I do now. And I am thankful for this.



11 When will we have perfumes names after our artists; the Baladi perfume? What fragrance would it take, what enticement and seduction would it imply; and what fantasies might it put in motion, the passions of which will alter young girls for years to come? “In Bin Laden and in Jinnah, we have the two opposing poles of Islam,” Akbar Ahmed writes, “the former, bearded, in his traditional Muslim clothes, speaking Arabic and of Jihad; the latter, clean-shaven, in his Savile Row suit, speaking in his English accent and reflecting his Lincoln’s Inn education. Which model will prevail in the next century? We know that parents in Pakistan named 10,000 of their newborn Osama in Pakistan and that bin Laden is a cult figure in much of the Muslim world, with his posters everywhere and even a perfume named after him. I have not come across young men named Jinnah. Certainly no perfume called ‘Jinnah’.” When will we have the Baladi perfume, and what fragrance would it take?



12 A girl sits in a powerful dish, legs dangling. Through this connection the world enters and leaves. The world indexes its dreams and sets the counter to the bomb that will explode somewhere else, everywhere else but here. The warning that could have come might not have arrived. The pornographic stretch that invites only the robot in our dreams takes just that bit longer to arrive. We are dead before we wake up. I don't know how in any other way to write about art. If I wish to explain more I am lost. Let us let others take our voices, and write in between the lines of the artist, in between those that consider themselves more trans-national than others. We must abdicate this nostalgia in favour of the rich common ground that will make the ground zero rules. "We are not what we said to be. At the age of three I knew that we are destined to be the orphans of Paradise. We remember happiness we have never known. At the age of three I saw that evil was in power and that resistance is clandestine." Are there two camps - *inshallah, definitely!* - for the whole of time as Helene Cixous puts it?

Nawara, one who illuminates: Nadezna, one who hopes.



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Roger Connah with Nadezna

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